



Three Levels of Challenges During Doctoral Studies in Higher Education: Personal, Institutional, and Supervisor-Related

Vilma Žydžiūnaitė¹, Monika Kelpšienė², Monika Šimkutė-Bukantė³, Marius Daugėla⁴,
Julija Grigėnaitė⁵

¹ Vytautas Magnus University, Education Academy, Educational Research Institute, 58 K. Donelaičio St., Kaunas, Lithuania, vilma.zydziunaite@vdu.lt

² Vytautas Magnus University, Education Academy, Educational Research Institute, 58 K. Donelaičio St., Kaunas, Lithuania, monika.kelpsiene@vdu.lt

³ Vytautas Magnus University, Education Academy, Educational Research Institute, 58 K. Donelaičio St., Kaunas, Lithuania, monika.simkute-bukante@vdu.lt

⁴ Vytautas Magnus University, Education Academy, Educational Research Institute, 58 K. Donelaičio St., Kaunas, Lithuania, marius.daugela@vdu.lt

⁵ Vytautas Magnus University, Education Academy, Educational Research Institute, 58 K. Donelaičio St., Kaunas, Lithuania, julija.grigenaite@vdu.lt

Annotation. The purpose of this study was to reveal, specify and substantiate the challenges experienced by doctoral students at different levels in the higher education space. The study used qualitative research design, collecting data through semi-structured interviews and applying latent qualitative content analysis. The results revealed three levels of challenges for doctoral students, which have specific contents and aspects that connect them. The central aspect at all levels remains the relationship between the doctoral student and the supervisor.

Keywords: *challenge, doctoral student, doctoral studies, higher education, interview, qualitative content analysis, supervisor, university.*

Introduction

Doctoral students internationally face a range of academic, financial, social, and personal challenges that can impact their success and well-being. These challenges include navigating unfamiliar academic cultures, securing funding, managing demanding research projects, and maintaining mental health amidst isolation and high expectations (Ryan et al., 2021; Jones-White et al., 2021; Klefbeck, 2025).

Research topicality and the scope of the problem being investigated. The number of doctoral students has grown significantly over the past two decades, as governments in different countries increasingly see doctoral graduates as necessary to foster the knowledge economy and international competitiveness (Hawkes & Yerrabati, 2018; Jones, 2018). Along with this growth, universities are increasingly investing in higher education policies that stem from the desire to devote shorter completion times to doctoral studies and have the expectation of doctoral graduates being better prepared for work outside academia (Leonard et al., 2005; Baker & Pifer, 2011; Burgess et al., 2013; Kumar, 2014).

Research on doctoral studies has grown significantly over the past 20 years. Reading the scientific literature, we can see that the factors are mentioned: (non)completion and time to completion of doctoral studies and satisfaction to a lesser extent (Pyhältö et al., 2012; McCauley & Hinojosa, 2020; Pervez et al., 2021). In general, studies examine specific aspects or processes of the experience, such as the relationship between the supervisor and the researcher/doctoral student (Anttila et al., 2023; Acharya et al., 2024) and the preparation of the dissertation (Odena & Burgess, 2015).

Research on doctoral experience shows that study completion (Pyhältö et al., 2022) and satisfaction (Kowalczyk-Walędziak et al., 2017; Ryan et al., 2021; Prendergast et al., 2023), issues regarding dissertation methodology and doctoral student's methodological (in)competence (Mowbray & Halse, 2010; van Rooij et al., 2019; Chalo et al., 2023) are key factors in assessing the doctoral student experience during their studies. Research reveals that issues such as the relationship between doctoral student and supervisor (Harman, 2003; Deuchar, 2008; Lee, 2020a; McCauley & Hinojosa, 2020) and institutional context (Golde, 2005; van den Beemt et al., 2023) are historically unsolvable (Pyhältö et al., 2009).

Research context and problem. Doctoral studies are the journey that requires dedication, hard work, and a deep commitment to the field of study. While it is a rigorous academic pursuit, it is not simply about mastering skills or accumulating knowledge. It is about developing the ability to think deeply and critically about the field, identifying important questions and problems, and searching for solutions and new insights (Baker & Pifer, 2011).

A doctoral study program typically involves conducting original research, writing a dissertation, and presenting the findings to the academic community. It can be

challenging and demanding, but it also provides an opportunity to delve deeply into the field of study and make a meaningful contribution to it. At the same time, doctoral students work closely with supervisors, mentors and colleagues, building a network of professionals in their field and receiving valuable advice and support (Atabay et al., 2017). In addition, doctoral studies provide an opportunity to develop a variety of skills, including critical thinking, research methods, and communication, that are valuable in academia and in various other areas of a doctoral student's and researcher's careers (Leonard et al., 2005). Doctoral studies are the experience that can shape a doctoral student's career and personal growth for years to come.

Despite the challenges of coursework, research, and writing, many people find that the benefits of pursuing doctoral studies far outweigh the costs. Doctoral studies can be very rewarding on a personal level, leading to a sense of personal growth and intellectual fulfillment. It can also help one build meaningful relationships and a sense of community in the field (Mowbray & Halse, 2010). The demands of a doctoral program can sometimes be overwhelming. However, with dedication, hard work, and a deep commitment to one's field of study, doctoral studies can be a meaningful experience that paves the way for success and fulfillment (Jones, 2018).

Research on the experiences of doctoral students is important because it can provide valuable insights into how doctoral studies shape their personal and professional development. Understanding these experiences can help improve the support and mentoring provided to doctoral students, ultimately promoting their academic success and well-being. This is why researching these experiences is so important, as there is still a paucity of data and research evidence on understanding the impact of doctoral studies, identifying factors that influence success, improving support systems, improving teaching, supervision and mentoring practices, promoting doctoral student development, and contributing to a more inclusive and supportive academic environment (Harman, 2003; Golde, 2005; Deuchar, 2008; Cho, 2009; Brown & Watson, 2010; Burgess & Wellington, 2010; Burgess et al., 2013; Kumar, 2014; Kowalczyk-Wałędziak et al., 2017; Hawke & Yerrabati, 2018; Lee, 2019, 2020 a, b).

Essentially, this experiential qualitative study of doctoral students' challenges is concerned about understanding the researcher's career and using this knowledge to improve the overall doctoral experience for future generations of researchers. In this context, the *research question* raised were the following: What are the levels of challenges experienced by doctoral students in the higher education space? What do these challenges reflect?

The aim of the study was to reveal, specify and substantiate the challenges experienced by doctoral students at different levels in the higher education space.

Literature review

Challenge is related not only to external factors, but also to the person's individual factors, which are observed through her/his competence and mental and physical integrity by realizing that challenges are an inevitable part of life (Lobos et al., 2024). In the context of higher education, "challenge" refers to various situations, tasks, or issues that demand effort, competencies and determination to overcome, ultimately leading to growth and development. It also refers to the obstacles or difficulties faced by institutions and/or students in their pursuit of knowledge and academic success (van den Beemt et al., 2023). A challenge in higher education is an activity, task, or situation that represents an obstacle that a person must overcome with the requisite development and utilization of diverse knowledge in order to solve the issue. A challenge fosters creation and application of new knowledge and necessary resources (Caratozzolo & Membrillo-Hernández, 2021). In higher education, this fits the Industry 4.0 requirements (Membrillo-Hernández et al., 2019) if students at all study levels develop competences while working on challenges with fellow students (colleagues) and with academic, and practice communities as well.

Students' capacity for adaptation to innovation is required in the face of an uncertain future, so higher education should educate professionals at all levels with complex competences to face the challenges in the world of work in order to meet its fast-changing requirements. The focus on challenges turns higher education into critical elements of society through the cooperation-based ecosystem for development of solutions. Then students learn, guided by academics with the participation of stakeholders who provide students with complex tools to be successful in the world of work (van den Beemt et al., 2013).

Doctoral students encounter various challenges during their learning in higher education: including maintaining motivation, overcoming supervisor issues (absence, conflicts), dealing with the second-year slump (dip in confidence, motivation, and morale), managing writing, and navigating the doctoral thesis process (the process of synthesizing research findings and creating a coherent thesis) (Pyhältö et al., 2012; Pyhältö et al., 2022). They also face criticism (struggling with receiving feedback on their work, especially if they lack experience in academic critique), the nature of PhD work can lead to feelings of isolation, making it important to maintain connections with others, and difficulty knowing what to do next, and chronic stress and lack of support can lead to burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and detachment. Additionally, limited financial resources, time management struggles, and finding the right research gap becomes a challenge for doctoral students too (Pyhältö et al., 2009). All these challenges can be divided into personal, institutional and supervisor-related.

Personal challenges. Doctoral students face personal challenges, which can either facilitate or impede their progress. These challenges may lead to either beneficial or detrimental outcomes. However, when challenges are a hindrance, they can deplete students' psychological energy, diminish their engagement and motivation, and negatively affect their well-being (Pervez et al., 2021). Doctoral students need to overcome such challenges as unclear requirements, organizational politics, conflicting feedback, program or policy issues, and abusive supervision (McCauley & Hinojosa, 2020). However, challenges in doctoral studies lead to positive consequences such as engagement, increased performance, interest in learning, and strengthening well-being. These challenges result from time pressure, pace of work, pressure to complete tasks, responsibilities, complexity, and workload. Challenging demands result in inverse relationships (Acharya et al., 2024).

Sense of belonging reduces doctoral students' odds of anxiety and depression symptoms, while academic, relationship-related, and financial stressors increase such odds (Jones-White et al., 2021). While doctoral students experience being stuck in fear of procrastination and the lack of engagement of their scientific supervisors, they experience abandonment and loneliness, which not only complicates the preparation of their dissertation, but also forms a negative experience of academic identity (Klefbeck, 2025; Anttila et al., 2023).

Doctoral students balance between work and life, work and university activities, various activities, roles, and responsibilities (Prendergast et al., 2023), and feel pressure (van Rooij et al., 2019), which leads to lack of motivation, poor emotional well-being, and feelings of guilt (Jones-White et al., 2021; Ryan et al., 2021). Regardless of the difficulty experienced, doctoral students search for the possibilities of academic growth. Personal development refers to the process of increasing one's self-awareness, associated increases of self-esteem, increasing skills, and fulfilling one's aspirations. Diversity and flexibility within doctoral education are of significant benefit in shaping the doctoral journey to best suit the personal and professional development needs of each individual postgraduate researcher (Riby & Rees, 2024). PhD students have a crucial need for academic growth, not just for completing their research and dissertation but also for their future career prospects and development as scholars. This growth encompasses developing various skills, enhancing knowledge, and building a strong network within the academic community (Chalo et al., 2023).

Institutional challenges. Doctoral students experience institutional challenges that shape their process of studies and preparation of dissertation. Doctoral students experience pressure to produce high-quality research and deliver results, particularly regarding publications and conference presentations. This pressure stems from various sources, including academic expectations, funding requirements, and career aspirations (Wollast et al., 2023). They experience institutional challenges when they are unclear about a university's research policies and infrastructure, which negatively

impact their well-being. In this regard, particular factors are: uncertain duration of programs; insufficient coursework content; inadequate credit and program completion requirements; unclear academic publication criteria; excessive administrative workload; discrepancy between teaching workload and study area; and delay in thesis evaluation, as obstacles to doctoral well-being (Acharya et al., 2024). Also, doctoral students indicate that they experience insufficient learning resources and methodologies, restricted access to specific software, irrelevant feedback from domain experts during advisory committee meetings, limited prospects of obtaining a fellowship, and scarce funding for conferences and publications. These institutional obstacles limit doctoral students' academic growth and development through their doctoral studies (Acharya et al., 2023).

Supervisor-related challenges. Supervisor-related factors significantly impact PhD students' success and well-being. Key aspects include the supervisor's availability, their leadership style, the quality and timeliness of feedback, and their commitment to the student's research project. Additional factors, such as interpersonal compatibility, supervisory styles, and the student's ability to manage expectations, play a role (van Rooij et al., 2019). Doctoral students' success in learning and academic productivity is directly influenced by their relationship with the supervisor. Healthy and positive relationships accelerate student progress to complete learning tasks on time, affect a student's mode of thinking and her/his professional literacy, alleviate a student's learning pressure, and enhance happiness and learning motivation (Li et al., 2025).

Supervision practices are common sites of tension for doctoral students, as they expect shared responsibility, support, and help from their supervisors. Unfortunately, a culture of silence from supervisors militates against positive changes in a doctoral student's learning, academic resilience, motivation, and engagement. The silence of the supervisor promotes tension in the relationship with the doctoral student, because in the absence of a culture of dialogue, the doctoral student relies on his or her personal knowledge, skills, psychological and social resources. In the absence of a supervisor's leadership and involvement, doctoral students experience stress and feelings of self-doubt: some students feel that their perceived competence as researchers is lacking, which decreases their motivation to grow intellectually. They experience confusion, which increases stress and strengthens the feeling of abandonment (Odena & Burgess, 2015).

Methodology

Design

Qualitative research design refers to a flexible, systematic approach focused on understanding and interpreting complex phenomena. Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research delves into the meanings constructed by individuals, experienced and meaningful contexts, always focusing on subjective experiences (Moser & Korstjens, 2017).

Qualitative research design is concerned with finding answers about the causes and ways in which a phenomenon is being studied (Busetto et al., 2020). This means that the data collected during qualitative research cannot usually be quantitatively analyzed using statistical methods, as there may not be common features between the various findings. However, a coding process can be implemented if common categories or themes can be identified during the analysis (Punch, 2013).

Although in qualitative research, questions are not directed towards a specific answer, the ability to code and draw conclusions from codes is more common than one might initially think. This is because the researcher “steers” the research in a certain direction, encouraging the research to expand on a specific topic and discuss in more detail certain issues raised (interviews) (Russell & Gregory, 2003).

Sample

The study sample was formed using the snowball method, also known as the chain referral method, a non-probability sample formed when existing study participants help to attract additional participants. This method is used when the target population is difficult to reach (Punch, 2013).

The study participants were selected according to the following criteria: i) third and fourth year full-time doctoral students studying at different Lithuanian universities; ii) doctoral students studying in different doctoral study fields and disciplines; iii) age and gender restrictions do not apply.

Sampling steps (Punch, 2013):

- Initial participants: The researchers began by identifying a small number of initial participants who met the study criteria.
- Referrals: Initial participants were asked to recommend other individuals they knew who also met the criteria.
- Expansion: The process continued as these new participants were asked to recommend others, thus creating a chain of referrals.
- Sample growth: The sample grew like a snowball rolling down a hill, hence the name the “snowball method.”

The sample size was formed based on the saturation principle. In qualitative sampling, the saturation principle refers to the point at which adding more participants or data collection no longer yields new insights, codes, or themes. It is essentially a criterion for determining when enough data has been collected to understand the research question thoroughly. This principle helps ensure the data is robust and that the research fully explores the topic (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Table 1
Demographics of Study Participants

Code of research participant	Gender	Age	Scientific field and field of doctoral studies
TD3	Man	30	Agricultural sciences, Forestry
TD5	Woman	39	Social sciences, Law
TD6	Woman	29	Technological Sciences, Measurement Engineering
TD7	Woman	30	Social sciences, Political sciences
TD8	Woman	54	Social Sciences, Communication and Information
TD9	Woman	28	Social sciences, Sociology
TD11	Woman	28	Agricultural sciences, Agronomy
TD12	Man	29	Social sciences, Economics
TD13	Woman	30	Social sciences, Psychology
TD14	Woman	42	Humanities, Philology
TD15	Woman	28	Natural sciences, Biology
TD16	Woman	42	Humanities, Art History

The study involved 12 research participants from five Lithuanian universities – ten male and two female doctoral students. The age of the research participants ranged from 28 years (the youngest participant) to 54 years (the oldest participant); the average age of the sample is 34 years.

Methods

Data collection

The study data was collected from September to December 2024, using semi-structured interviews. The shortest interview lasted 72 minutes, and the longest 130 minutes. A semi-structured interview is a data collection method based on asking questions according to a predetermined thematic system. However, the questions are not arranged in a strict order. The researcher must be empathetic and adaptive to each interview situation. It is possible that the answers to the planned questions are already found in the research participant's answer, or vice versa – there is a need to ask additional questions to those around them in order to obtain data relevant to the study (Kvale, 1996). The semi-structured interview questionnaire consisted of two parts – a content section with six questions, and a demographic section with two questions (see Table 2).

Table 2

Semi-Structured Interview Tool

Interview content questions
1. How do you combine scientific activities with your other activities? What challenges do you face and how do you deal with them?
2. How has your learning process changed? How do you evaluate your studies during your doctoral studies?
3. How is your collaboration with your scientific supervisor? What makes you happy, what makes you sad?
4. How is your involvement in academic activities at the university? Share your experience.
5. What are your sources of support and encouragement during your doctoral studies: in terms of psychosocial support and academic support?
6. What kind of help do you lack during your doctoral studies? What are your expectations for support during your doctoral studies?
Demographic questions
1. What is your age?
2. What are you currently studying?

Data analysis

In this study, latent qualitative content analysis was used for data analysis. This is a type of qualitative analysis which focuses on the underlying, unspoken meanings within the text. It involves a multi-step process of careful reading, interpretation, and coding to identify latent categories and patterns (Bengtsson, 2016). The key steps are the following (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017):

1. Preparing the data: transcribing interviews, ensuring it is in a format suitable for analysis and organizing digital archives.
2. Familiarizing with the data: reading and re-reading the data thoroughly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the interviews' content, making initial notes and reflections on the text.
3. Performing initial coding: Deciding the level of analysis (word, word sense, phrase, sentence, categories) creating initial subcategories, which emerge from researchers' understanding the interview texts and interpreting the data. In this study, the level of analysis was sentence and categories.
4. Developing categories: grouping similar subcategories into broader categories.
5. Refining and selecting codes: reviewing subcategories and categories, refining them, and selecting those that are most relevant to the research question(s).
6. Analyzing patterns: analyzing the categories to identify patterns and significant findings.

7. Interpreting and reporting findings: providing a detailed explanation of the findings, justifying interpretations, and reporting methods, and analysis process.
8. Revisiting and iterating: latent qualitative content analysis is an iterative process, meaning the researchers revisited previous steps to refine their interpretations and strengthen the analysis.

Ethics

The Ethics Committee of the Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania) granted permission to conduct the study on 2024-10-21, protocol number 24–28, permit number SA-EK-24-46.

Ethical aspects were important in all qualitative studies from literature review, recruiting of research participants, to data analysis and presentation of findings/results. The researchers prioritized informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, respect for research participants, and transparency in the study. This included providing research participants with the informed consent document and obtaining participants' permissions to use quotes and ensuring that their identities were not revealed in the analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). To ensure trustworthiness in qualitative content analysis, credibility with member checks, transferability (thick description), dependability (clear methods), and confirmability (reflexivity, peer review) were used to build confidence that findings are believable, applicable, consistent, and unbiased (Stahl & King, 2020).

Findings

Doctoral students experience challenges at three levels during their studies: personal, institutional, and supervisor-related (see Table 3).

Table 3

Three Levels of Academic Challenges Experienced by Doctoral Students

Category	Subcategory	Level of Challenges
Academic challenges	Doubts about personal methodological competence	Personal
	Balancing between academic activities, dissertation preparation and social life	
	Balancing between work and university activities	
	Being stuck in fear of procrastination	
	Searching purposefully for scientific growth	Institutional
	Experiencing high demands on intellectual productivity	
	Lacking shared responsibility	
	Lacking expert support	

Category	Subcategory	Level of Challenges
Academic challenges	Balancing between doctoral studies and work	
	Limited academic freedom based on methodological framework	
	Being disconnected from the organizational information system	
	Experiencing institutional academic loneliness	
	Being academically neglected by a supervisor	Supervisor-related
	Experiencing an unequal relationship	

Academic challenges at the personal level

At the personal level, doctoral students' academic challenges are related to doubts about their methodological competence, balancing work-life, work and university activities, neglect by their scientific supervisor, and targeted searches for scientific growth.

Doubting about personal methodological competence. Doctoral studies are a dynamic and challenging process, in which doctoral students face the difficulties of preparing a dissertation. One of the most difficult stages of preparing a dissertation is conducting an empirical study, in which methodological problems arise that raise doubts and questions for doctoral students about the further direction of their dissertation work. Then there are doubts about the meaningfulness of the research results, and the lack of methodological skills causes stress. PhD students experience methodological incompetence, overcoming which requires a will to learn, to read methodological literature, which is often written in a complex way, does not have clear answers and references to specific practical application. This reading requires additional time, which is intended for personal growth, not for writing a dissertation.

It's scary when you feel like you're hitting a wall somewhere, where it seems like the research is leading nowhere. There are some pretty complicated methodologies and you see that the results don't show any ... they don't make any sense and you don't know what to do, what's wrong with it. And it seems like the research is leading nowhere. Reading methodological literature requires a lot of extra time from me. Without it, there will be nothing, I understand that. But it is very difficult to devote time to it. Inside, I understand that it is personally important to me, but that reading somehow distracts from the direct writing of the dissertation. Searches take a lot of time, and often the event does not meet expectations regarding the content and the competencies of the participating scientists/lecturers. (TD12)

The imbalance between work and life is experienced, becoming a daily occurrence when priorities have to be re-allocated. When prioritizing and devoting more time to doctoral studies and dissertation preparation, doctoral students experience an

internal struggle. Their relationship with their social environment – friends, family members – changes. They have to give up previously common life pleasures, such as frequent meetings with friends, entertainment events, and spending leisure time together. When preparing a dissertation, there is no time for these things, and they become obstacles to working on the dissertation during that period. It is difficult for the environment to understand such a change.

I think that for me this is probably one of the most difficult, where I have to fight a lot to have that free time for the dissertation. And for example, if someone says, let's go for coffee at twelve o'clock and I see that I have time, but there is that time when I would sit and, for example, write something, collect, analyze. And I have to tell the person that I have time anyway, but no. It can be very difficult to understand that when you have time, you still can't do certain activities, because that time is needed elsewhere. (TD13)

Balancing between academic activities, dissertation preparation and social life. Doctoral students who prioritize the dissertation writing process face tension and an internal sense of guilt, which is intertwined with the search for personal motivation to find arguments to devote time to the dissertation and to strictly plan their social life time. The feeling of guilt is experienced every time they have fun, go on vacation, and take time away from the dissertation preparation. The tension experienced by doctoral students between work and rest creates internal conflict.

I would say there are a lot of such emotional experiences. <...> I'm just saying you really have to find, always look for motivation. Always plan your time very carefully. Always think about the future, how you're going to do something, so that you have time. If you're still working very hard <...>. And the only thing, at least for me, is that the constant feeling of guilt always accompanies me. Always. I just know that if I'm having fun now, going on vacation, I could do something for myself now. And if I'm already doing something for my doctoral studies, then I think I could maybe go now ... In that sense, guilt is always your companion. (TD7)

The daily balancing act experienced by doctoral students between university activities requires different personal preparation, attention, and ways of thinking. Different activities, intertwining with each other, complicate the doctoral student's consistent and purposeful work, because university activities have to be done quickly and efficiently; then the preparation of the dissertation has to be postponed, and when returning to writing, it is difficult to concentrate and continue work.

For this reason, the process of writing a dissertation becomes burdensome and complicated. If there were no tension, there would be no such big jumps as there are now, for example. You prepare for a certification, an article, you concentrate on something, but you don't really do anything. Then you work on a project ... Then you return to the project, after a while you return to science, you do your dissertation and then you forget where you left off. So that there is no such fragmentation. (TD16)

Balancing between work and university activities. As doctoral students balance the different tasks of preparing their dissertation, university activities and their current job at another institution, physical presence at the university becomes a challenge, as they have to be physically present at work and physically present at the university (TD11). As a result, doctoral students cannot withstand the stress and suffer various consequences – their emotional and physical health deteriorates, not only does the quality of work in all institutions with which the doctoral student is associated decline, but the dissertation becomes a burden; in some cases, doctoral students drop out of their studies as a result.

A very high percentage of doctoral students drop out because they simply can't keep up. They get sick. Or they simply can't, can't, don't meet the criteria, and then it's terribly difficult for them. And then a vicious circle forms. Your dissertation has become your biggest nightmare. Your health has ruined you. (TD7)

Being stuck in fear of procrastination. Doctoral students often experience a sense of being stuck in fear of procrastination. So, in doctoral studies, they find themselves in situations where they know what to do, but feel trapped, experiencing fear, doubt, and self-doubt. This feeling of a doctoral student arises from facing the high expectations of the university and receiving criticism. Doctoral students begin to resort to avoidance – they put off mandatory dissertation-related work without preparing to start and complete it.

I'm trying to dig in on my own. I'm going to try to do a final draft, show it to the managers, then listen to my "structural criticism". And I'll see. And then I'll draw conclusions about how I'm doing here. But yeah, there's no primal instinct to go and say I'm not doing well. <...> For example, with that article, I know I have to write it, but I'm in that place where those learning circles are, so I'm in the fear zone. And I'm putting off this task because I'm just afraid to start it. But I'm trying somehow for now. (TD6)

Searching purposefully for scientific growth. In doctoral studies, students seek targeted growth opportunities that promote the development of specific skills and the acquisition of new knowledge. This search becomes a personal challenge due to the time, content of the event, and the competencies of the scientists representing the event.

Then I feel like I've either tried "tutorials on YouTube" or I've tried winter and summer schools, but they didn't work out for me. Because either they were too difficult, or they weren't about what I wanted at all. (TD9)

Academic challenges at the institutional level

At the institutional level doctoral students experience challenges regarding high demands on intellectual productivity, lacking the shared responsibility and expert support, and balancing between doctoral studies and work.

Experiencing high demands on intellectual productivity. Doctoral students are expected to perform at a high level of intellectual productivity. The emphasis on scientific production at the university causes stress for doctoral students due to the long time it takes to write publications, and the lengthy review and publication processes. The opinion expressed by a doctoral student represents resistance that cannot be expressed verbally.

I think there is a lot of importance to this. I think there is the biggest pressure here, because you have to make two publications in four years, well, I would say even three. In the first year you basically do nothing. So, what do you do? In that sense, you probably choose modules during your time there, exams. You probably write some kind of draft version of your doctoral studies. You don't really do anything very productive in the first year. So, let's say, you have three years for two publications. Realistically, this is very ambitious, because we know how much review of publications in particularly good journals takes, it can take up to two years, sometimes even more. Depending on where you publish. (TD7)

Lacking the shared responsibility structure. Doctoral students are confused by the lack of a shared responsibility structure in their studies. They expect guidance from their supervisor because they have to work independently, which in reality means loneliness and confusion. Doctoral students are responsible for the confusion of doctoral students and the encounter with unclear expectations. Experienced communication has an expectation for the distribution of responsibilities in preparing a dissertation and divides it into three directions – the supervisor, the university, and the doctoral student. Doctoral students focus on shared responsibility in preparing their dissertation.

I understand that there may not be any regulations, but there is no structure, no responsibility, how much the supervisor should help you, how much he should guide you. I feel that I work very independently. <...> I think that there should be responsibility from the supervisor, from the university, and from the doctoral student. I lack coordination, responsibility. (TD14)

Lacking expert support. The lack of expert support is related to the loneliness experienced by doctoral students when they do not have support for their dissertation preparation, which disrupts communication channels and personal learning:

I feel sometimes like I have nothing to ask and no one to learn from. (TD9)

Balancing between doctoral studies and work. Doctoral students working at the university face a work-study imbalance. Doctoral studies require students' active intellectual engagement and time investment. Doctoral students consider financial support during their studies to be inadequate, and therefore they tend to take on additional work, which affects the preparation of their dissertation and the quality of their studies.

It's very difficult for me <...> I don't know what others say, but it's really very difficult. I'm very tired. My workload has been greatly reduced. And I feel that my studies are suffering.

Sometimes it seems that in order to do it well, I need to stop working anywhere, but that doesn't work either, because the scholarship still doesn't meet my needs and there are no social guarantees. In short, it just doesn't work out that way. (TD16)

The compatibility of work and doctoral studies is complicated by the lack of time management of doctoral students and the failure to prioritize the preparation of the dissertation, when financial interest is the main priority of the doctoral studies period. The indecision of a doctoral student regarding the preparation of the dissertation as a main priority leads to the postponement of obligations in the doctoral studies.

And then after the exams, since I had already paid for everything, it seemed to me that I still had a lot of time and everything became much more free for me, when I paid for everything, then I received an offer to work part-time at one job. And I accepted it. Then I was offered another job. In total, I had 1.5 full-time jobs and a PhD studies with preparation of dissertation. And in that second year, my doctoral dissertation was put aside. (TD9)

Limited academic freedom based on methodological framework. When starting doctoral studies, many doctoral students expect to be able to research personally significant, uniquely formulated problems, i.e., they will have unlimited freedom. However, while at university, the complexity experienced is to understand that the academic freedom to which they are entitled has specific limits and responsibilities, i.e., doctoral students are faced with academic freedom that has a structure – academic freedom based on a methodological structure. This means that doctoral students must focus on topics that are related to the expertise of a specific academic unit. Then students experience the transformation of personal interest into university interest, where they need to be able to adapt to the expertise relevant to the institution in a specific scientific field and direction and carry out specific research, putting their personal desires and interests in the background. However, even in this context, doctoral students find interesting aspects for themselves when conducting their dissertation research.

When you come to a doctoral program thinking that you bring your own ideas that you can implement. Well, how much of your own contribution can you bring, for example, it happens that you simply have to adapt to what the main challenges are at that time in that field. You don't come here with your own idea, because there are politics, there are already existing parameters within which you have to try to do what you are interested in, adapting to the field of expertise of the academic department. I understand that personal interest changes into university interest. (TD3)

Being disconnected from the organizational information system. The limited academic freedom experienced by doctoral students is accompanied by a disconnection from the organizational information system. Although doctoral studies are the highest level of study, doctoral students experience institutional marginalization due to the university's greater interest in students at other study levels.

Now the situation is changing a little, but administratively, doctoral students were left absolutely somewhere for a long time, because all the attention is on bachelors, bachelor's students, master's students, and doctoral students – 'somehow'. For example, we, as we have our own access, our own at the university, we have our own information system, but it is not really working and if some bachelor logs into his account and sees schedules and documents, everything, then doctoral students have nothing. Although we also take exams, we collect credits, we also participate in that system. We are part of the system, we are students, but, for example, I still can't check anywhere what my results are, whether I have collected all the credits, or maybe I am missing some certificate, no matter what, I don't see anything. I have to go to the doctoral department and personally ask someone directly to look for some papers somewhere. This is such a slight push of doctoral studies to the side. (TD14)

Experiencing institutional academic loneliness. Lack of inclusion in the information system of the organization isolates doctoral students not only at the university level, but also causes institutional academic loneliness. Experiences of loneliness in doctoral studies are exacerbated by academic challenges, targeted information search processes, and study planning. Fragmented academic connections weaken the community, which in turn weakens collaborative relationships.

In our University, I could say that the academic community is very divided, very individualized, so we communicate little with each other because we don't open up to others, we don't share. (TD5)

In a fragmented academic environment, doctoral students are left to navigate the processes of research and academic management alone. They feel left to their own devices during their doctoral studies, without structured support and opportunities for community learning. Such experiences reinforce feelings of insecurity and contribute to a decline in self-confidence.

And from the perspective of those two years, from all those processes, I see the biggest shortcoming and what greatly intensifies loneliness is that you have to know a lot of things for yourself and discover them for yourself. In other words, that experience, as a doctoral dissertation is written, you have to discover it for yourself completely by poking your nose against the wall. In that primitive way. Or walking around the room blindfolded. That's the feeling. Because then you think: "Well, how can I ... Well, I can read the dissertation, I can read the articles, I can talk to someone in principle, with some colleague who has been on that path for, say, three or four years." It didn't help me, by the way. Neither did conversations with doctoral students. Because they said exactly the same thing, that somehow you have to discover for yourself how you will think about who you are now and how you are and why this way and why not. And how? Because the most difficult process is finding a way for yourself, and how will everything be here now? And not how will it be here, combining some of your personal life, family or other challenges, but how is the process of creating a PhD itself going? (TD8)

Doctoral students lack not only targeted knowledge sharing, but also human support and collegial relationships where they can share their doubts or simply be heard.

The first thing is that there is a certain lack of divination in that community. Both among doctoral students and among professors, among people who understand the methods, who understand that they could simply help you. (TD9)

Challenges at the supervisor-related level

At the supervisor-related level, doctoral students experience challenges related to being academically neglected by a supervisor, and being in an unequal relationship with her/him.

Being academically neglected by a supervisor. The feeling of abandonment experienced by doctoral students is not the same as loneliness, as it arises from the educational relationship between the doctoral student and the scientific supervisor. As doctoral students become active and show initiative in the process of preparing their dissertation, they have the expectation that their scientific supervisors will respond to their emerging academic needs and accompany them throughout the entire path of preparing their dissertation. When this expectation is not met, doctoral students feel abandoned by academia.

This is basically what I could say about the supervisor on the positive side. I get some of those observations from him, but it's definitely not enough. I would think that I prepared the project itself and the introduction to the dissertation, everything I've done there so far, the research design, all by myself. There really wasn't any collaboration. Maybe it was some kind of initiative on my part. And when I reminded him, I got some comments, but it's definitely not enough. I often feel abandoned by my scientific supervisor. (TD5)

Doctoral students' experience of academic neglect by their supervisors during the dissertation preparation creates a sense of isolation for them. The growing distance between doctoral students and their supervisors creates for students a sense of loneliness and the feeling of "being abandoned".

In fact, what I miss most from a supervisor is this kind of guidance. You are still a young researcher, have not published much, do not have experience and confidence yet, and sometimes you really do not know. It would be very good from a more experienced person to tell you what is good and what is bad. I sometimes miss such a simple, sometimes like a school assignment. Because now everything is: "well, look, think critically". You are still left alone. I miss that clearer teaching. (TD14)

Experiencing unequal relationship. The relationship between doctoral students and their supervisors is not always based on a mutually equal dialogue. At university, doctoral students encounter experiences of an unequal relationship when communicating and/or collaborating with their supervisors.

It saddens me that there is still such an attitude and such a relationship that the leader is high and the student is low. But it seems to me that they should be in the same position. They are both interested in the result. It is a little sad that there are very things that depend on the personality or personal qualities of the professors. (TD14)

Discussion

The results of the study could be grouped into three levels of challenges experienced by doctoral students in their studies – personal, institutional, and supervisor-related.

Personal challenges. Doctoral students balance different academic, professional, personal, and social roles (Harman, 2003; McCauley & Hinojosa, 2020; Prendergast et al., 2023), which emphasize that doctoral studies require constant re-prioritization and the ability to cope with everyday challenges. The study revealed that personal challenges of doctoral students are related to balancing doctoral studies with social life or existing professional activities. Often, doctoral studies are not considered a priority, and therefore the experience of a supervisor or institutional empowerment to take responsibility for the quality of studies and time management is described as pressure that causes emotional turmoil. The doctoral study period poses a number of interrelated challenges for doctoral students, affecting their personal, academic, and professional lives. If doctoral students do not cope with these challenges, it affects their emotional exhaustion, feelings of guilt, and lack of motivation to prepare a good dissertation and successfully complete their doctoral studies (Jones-White et al., 2021).

The study revealed that when doctoral students do not deal with their “I” and do not become empowered with academic obedience, it becomes difficult to understand the subtleties of the academic world that need to be known, to understand their meaning and to integrate into the university’s academic community. However, when they become empowered with scientific growth, initiative, activity, in-depth study, and searches for scientific questions, they succeed in overcoming challenges and successfully defend their dissertation (Atabay et al., 2017; Caratozzolo et al., 2021).

Institutional challenges. Doctoral students face structural, communication and organizational problems in the university. Often, students face a lack of personalized approach to the doctoral study process, and the existing structure does not focus on individual study needs (Acharya et al., 2024; Ryan et al., 2021). Findings showed that doctoral students experience loneliness. Their narratives reveal that they tend to rely on a waiting strategy, which determines their feeling of loneliness. They expect doctoral studies to be similar to their study experience in bachelor’s and/or master’s studies. Therefore, they often experience shock due to institutional requirements for scientific production, with priority given to doctoral studies and dissertation preparation. However, there are cases when doctoral students experience loneliness because they are not provided with expert scientific assistance in the university department; they do

not experience targeted guidance from their scientific supervisor regarding the study of specific sources, they lack discussions, consultations, and targeted information, which causes them stress and anxiety. Supervisors can play a crucial role in mitigating doctoral student stress and anxiety by fostering a supportive and communicative environment. This includes providing clear expectations, offering constructive feedback, and encouraging open communication about challenges (Golde, 2005; Deuchar, 2008). Additionally, supervisors can help normalize the struggles of doctoral work and promote self-care practices (Lee, 2019; McCauley & Hinojosa, 2020; Anttila et al., 2023).

Supervisor-related challenges. The doctoral student-supervisor relationship is crucial, extending beyond academic guidance to significantly impact the student's personal well-being and overall experience. A positive and supportive relationship can foster a thriving research environment, while a poor one can negatively impact on a student's mental health and academic progress (Li et al., 2025). The doctoral students who participated in the study mentioned two problems – feeling abandoned by their supervisor and experiencing unequal relationships. When doctoral students experience the lack of involvement of their scientific supervisors, they experience abandonment and loneliness, which not only complicates the preparation of their dissertation, but also forms a negative experience of academic identity (Klefbeck, 2025; Anttila et al., 2023).

The focus on the supervisor-student relationship, crucial to the success of doctoral studies, likely stems from the historical nature of relatively unstructured doctoral studies, where understanding of doctoral studies' structure, curriculum, and process is poor. However, while the role of the supervisor remains important, his/her role is more institutionally structured, and may therefore not play the key role that it did a few decades ago. In particular, doctoral programs are becoming increasingly standardized, including various forms of structured learning (e.g., modules, seminars, workshops, summer schools, writing courses, career services); there is greater institutional accountability (e.g., greater monitoring of progress in doctoral studies, more formal assessment procedures); and other scientists are increasingly involved in supporting the progress of doctoral studies, e.g., scientists other than the supervisor are involved in assessment and feedback, support groups are being formed, a doctoral student is assigned several scientific supervisors during the study period – for example, two or three, a supervisor and a scientific consultant (Cho, 2009; Caratozzolo et al., 2021; Chalo et al., 2023).

Generally, it is evident from findings that doctoral students need to empower themselves for learning to search for their priorities, and during doctoral studies they need to prioritize the preparation of dissertation. For a doctoral student, prioritization is procedural, as it enables them to learn to manage their time and develop the will and perseverance to systematically and consistently prepare a dissertation according to plan. It also helps integration with the academic university community by changing individualistic attitudes from being closed off after being convinced of their solid knowledge towards being open to their own ignorance and opening up to learning from the academic

community; changing from unlimited action in representing oneself towards targeted action with clear boundaries in representing the university and the scientific community.

Limitations of the study. In the study, two key limitations were identified, both related to the composition of the research sample, i.e., ensuring the diversity of the research participants. First, the study focused on understanding the situation of challenges experienced by doctoral students – its subjective scanning – therefore it is relevant to expand the sample of doctoral students of various years of study. This includes doctoral graduates who would share their reflections several years after the defense, when emotions are balanced and, likely, the doctoral studies period is seen differently. Second, the study did not include supervisors, whose experience is relevant to hear and understand in order to form a holistic picture of the challenges experienced by doctoral students in doctoral studies.

Implications for higher education research. The research results showed that there are irresolvable problems, therefore it is relevant to develop research on the experiences of doctoral studies, doctoral students, and their supervisors. Future research might delve deeper not only into the challenges and obstacles, but also, based on the already available empirical evidence, consider several directions: joint consortium-based leadership of the doctoral school; the diversity of models for monitoring the quality of doctoral studies (e.g., a doctoral student led by a non-academic supervisor together with an academic supervisor; a mandatory support group for the doctoral student working throughout the study year, ensuring that the doctoral student is led by at least two supervisors); the diversity of genres of doctoral production and the empowerment of doctoral students to read, reflect and achieve the highest level of academic expertise in conducting empirical research and preparing scientific production.

Recommendations for future research. Future research on challenges in doctoral studies should focus on empirical testing across diverse contexts, exploring new factors like AI's role, investigating intersectionality (culture, discipline, work status), and developing longitudinal studies on career pathways amidst academic precarity, emphasizing practical support for mental health, digital literacy, and realistic career expectations, especially for international or part-time students facing unique pressures like financial insecurity and work-life balance issues.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by doctoral students during their studies can be categorized at personal, institutional, and supervisor-related levels. These levels reflect that challenges related to the relationship between the doctoral student and the scientific supervisor are common to all of them. Challenges in the student–supervisor relationship are a significant concern, potentially impacting academic achievement, well-being, and career development. This shows that the relationship between doctoral student and supervisor is at

the center of doctoral studies, adding to students' existing challenges through fear of supervisors' procrastination, their academic neglect, lack of shared responsibility, and unequal relationship.

The interconnectedness of personal and institutional levels is reflected in doctoral students' balancing act, though not identically on both levels. On a personal level, students balance academic activities, dissertation preparation and social life, work activities and academic activities at the university. On an institutional level, they balance doctoral studies and work. If doctoral students do not prioritize their studies, this balancing act is always unsuccessful.

Challenges at the personal level show the doctoral student's learning to become an academic, when they have to regroup priorities, reflect on personal limitations, understand the meaning of academic humility in the academic space of higher education, and set clear goals based on an activity plan for the preparation of the dissertation. They gain comprehensive academic growth and expertise in their field of science. and in their knowledge, understanding and development of the dissertation topic.

The challenges at the institutional level raise the problems of academic loneliness and lack of expert support, which show doctoral students' need to become empowered in leadership in managing their dissertation preparation process. Empowerment is relevant for them to change their attitudes from waiting for help and support towards empowerment to become active by clearly communicating the needs of their learning and dissertation preparation in the academic community without delay. This processual path involves empowering doctoral students to master the skills of self-regulated reflective learning, academic communication, and time management in order to manage the dissertation preparation process successfully.

Challenges at the supervisor-related level indicate the need for the scientific supervisor to find a balance between an expert and an individualized approach when guiding the preparation of a doctoral dissertation. The harmony of these approaches creates opportunities for the doctoral student's learning needs to be met, expecting academic support and human empathy from the supervisor, with a high level of scientific competence and specific expertise in the dissertation topic.

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Trys iššūkių lygmenys doktorantūros studijose aukštajame moksle: asmeninis, institucinis ir susijęs su vadovu

Vilma Žydziiūnaitė¹, Monika Kelpšienė², Monika Šimkutė-Bukantė³, Marius Daugėla⁴, Julija Grigėnaitė⁵

¹ Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Švietimo akademija, Edukologijos tyrimų institutas, K. Donelaičio g. 58, Kaunas, Lietuva, vilma.zydziiunaite@vdu.lt

² Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Švietimo akademija, Edukologijos tyrimų institutas, K. Donelaičio g. 58, Kaunas, Lietuva, monika.kelpsiene@vdu.lt

³ Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Švietimo akademija, Edukologijos tyrimų institutas, K. Donelaičio g. 58, Kaunas, Lietuva, monika.simkute-bukante@vdu.lt

⁴ Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Švietimo akademija, Edukologijos tyrimų institutas, K. Donelaičio g. 58, Kaunas, Lietuva, marius.daugela@vdu.lt

⁵ Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Švietimo akademija, Edukologijos tyrimų institutas, K. Donelaičio g. 58, Kaunas, Lietuva, julija.grigenaite@vdu.lt

Santrauka

Šio tyrimo tikslas – atskleisti, patikslinti ir pagrįsti doktorantų patiriamus iššūkius skirtinguose aukštojo mokslo lygmenyse. Tyrime taikytas kokybinio tyrimo dizainas, duomenys rinkti pusiau struktūruotų interviu būdu, o jų analizei taikyta latentinė kokybinė turinio analizė. Tyrime dalyvavo dvylika doktorantų iš penkių Lietuvos universitetų. Doktorantai atstovavo skirtingoms mokslo sritims ir kryptims. Rezultatai atskleidė tris doktorantų iššūkių lygmenis (asmeninį, institucinį ir doktoranto bei vadovo santykio), kurie turi specifinį turinį ir juos siejančius aspektus. Visus lygmenis apima doktoranto ir mokslinio vadovo santykis. Bendraujant su vadovais doktorantams kyla iššūkių, jie baiminasi vadovų delsimu ar atidėjimo, jaučiasi jų akademiškai apleisti, patiria bendros atsakomybės stygių ir išgyvena nelygiaverčius santykius. Asmeninis ir institucinis lygmenys atskleidžia jų tarpusavio ryšį per doktorantų siekį išlaikyti pusiausvyrą, tačiau nė viename iš paminėtų lygmenų tas ryšys nėra identiškas: asmeniniame lygmenyje doktorantai balansuoja tarp akademinės veiklos, disertacijos rengimo ir socialinio gyvenimo bei darbinės veiklos, taip pat ir akademinės veiklos universitete, o instituciniame lygmenyje jie balansuoja tarp doktorantūros studijų ir darbo. Šis balansavimas, siekis išlaikyti pusiausvyrą, visais atvejais nesėkmingas, jei doktorantai neteikia pirmenybės doktorantūros studijoms.

Esminiai žodžiai: *aukštasis mokslas, doktorantas, doktorantūros studijos, interviu, iššūkis, kokybinė turinio analizė, mokslinis vadovas, universitetas.*

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