



Annual Report of the DOMB December 16, 2017 – December 20, 2018

Summary

The Doctoral Students' Representative (Doktorandombud, DOMB) has been contracted by the board of Chalmers Doctoral Students Guild (Doktorandsektionen, DS) to advise, support and/or represent doctoral students at Chalmers. In any situation the progression of the DOMB's actions, from remaining in the background to active intervention, is guided by the doctoral student. The DOMB is neutral with respect to the rules but acts in the interests of the doctoral student. The DOMB's communications with doctoral students and all case files are confidential.

Within the limits of the required confidentiality, this annual report presents a summary of the DOMB's activities between December 16, 2017 and December 20, 2018 (Year 3) along with comparative data from Years 1 and 2. In Year 3, as in Years 1 and 2, the participation profile included students from all departments at Chalmers. Approximately 48% of the students came from within the European Union (EU). Approximately 54% of the students were male and 42% were female (4% unknown). The DOMB has an on-going, and growing, annual commitment to between 7% and 9% of the doctoral student population.

In Year 3, the DOMB's overall annual time commitment was about 34%, consistent with Year 2 (35%). Student-related email, student-related preparation and student-related meetings continued to account for 70% of the DOMB's time. Cumulative data from Years 1 through 3 continued to indicate that the main concern of doctoral students in contact with the DOMB (40%) was that of supervision, i.e., its relationship to the workplace environment, its amount, its quality, who does it and how to go about changing it. The second area of concern (15%) was that of work-related illness, return to work and the rehabilitation process. The third area of concern (13%) related to a number of different aspects associated with a possible and unexpected, i.e., non-standard, end of the PhD position.

Several recommendations have been made to the Vice President (VP) for graduate education as well as to DS, with respect to these issues. In general, when apparently established procedures are not routinely followed, it is of particular importance that Chalmers finds a way to improve or clarify those procedures. In particular, in Year 3, attention has again been drawn to problems related to the process for requesting a change of supervisor. In addition, issues related to timing and other reminders set out in the Rules of Procedure and the process of discontinuation and its related guidelines have been raised. Finally, concern over possible consequences arising from the portion of the Collective Agreement which refers to a maximum 8-calendar-year limit for a doctoral position has been raised.

The DOMB participated in ten events in Year 3 including a variety of presentations. In order to better advise doctoral students, the DOMB attended a basic course for ombudsmen, i.e., "Facklig grundkurs för ombudsmän och förtroendevalda". Also, late in the year, the DOMB attended a basic course in suicide prevention. Both courses proved helpful in the DOMB's work and it is expected they will continue to be so.

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1. Contacting the DOMB

In Year 3, doctoral students and Chalmers personnel were able to contact the DOMB by email, by mobile phone and in person at a drop-in time or by appointment as shown in the table below.^{1,2,3} The contact information on the DS website was updated as required including vacation alerts and short-notice changes.

Phone	Email goal of 24-hour response ⁴	Drop-in Wednesday 12:00 – 13:00	Appointments
+46 707839825 SMS & voicemail	domb@dokt.chs.chalmers.se ⁵	Emilia in Kårhuset (except vacation periods ⁴)	On request ⁶
On-call Tues, Weds, Thurs 12:00 – 13:00 (except vacation periods ⁴)	moyra@chalmers.se used mostly by Chalmers personnel		As needed for student representation or support
Regularly monitored			

¹https://student.portal.chalmers.se/doctoralportal/handbok_sv/Doktorandsektionen/Sidor/default.aspx

² <http://www.chalmers.se/insidan/EN/education-research/doctoral-student/questions-answers>

³ <http://www.dokt.chs.chalmers.se/support-for-phd-students/#DOMB>

⁴ A vacation alert is used when slightly longer response times might be needed, e.g., December 15 – January 15 and July 15 – August 15.

⁵ At the request of DS, incoming email is forwarded to domb.chalmers@gmail.com and deleted from the chs server.

⁶ The DOMB can book rooms in Kårhuset via <http://aptus.chs.chalmers.se/AptusPortal>

2. DOMB meetings and changes in Year 3

The standard intake form was modified in Year 3 to include permission to record certain data for DS and for the DOMB's annual report. Specifically, department, background (EU, non-EU), gender and the main, or current, reason for contact were recorded separately if allowed.⁷ Confidentiality was assured.⁸ As in previous years, the doctoral student's concerns were compared to a body of information such as the Rules of Procedure, the Collective Agreement and certain aspects of Swedish labour law. In addition, to reduce the amount of personal data in emailed documents, the use of an emailed meeting summary was eliminated unless specifically requested. Doctoral students were encouraged to take pictures of the intake form for their personal records.

For a significant percentage of the doctoral students, no direct action was taken by the DOMB since many doctoral students fear retaliation or worsening of the situation if it should become known that the DOMB is involved. In these situations, the DOMB remained in the background but provided advice on the issues as needed.

Several standard actions can arise from a meeting or from an exchange of emails. The student might contact the local PhD council, the supervisor, division head or other personnel including Chalmers Ethics Committee or be referred elsewhere such as a trade union or Feelgood. Alternatively, with agreement from the student, the DOMB emails, calls or interacts in person with the department or others at Chalmers, as requested. In these cases, the DOMB represents the student or acts as a go-between, with or without the student present as preferred by the student.⁹ Doctoral students are informed that once the DOMB is interacting with Chalmers personnel or others, there will be some associated loss in confidentiality.¹⁰

In some departments intervention by the DOMB is welcomed. In others, it is much less so. There continue to be occasions when Chalmers personnel do not respond to phone or email requests. Unfortunately, and as previously reported in Year 2, a number of doctoral students have experienced the same thing. This concern has been referred to DS for their attention.

3. DOMB Statistics

Within the bounds of confidentiality, a number of general and specific statistics have been assembled for participation profile, work breakdown, the DOMB's time commitment and the main reasons for contacting the DOMB.

⁷ Only the necessary personal data is collected. It is used only for the purposes for which it was collected and will be saved only as long as necessary.

⁸ Doctoral students are informed in the first meeting that confidentiality does not extend to threats to harm themselves or others.

⁹ The student is not usually present at a Discontinuation meeting. The DOMB is invited by the department.

¹⁰ Any specific restrictions on what can be relayed are discussed ahead of time.

3.1 Participation profile

In Year 3, as was the case in Years 1 and 2, doctoral students from all departments were represented in the DOMB's case files. The DOMB had, on average, just about one new case each week (50 in 52 weeks). About 70% of all cases from Years 1 to 3, were open at some point during Year 3. This means that the DOMB now has an on-going annual commitment to between 7 and 9% of the Chalmers population of about 1140 active doctoral students.¹¹ As the number of files opened exceeds that of the number of files closed, it is clear that steady state has not yet been reached in terms of contacting the DOMB. It is expected that a further increase in contact will occur in Year 4.

In terms of departmental distribution, and excluding individuals requesting anonymity or unknown: five departments were below 7%; four departments fell within the 7 to 9% range; and three departments were above the 9% commitment.¹²

The case records for the DOMB show that over three years, about 54% were male students, as compared to an overall enrolment of about 70% male doctoral students, and 42% were female students as compared to an overall enrolment of about 30%. About 4% declined to provide this information. As shown in Figure 1, doctoral students from within the EU¹⁴ represented about 48% of the cases. Non-EU students represented about 37% of the cases. For approximately 15% of the cases this information is unknown or anonymous. This reflects the on-going concern of doctoral students that there may be retaliation or other consequences if students are known to have asked for help from the DOMB.

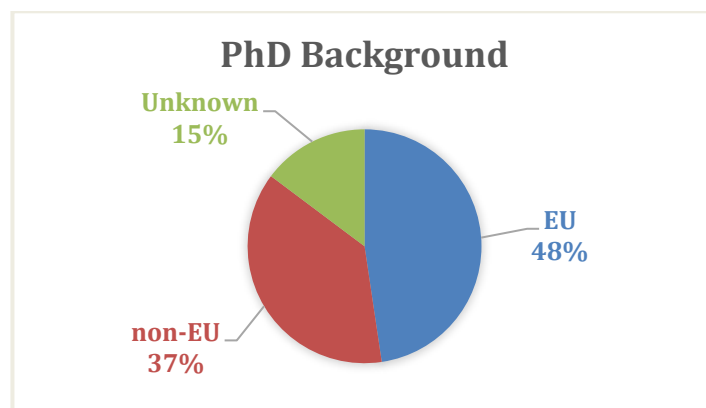


Figure 1. Background of doctoral students contacting the DOMB

¹¹ On a percentage basis fewer industrial PhD students have made contact with the DOMB.

¹² VKOL is excluded.

¹⁴ In this case the term EU has been expanded to include countries from the EEA, e.g. Norway, and Switzerland.

3.2 Work breakdown for Year3

To provide a work breakdown, the activities of the DOMB were divided into six areas: general email (GE); student-related email (SE), general meetings (GM); student-related meetings (SM); general preparation (GP); student-related preparation (SP); and events, formal meetings or presentations (EV). Figure 2 shows the distribution of hours for Years 2 and 3. Both years had a similar work breakdown in terms of the DOMB activities with student-related preparation, student-related email and student-related meetings amounting to about 70% of the work in both years. In Year 3, student-related email was the single largest contributor and was often carried out in the evenings and on weekends.

Figure 2 (right) shows an overall 34% time commitment in Year 3.¹⁵ This was a similar to the 35% commitment seen in Year 2 (December 16, 2016 to December 15, 2017). In Year 3 the work was more evenly distributed over the year than in Year 2, however, during some periods of the academic year, the commitment approached 75%.

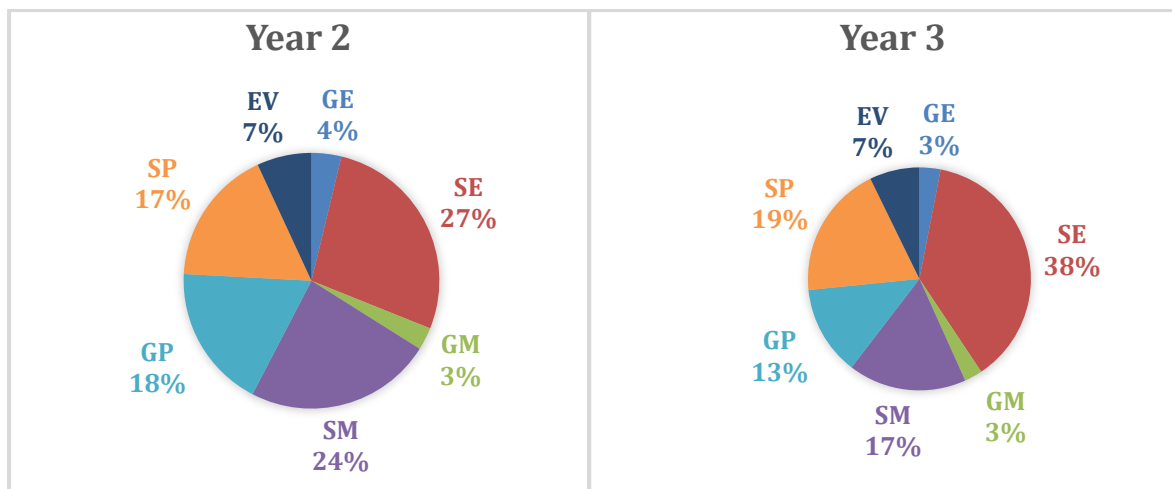


Figure 2. DOMB Work Breakdown in Year 2 (589 hours) and Year 3 (577 hours)

3.3 Reasons for contacting the DOMB

As indicated in previous annual reports¹⁶ all students who have reached out to the DOMB have had important issues. Most students have tried first to resolve the issue or issues on their own. While some issues are straight forward, many are

¹⁵ Based on 1700 working hours per year.

¹⁶ <https://www.dokt.chs.chalmers.se/public/#DOMBAR>

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difficult or challenging. These cases typically involve multiple complex emails, multiple meetings including by phone and Skype, and direct and often multiple involvements with departments and support such as the other ombudsmen, the Equity officer, Feelgood and the doctoral student’s trade union.

With consolidation of data from Years 1 through 3, sufficient confidentiality can be assured to allow a breakdown of the concerns of the doctoral students in terms of the main reason for contacting the DOMB. It should be remembered that most students have multiple reasons for contact, e.g., an individual reporting work-related illness may have supervision issues and in some cases, a simple matter may have evolved, over time, into a more complex issue.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of the main, or current, concern in Years 1 through 3. The dominant first concern (40%) related to supervision, e.g., its relationship to the workplace environment, its amount, its quality and how to go about changing it. The second main concern (15%) related to work-related illness such as burnout, return to work and the rehabilitation process. The third area of concern (13%) related to the aspect of a non-standard end of the doctoral position. This concern, not previously seen at this significance, ranged from feeling pushed to resign, possible or threatened discontinuation and the 8-calendar-year limit¹⁷ in the Collective Agreement. Other areas of concern were identified including ethics, plagiarism and intellectual property (IP). A more detailed alphabetical list of contact issues was presented in the DOMB’s Year 2 report.

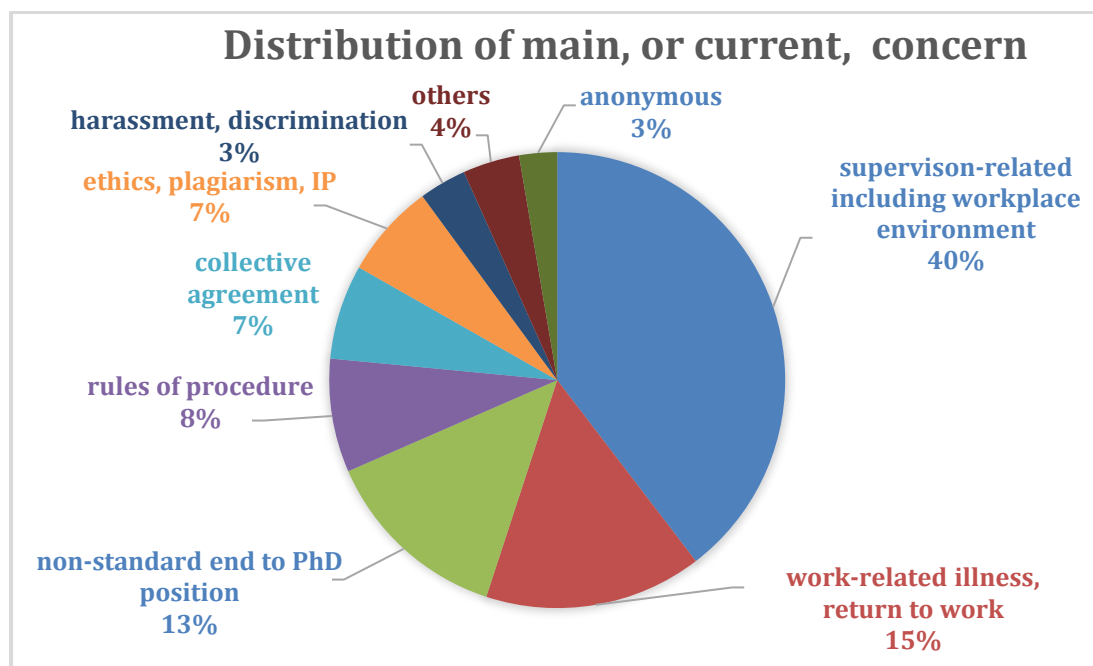


Figure 3. Distribution of Main Concern in Years 1 through 3

¹⁷ Agreement on salary and employment conditions, Appendix 1, para 8, note 1.

In Year 3, recommendations were made to the VP responsible for graduate education and to DS with respect to a number of the more challenging problems. In particular, in Year 3, attention was again drawn to problems related to the process for requesting a change of supervisor (6.9, Rules of Procedure (ROP)). Other concerns related to timing reminders (e.g. 6.1 ROP) and the 3-year mark (6.2 ROP) were identified. In addition, attention was directed to the Guidelines for Discontinuation (Appendix 1, ROP). Also, concern was raised over the portion of the Collective Agreement which refers to a maximum 8-calendar-year limit for a doctoral position (Appendix 1, para 8, note 1).

With respect to the Guidelines for Discontinuation, doctoral students should be able to expect that all departments at Chalmers are familiar with the Guidelines and will follow them fully. This is an issue of trust. A doctoral student hearing conversations dealing with capacity to continue and contract renewal should be able to seek and receive advice, knowing that the Guidelines can be trusted. A doctoral student should not have to wonder, after the fact, if some meeting held some time at which some things were said, might actually have been one of the steps in the discontinuation process. This issue affects all doctoral students but is of particular significance to international doctoral students who may have chosen Chalmers in terms of making key choices for their future.

In terms of the 8-calendar-year limit in the Collective Agreement, the DOMB pointed out the potential adverse effect on certain doctoral students, in particular those who are or intend to become parents and/or those who are chronically or seriously ill. Additionally, it is not clear how this will affect those who are not employed as doctoral students but are none the less, doctoral students registered in a graduate school.

4. Events, meetings and presentations

Preparation for, and participation in, formal meetings and events accounted for about 7% of the DOMB's time (Figure 2). Through these the DOMB has participated in, contributed to and learned from, activities within Chalmers and nationally and raised the visibility of the DOMB. The ten events including presentations and courses, for Year 3, are listed below.

- January 25th – *Introduction to the Doktorombud (DOMB)* to the CSE PhD Council (with Friedrich Heger, SULF Ombudsman)
- February 19th – *Några frågeställningar och trender som är bekymmersamma och lite till* to CLG
- April 9th – *DOMB Presentation* to SEE
- April 11th, 12th – *Facklig grundkurs för ombudsmän och förtroendevalda*, Institutet för juridisk utbildning, Stockholm

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- April 18th – *Några frågeställningar och trender som är bekymmer-samma och lite till* to FUN
- May 14th – *PhD Introduction Day*, Chalmers
- May 25th – *DOMB Presentation* to ACE
- September 4th – *DOMB Presentation* to DS
- October 24th – *PhD Introduction Day*, Chalmers
- November 22nd – *Baskurs i suicidprevention*, Chalmers

The knowledge gained from the course, "Facklig grundkurs för ombudsmän och förtroendevalda" has been relevant to those doctoral students who find themselves in need of advice on employment and/or labour law. It also allows the DOMB to quickly advise a doctoral student to seek advice from the relevant trade union if the student is already a member. The basic course in Suicide prevention, was also helpful in Year 3 and is expected to continue to be relevant in the DOMB's work.

5. Remarks

The DOMB is deeply concerned that the annual commitment rate continues to rise and that a steady state level has not yet been reached. The overall annual commitment rate in Year 3 was 7% to 9% although this was exceeded in three departments. In many respects it is very good that doctoral students are comfortable approaching the DOMB and do so, in part, because the DOMB is a third party and the discussion is confidential. In other respects, given the nature of the concerns, both DS and Chalmers need to consider the implications of the DOMB's contact with nearly 10% of the doctoral student population.

Issues related to supervision and work-related illness have continued to account for about 55% of the main reasons for contacting the DOMB. Unfortunately, no changes have been observed in this over three years. Concerns related to the non-standard end of the doctoral position accounted for 13% of the main reasons for contacting the DOMB. This too is troubling because it suggests that issues surrounding a non-standard ending of the PhD degree have now become an observable concern. When apparently established procedures are not routinely followed, it is of the particular importance that Chalmers finds a way to improve or clarify those procedures. Recommendations have been made to the VP and to DS with respect to several parts of the ROP that have been problematic, e.g., changing supervisor, reminders and the discontinuation guidelines. In addition, concerns surrounding the 8-calender-year limit in the collective agreement have been raised.



Moyra McDill, Chalmers Doktorandombud (DOMB), January 28, 2019.