

Copenhagen
Denmark

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PhD Extension Problem Statement 2018

Summary

The PhD Association Network of Denmark (PAND) presents in this document a systematic problem that affects a large proportion of PhD students; namely that when PhD studies are extended beyond employment contracts, often for reasons outside the individual's control, these extra months of research activity are undertaken without remuneration. The lack of remuneration puts significant financial, professional and personal stress on the individual but also impacts the host university, industry partners and the student's contribution to society in general. In this document we will briefly introduce the timing and activities of a Danish PhD, both the expectation and the reality, we continue with a description of the law change that has brought about the current funding problem, and using testimonials as case studies, we elaborate on the problems from both prior to the law change and subsequent to it. Finally, we state PAND's position on the problem by inviting relevant parties to engage collaboratively in finding a solution.

Introduction

The PhD programme in Denmark is based on an employment contract between individual students and state institutions capable of conferring the PhD degree which are negotiated under a collective agreement for Danish University faculty members. This standard employment agreement is for a three year duration, during which a successful PhD student will complete the following:

1. Up to 840 hours (equivalent to half of one year's employment) of work for the institution responsible for their course of study. This might take the form of teaching, advisory tasks or project work outside the PhD study.
2. 30 ECTS-credits of courses which equates to approximately 840 hours of coursework (~28 hours per credit, equivalent to one semester).
3. An external research stay at a facility not part of the same institution and strongly recommended to be abroad for a period of 3-6 months.

Among a few other countries in the world, Denmark has one of the shortest times to complete a PhD study. This is beneficial for PhD students' careers but, on the other hand, it can penalize the researcher in case of delays during his or her studies.

Findings from an industry report from 2015 on the PhD program in Denmark state:

the average completion time is shortest for PhD students in the technical and natural sciences followed by PhD students from health and medical sciences. In the first case, PhD students complete their studies on average three months after the three years. For PhD students in the health and medical sciences it takes on average four months more than required. The completion time is the longest for PhD students in social sciences and humanities, where on average PhD students finish respectively five months and six months over the deadline.¹

From this report it is possible to infer that most PhD students complete their PhD project several months after the anticipated three year deadline.

There are multiple reasons for these extensions. Extensions covered by employment law, including parental and sickness leave, are funded as the employment contract is extended along with the PhD study and the period of leave is covered by the state. Parental leave, in particular is an important social benefit for PhD students as this life stage often coincides with this career stage. However, research-related delays and subsequent academically justified extensions may be caused by unexpected experimental results, the emergence of new literature, delays in gaining ethical approval for a project² or changes in partners involved in the studies. These events are beyond the control of the PhD student and his or her working group. The merits of the academic justification for such extensions are judged by PhD schools and academic panels before being declined or awarded.

In October of 2015, the Danish government signed an agreement (with supporting non-governing parties) to amend the Act on Unemployment Insurance. The subsequent amendments included a modification to rules preventing people participating in education from receiving unemployment insurance. The modification relevant to this discussion included a deletion of an exception to this rule, which formerly allowed PhD students to receive unemployment insurance once their employment contract as PhD students had expired but whilst completing their studies as enrolled PhD students, so long as the student spent no more than 20 hours per week on their PhD work. This past situation limited the time a PhD student could use to complete their programme and also placed a financial burden on unemployment insurance funds. The enforcement of these new rules was phased in from the 2nd of January 2017 until it came into full effect on the 1st of July 2017. The main consequence of this amendment is that PhD students who have not completed their PhD thesis prior to the expiration of their employment contract can no longer receive unemployment benefits and are thus forced to abandon their programme and/or find alternative employment.

It must be noted that the completion of the PhD project is of benefit to the PhD student, the university, any industry partners and Danish society in general. The benefit to the PhD student is clear, they attain a higher level qualification and complete a (minimum) three year programme of work. The university achieves its aim of successfully delivering another PhD graduate and increases its research output. Industry partners, that may be involved in the project, receive their final reports on innovative new ideas and methods. Finally, society at large benefits two fold by increasing the number of highly-trained individuals in the work-force and by receiving more in-depth and novel research to draw upon.

¹ The report and datasource was provided to PAND in confidence and hence the source cannot be disclosed

² <http://www.utas.edu.au/research-admin/graduate-research/frequently-asked-questions>

Testimonials

Individuals providing testimonials contributed substantial personal information but wished to remain anonymous. Here we have paraphrased their testimonials and removed names of individuals and organisations to prevent any future prejudice or unfair attribution of blame as we (PAND) view this as a systematic problem exemplified in the case studies below.

Testimonials - Before 2017 Law Change

Prior to the 2017 law change, PhD students who's 3 year employment contract had ended, but were granted an extension to their PhD enrolment to complete and submit their PhD thesis, were able to get financial assistance via their unemployment insurance. This section uses case studies from PhD students who received extensions prior to the law change to outline the limitations of this model of funding PhD extensions and the experiences PhD students had under this model.

TESTIMONIAL 1

Upon the period of employment ending, the PhD student was required to submit an application to receive dagpenge from their A-kasse. Part of this application required a declaration that the PhD student was still enrolled in higher education due to the fact that they were still writing their thesis. Once accepted the PhD student now depended on unemployment insurance to pay for food and rent whilst they continued to work for the knowledge industry. Furthermore, whilst receiving this unemployment insurance the PhD student was constrained in many ways, listed below, with the corresponding testimonial viewpoint:

Limitation: The time spent on education could not exceed 20 hours per week.

Viewpoint: This prolongs the required length of the extension. This prolongation increases the burden on the A-kasse and prevents the PhD student from submitting and progressing in their career.

Limitation: The PhD student should spend time actively job seeking, sending seven job applications a month. These were reviewed by a case-worker.

Viewpoint: This wastes the time of the PhD student, the A-kasse case worker and the job-advertiser. The PhD student is forced to apply for jobs that are not congruent with their career progression nor compatible with their commitment to finishing their PhD. The A-kasse is forced to monitor this effort indefinitely. The job advertiser is having to consider submissions from applicants that do not want the position.

Limitation: What to do when offered a job?

Viewpoint: If offered a job from the compulsory job search the PhD student has two possible choices:

Accept the job - in which case the PhD is most likely not going to be completed, the student does not get the degree they have worked toward, the university loses a graduate.

Turn down the job - in which case the PhD student burns a bridge with a potential employer, faces a loss of their income for three weeks and if it is not the first time they have declined an offer, potentially lose their income completely.

TESTIMONIAL 2

Because of the extensive effort required in projects not related to the PhD, a PhD student applied two times for a six month extension. During the one year extension, the PhD student was employed by the university as a research assistant and worked

on various university projects and continued working on the final thesis in the spare time. The PhD student highlighted the following limitations of his journey:

Limitation: No time assigned for contributing to the PhD thesis.

Viewpoint: Working full time on university projects impeded the PhD student's ability to significantly contribute to their PhD work, which resulted in the request for a second six months extension.

Limitation: Multiple responsibilities and deadlines caused stress.

Viewpoint: The PhD deadlines combined with the university project responsibilities caused the PhD student severe stress, sickness and writer's block that still need to be fully overcome after 2 years. This contributed to the delay of the thesis completion.

Limitation: Lack of assigned supervision during the extension

Viewpoint: The supervisor did not have the time to discuss important points like the structure of the thesis, administration forms, and so on. This was overcome by seeking help from other PhD students but still delayed and impacted the time required to complete the PhD.

Testimonials - After 2017 Law change

This section uses case studies from PhD students who received extensions after the law change to outline the limitations of the absence of funding PhD extensions and the experiences PhD students had under this model.

TESTIMONIAL 3

Following news of the law change, this PhD student experienced a drawn out wild-goose chase through all levels of the university, from department, through PhD school, right up to the relevant head of PhD programme at their university, trying to find some answers to what their situation would be after their employment contract ended. The final advice from the university was that they were not able to employ the PhD student beyond the end of their contract and told the student:

"... not to worry that I don't finish my PhD studies, because this [PhD students not finishing their studies] happens from time to time and the department will not ask money back [referring to the salary]".

In concurrent conversations with an A-kasse, the PhD student was informed that to receive any form of unemployment assistance, they must be unenrolled from the PhD programme. With no options left, the PhD student did so.

Limitation: The university handled the un-enrolment process in a confusing manner.

Viewpoint: It took the PhD student over a month and tens of emails and meetings to get answers from the university on how to proceed with the un-enrolment. This not only wasted the PhD student's time but also caused stress and discomfort.

Limitation: The student had to officially unenroll from their programme of study to be able to seek A-kasse support. The student had to negotiate a bespoke agreement with their PhD Administration where-by the administration agreed to re-enrol the student within one year of the un-enrolment.

Viewpoint: This puts the PhD student's ability to deliver a thesis in jeopardy as they must wilfully unenrol from their programme. Furthermore, for the period post un-enrolment where the PhD student continues work on their thesis unofficially, they are effectively in the same position as those students before the law-change, as described above.

TESTIMONIAL 4

To complete the PhD study the student needed 6 additional months of work. After a consultation with his supervisor, the PhD student applied for a 6 months extension. During this period, the financial support was provided by the university by him working at a project partly related to the PhD. Coming from outside the European Union, the PhD student did not have access to A-kasse support. While being employed at the university, the PhD student was constrained as described below:

Limitation: Exhausting life.

Viewpoint: During the six months before the hand-in and the six months of the extension the PhD student had to work most weekends and could not afford to any vacation in the last year of his PhD.

Limitation: Financial support came from another project

Viewpoint: The degree to which the outside project funds and the original PhD topic overlap determine the extent of this limitation. If the PhD student continues on the same track, then the outside project is shouldering the financial burden, potentially reducing the employment opportunities for others. If the PhD student changes their activities to align with the goals of the outside project, then this provides an added stressor and dictates the subject of their thesis.

Positive fact: Support from the supervisor

Viewpoint: The funding provided by the supervisor supported the PhD student financially for the duration of the extension. It was a fair level of remuneration for the work being undertaken and removed the financial stress from this inherently stressful period.

Position Statement

We, the PhD Association Network of Denmark, highlight the problem that under the current situation a proportion of research work, undertaken by PhD students, is carried out without remuneration. With this policy paper we petition the Ministry of Higher Education and Science, the Agency for Modernisation (Ministry of Finance), Universities Denmark (Danske Universiteter), and the appropriate trade unions to work collaboratively on finding a solution for funding academically justified PhD extensions.

PhD students undertake novel and exploratory research, for which outcomes are inherently unknown and unpredictable. Furthermore, they carry out this work with a large reliance on external actors, be they the colleagues of their own lab group or the external project partners. Because of this unpredictability and reliance on factors outside of their control, PhD students often require academic extensions beyond their employment contracts. During this time, PhD students continue to provide valuable research and outputs for the research community, their relevant industry sectors, and the community at large. This work should be recognised and remunerated accordingly.

While universities can ask for support to extend their research projects directly to the private and public institutions, PhD students do not have this option.

The comparable situation prior to the change³ in unemployment insurance law was not ideal. It placed the burden of financially supporting the completion of academically extended PhD projects on the Danish welfare system. However, instead of fixing this issue, the law change has only moved the burden from A-kasse and the

³ <https://www.retsinformation.dk/Forms/R0710.aspx?id=185857>

unemployment benefit system and loaded it further on the already heavily burdened individual PhD student.

The PhD Association Network of Denmark looks forward to working and participating with the relevant organisations to solve this research funding and PhD employment issue.

On behalf of the board of the PhD Association Network of Denmark,



Co-chair, Marco Nardello



Co-chair, Vanya Rusinova