

Annual Report of the DOMB – Year 4 December 21, 2018 – November 30, 2019

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 21, 2018 and November 30, 2019¹ (Year 4) along with some comparative data from previous years.

In Year 4, the DOMB's overall annual time commitment was 38%, an increase over all previous years and accompanied by an increase in doctoral student contact. There was also, between 2016 and 2019, a net loss of about 60 doctoral students at Chalmers. Updated data allowed the separation, by department, of industrial doctoral students from non-industrial (regular) doctoral students. The average contact rate of regular doctoral students across all departments was 13%. Four departments exceeded the 13% average, four departments approached the 13% average, and four were below the 13% average.

Over the last four years, approximately 50% of the doctoral students in contact with the DOMB came from within the European Union (EU²) and 37% were non-EU (with 13% unknown.) Approximately 52% of the students were male and 42% were female (4% unknown) compared to the Chalmers-wide distribution of 70% male and 30% female doctoral students.

In Year 4, student-related work (preparation, email and meetings) continued to account for about 70% of the DOMB's time. Cumulative data continued to indicate that the main concern of doctoral students in contact with the DOMB (44%) was that of supervision, i.e., its relationship to the workplace environment, its amount, its quality, who does it and how to change it. The second area of concern (14%) was that of work-related illness, return to work and the rehabilitation process. The third area of concern (10%) was associated with a possible and unexpected (non-standard) end of the doctoral position.

The DOMB participated in seven events in Year 4 including presentations such as *PhD Introduction Day* and *Fokus Jämställdhet - doktorandtema* at Chalmers as well as planning for a national meeting of DOMBs in April 2020 to be co-hosted by Gothenburg University.

Several concerns were raised to DS and the Vice President responsible for graduate education. Of particular note is that some internal departmental policies appear to directly contradict the Rules of Procedure, for example, the interpretation of *shall* as a non-mandatory suggestion. Also, that the presence of the DOMB at a meeting, if requested by a doctoral student, should not be discouraged nor denied by a faculty member, division or department.

¹ The DOMB started a new contract December 1, 2019.

² The term EU, in this case, includes EEA countries such as Norway and Switzerland.

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1. Contacting the DOMB

In Year 4, as in previous years, doctoral students and Chalmers personnel were able to contact the DOMB by email, by mobile phone/sms and in person at a drop-in time or by appointment.^{3,4,5} The contact information on the DS website was updated to include vacation alerts and short-notice changes. An increase in urgent contact during vacation periods was observed in Year 4.

2. DOMB meetings in Year 4

The standard intake form developed previously continued to be used⁶ and confidentiality⁷ was assured. 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. Doctoral students normally 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 the situation will worsen if it is known that the DOMB is involved. In these cases, the DOMB remained in the background but provided advice or referred the doctoral student to other support, e.g., Pe3. In some cases, the DOMB's direct involvement⁸ through calls, email or meetings was requested.

In some departments, participation by the DOMB is welcomed. In others, it is much less so. If the attendance of the DOMB at a meeting is requested by a doctoral student, the student should not be discouraged from seeking support nor be

³https://student.portal.chalmers.se/doctoralportal/handbok_sv/Doktorandsektionen/Sidor/default.aspx

⁴ <http://www.chalmers.se/insidan/EN/education-research/doctoral-student/questions-answers>

⁵ <http://www.dokt.chs.chalmers.se/support-for-phd-students/#DOMB>

⁶ If allowed by the doctoral student, information on department, background (EU, non-EU), gender and the main, or current, reason for contact were collected. Only the necessary personal data are collected. It is used only for the purposes for which it was collected and is saved only as long as necessary.

⁷ Doctoral students are informed in the first meeting that confidentiality does not extend to threats to harm themselves or others.

⁸ Any specific restrictions on what can be relayed are discussed ahead of time.

denied the opportunity to have that support. For this reason, a suggestion to formalize the right of the DOMB to be present at meetings if requested by the doctoral student, was made to DS and the Vice President responsible for graduate education.

In Year 4 there were fewer occasions when Chalmers personnel did not respond to phone or email requests from the DOMB. Unfortunately, as in previous years, some doctoral students continued to report this as an issue.

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.

3.1 Participation profile

In Year 4, the DOMB's annual time commitment was 38%, an increase over all previous years and accompanied by a proportionate increase in doctoral student contact. To clarify the situation, the DOMB requested updated data by department from the Central Administration. In 2016, there were 1140⁹ active doctoral students (962 regular and 178 industrial). In 2019, there were 1078 active doctoral students (898 regular and 180 industrial). Based on these numbers there has been a net loss of 64 regular doctoral students. This change has been uneven across Chalmers. The largest departmental drop was 28 doctoral students and the largest departmental gain was 29 doctoral students.

The updated data allowed for a better evaluation of contact rate by department for "regular" doctoral students by excluding 180 industrial doctoral students who, as a group, rarely contact the DOMB. The average Chalmers-wide contact rate of regular¹⁰ doctoral students in Year 4 was 13%. Figure 1 shows the average contact rate (13%) and the DOMB's contact rate by department, based on the number¹¹ of regular doctoral students in the department. As shown, four departments exceeded the average; four were close but below and four departments had a lower participation rate. Industrial doctoral students, as a group, have the lowest contact rate.

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

⁹ Doktorandarbetsmiljöprojekt, Magnus Åkerström och Helen Lejon. Data from Vetenskapens kommunikation och lärande (VKOL) were added separately.

¹⁰ Individuals requesting anonymity/unknown were excluded from departmental statistics.

¹¹ VKOL is not included in Figure 1.

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with 13% of the regular doctoral students especially in those departments with comparatively high contact.

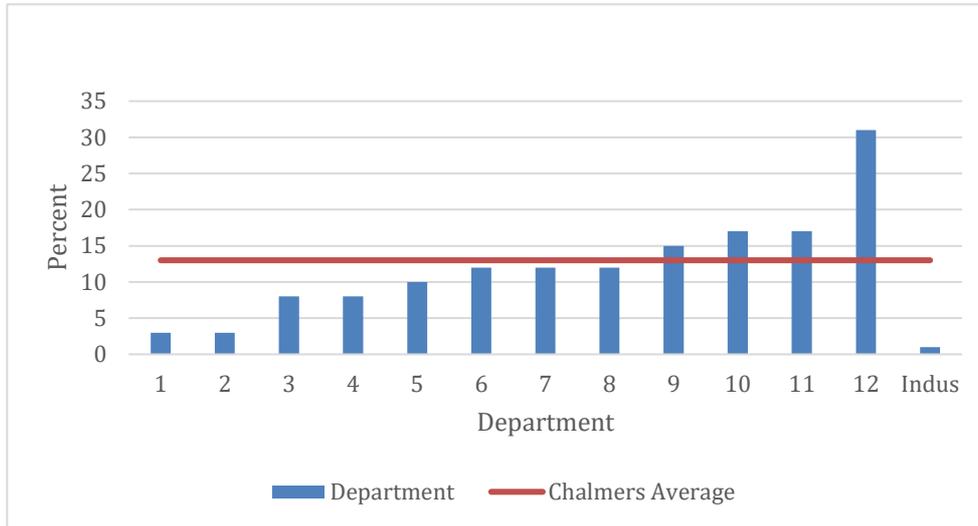


Figure 1. Year 4 - Contact by regular and industrial doctoral students

For the DOMB’s cases from 2016 to 2019, about 52% were male students, as compared to an overall enrolment of about 70% male doctoral students, and 44% were female students as compared to an overall enrolment of about 30%. About 4% declined to provide this information.

As shown in Figure 2, doctoral students from within the EU represented about 50% of the cases. Non-EU students represented about 33% of the cases. For approximately 15% of the cases this information was unknown or anonymous. This reflects the on-going concern that there may be reprisals or other consequences if students are known to have asked for help from the DOMB.

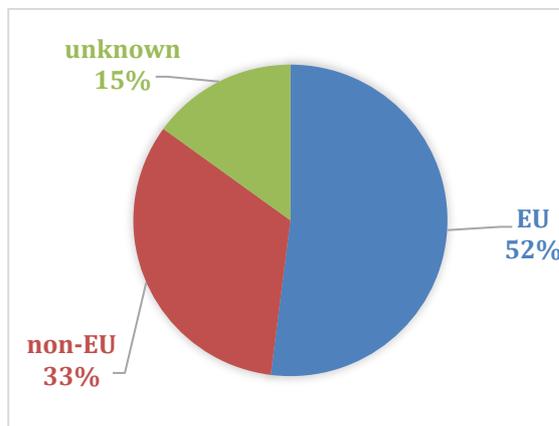


Figure 2. Background of doctoral students contacting the DOMB: 2016 to 2019

3.2 Work breakdown for Year 4

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 3 shows the distribution of work for Years 3 and 4. The time commitment of 38% in Year 4 represents an uptick of several points over both Years 3 (34%) and 2 (35%).¹²

Years 3 and 4 had a similar work breakdown in terms of student-related email and student-related meetings. In both years the overall preparation time was about the same although in Year 4, general preparation dominated.¹³ In both years, student-related email was the single largest time contributor and was often carried out in the evenings and on weekends. In Year 4 an increase in the need for urgent response during vacation periods was observed.

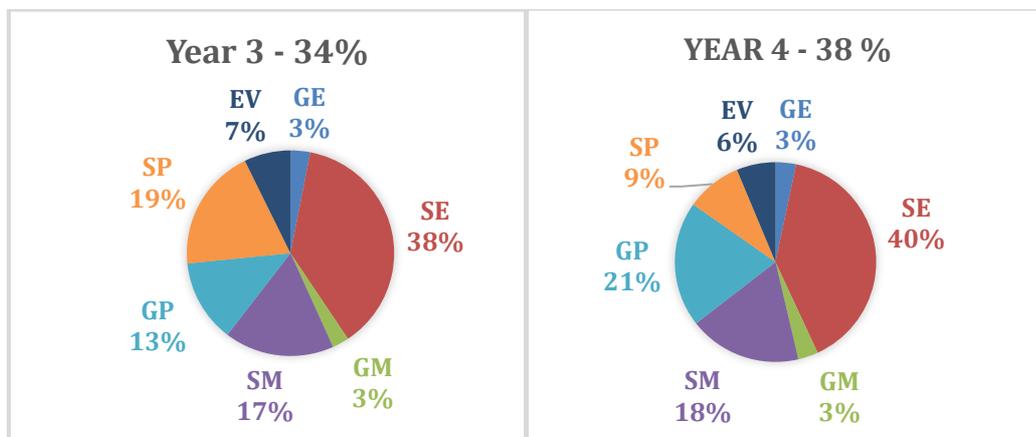


Figure 3. DOMB Work breakdown in Years 3 and 4

3.3 Reasons for contacting the DOMB

As indicated in previous annual reports¹⁴ students who reach out to the DOMB have important issues. Most doctoral students report having first tried to resolve the issue or issues on their own. While some issues are straight forward, many

¹² Based on 1700 working hours per year.

¹³ GP is used when several students report similar concerns at the same time. GP was also needed to sort out details surrounding a new contract with DS including aspects from labour law, the collective agreement (Ideella och Idéburna Organisationer) and interaction with SULF.

¹⁴ <https://www.dokt.chs.chalmers.se/public/#DOMBAR>

more are challenging and involve multiple, complex emails and multiple meetings including by phone and Skype, and direct and often multiple involvements with departments and other support such as other ombudsmen, the Equity officer, Pe3 and the doctoral student’s trade union.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of the main, or current, concern in Years 1 through 4. Most students have multiple reasons for contact, e.g., an individual reporting supervision issues may have work-related health issues. In other cases, a simple matter may have evolved, over time, into a more complex issue. The dominant first concern (44%) continued to be related to supervision, e.g., its relationship to the workplace environment, its amount, its quality and how to change it. The second main concern (14%) continued to be related to work-related illness such as burnout, return to work and the rehabilitation process. The third area of concern (10%) in which doctoral students express feeling pushed to resign, sense possible or threatened discontinuation or are considering walking away, appeared as a significant issue in Year 3. Other areas of concern were identified including ethics, plagiarism and intellectual property (IP).

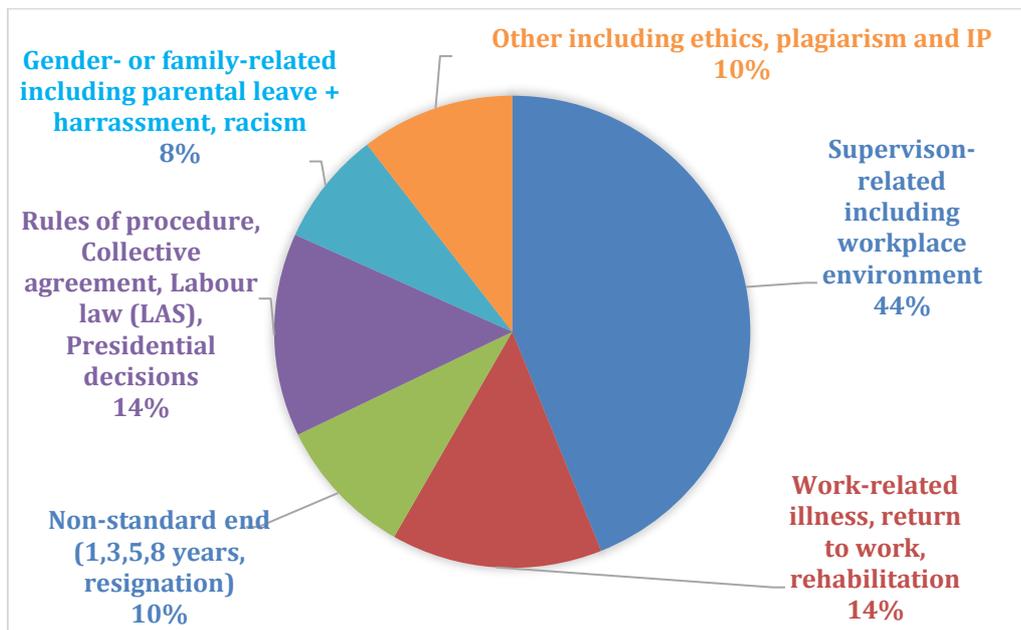


Figure 4. Distribution of main or current concern: 2016 to 2019

During Year 4, several concerns were raised to DS and the Vice President responsible for graduate education. There appears to have been inconsistent handling of *vård av barn* in terms of the associated extension of the doctoral contract. Also, some internal departmental policies appear to directly contradict the Rules of Procedure, e.g., the interpretation of *shall (ska)* as a non-mandatory suggestion. The DOMB has also

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asked that the presence of the DOMB at a meeting, if requested by a doctoral student, should not be discouraged nor denied by a faculty member, division or department.

4. Events, meetings and presentations

Preparation for, and participation in, formal meetings and events accounted for about 6% of the DOMB's time (Figure 3). Through these the DOMB has participated in, contributed to and learned from, activities within Chalmers and raised the visibility of the DOMB. In addition, in 2019, planning began for the April 27, 2020 national meeting of all DOMBs, supported by DS and co-hosted by Gothenburg University.

- February 8th – FUN, *DOMB's Annual Report*
- March 20th – DS and PhD Councils Workshop
- April 3rd – ACE, *Introduction to the DOMB*
- May 9th – *PhD Introduction Day*
- September 10th – DS, *DOMB Presentation*
- September 18th – *PhD Introduction Day*
- November 6th – *Fokus Jämställdhet – doktorandtema*

5. Remarks

The DOMB is again deeply concerned that the annual time commitment, now 38%, continues to rise. The overall average annual contact rate was 13% with four departments above this and one of those more than double this. While it is very good that doctoral students are comfortable approaching the DOMB, both DS and Chalmers need to consider the implications of the DOMB's contact with this fraction of the regular doctoral student population especially given the number of difficult issues.

Issues related to supervision and work-related illness have continued to account for nearly 60% of the main reasons for contacting the DOMB. Unfortunately, no changes have been observed in this over four years. Concerns related to the non-standard end of the doctoral position accounted for 10% of the main reasons for contacting the DOMB in four years. This remains troubling.

It is worrisome that some internal policies appear to directly contradict the Rules of Procedure, e.g., the interpretation of *shall* as a non-mandatory suggestion. There appears to have been inconsistent handling of *vård av barn* in terms of extension of the doctoral contract. There may be a need to further formalise the DOMB's role so that doctoral students requesting the presence and support of the DOMB, have the right to the DOMB's presence and support.



Moyra McDill, Chalmers Doktorandombud (DOMB), February 3, 2020.