

Annual Report of the DOMB – Year 5 December 1, 2019 – November 30, 2020

Summary

The Doctoral Students' Representative (Doktorandombud, DOMB) has been contracted by the board of the 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 1, 2019 and November 30, 2020¹ (Year 5) along with some cumulative comparative data from 2017 to 2020 and from 2016 to 2019.

Updated data in 2020 allowed for the separation, by department, of doctoral students employed in a doctoral student position at Chalmers and the few on scholarship, from those employed elsewhere such as, Industrial PhDs, those from universities without exam rights and those holding non-PhD positions at Chalmers. It was also possible to consider a small group of doctoral students that included those who are unfunded but who still remain in their graduate school.

The average contact rate of doctoral students across all departments was 11.5% for those students employed in a doctoral position (or on scholarship). This represents a modest decrease from 13% in Year 4 (2019) although some of the change can be attributed to the change in the distribution of the data. Two departments exceeded the average (30% and 18%), three departments were at the average and the remaining seven departments were below the average, ranging from 7% to 10%.

The contact rate of doctoral students in a doctoral programme but employed elsewhere, e.g., Industrial PhDs, was 2.3%. This group of doctoral students tends to contact their supervisor and manager at their employer when needing help. The contact rate for a small group of other/unfunded students exceeded 35%. This high level of contact is concerning.

In Year 5, the DOMB's overall annual time commitment was 41%, an increase over all previous years. This increase cannot be entirely attributed to Covid-19 and Economy in Balance (EiB) as there were more cases of a very time-consuming nature in 2020 than in previous years.

Over the last four years, 2017 to 2020, approximately 48% of the doctoral students in contact with the DOMB came from within the European Union (EU²) and 36% were non-EU (with 16% unknown.) This represents a slight shift towards non-EU students when compared to the Year 4 Report based on data from 2016 to 2019. Approximately 56% of the students were male and 37% were female (7% unknown) compared to the Chalmers distribution of about 70% male and 30% female doctoral students.

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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Doctoral students in contact with the DOMB identify their main, or current, concern. Cumulative data continued to indicate that the dominant concern for doctoral students in contact with the DOMB, 42% for 2017 to 2020, was that of the supervision team and the related workplace environment. Work-related illness, return to work and the rehabilitation process accounted for 13% of the main reason for contact. Contact for issues related to gender and family including parental leave, as well as harassment and racism increased to 13% from 8% (Year 4 Report). This may represent a negative change in the workplace environment. Contact related to a wide range of regulations and procedures was also 13%. The issue of a possible and unexpected end of the doctoral position accounted for 10% of the main reason for contact. Other issues such as ethics and plagiarism accounted for 9% of the main reason for contact.

In Year 5, there was a notable increase in the number of issues and concerns raised directly to the Vice President responsible for research education, including several requests under Section 14 of the new Appointment regulation (C2020-0899). Two planned events, including the National meeting of all DOMBs, were cancelled due to Covid-19. The DOMB participated in three events including the fall PhD Introduction Day.

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1. Contacting the DOMB

In Year 5 (2020), doctoral students and Chalmers personnel were able to contact the DOMB by email and by mobile phone/sms.³ From December 2019 to mid-March 2020 and again from mid-August to the end of October, in-person meetings at a drop-in time or by appointment were possible. For the remainder of the year, all meetings were carried out by phone or with Zoom, Teams or Skype. The contact information on the DS website was updated when required.

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 involvement through calls, email or meetings was requested.

³ https://student.portal.chalmers.se/doctoralportal/handbok_sv/Doktorandsektionen/Sidor/default.aspx; <http://www.chalmers.se/insidan/EN/education-research/doctoral-student/questions-answers>; <http://www.chalmers.se/insidan/EN/education-research/doctoral-student/questions-answers>

2. DOMB Statistics

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

2.1 Participation profile

Table 1 shows a summary of updated enrolment data provided by Central Administration in early December 2019 and early December 2020. In 2020, these data were also provided on a departmental basis.⁴ This allowed for the separation, by department, of doctoral students employed in a doctoral position at Chalmers (and the few on scholarship) from doctoral students employed elsewhere, i.e., Industrial PhDs, those from universities without exam rights and those employed at Chalmers but not in a doctoral student position. In addition, it was possible to consider separately those doctoral students who were, e.g., unfunded but remained in their doctoral programme.

Table 1 Enrolment Data for 2019 and 2020

Year	Chalmers PhD position	Scholarship	Industrial PhD	Other employment inside/outside Chalmers	Other / Unfunded	Total
2019	866	3	180	32	17	1098 (30.5% F)
2020	880	4	180	41	15	1120 (32% F)

As shown in Figure 1, the average contact rate of doctoral students employed in a Chalmers doctoral student position (plus those on scholarship) across all departments was 11.5%. The average of 11.5% is slightly lower than the Year 4 (2019) value of 13%, although some of this can be attributed to the redistribution of participation data.⁵ Nevertheless, a small reduction in the number of individuals in contact with the DOMB was noted along with an uptick in the total number of doctoral students. Two departments exceeded the Chalmers average with contact rates of 30% and 18% respectively. Three departments were at the average. The remaining seven departments were below the average, ranging from 7% to 10%. No departments had a contact rate below 7%. In fact, the two departments with quite low contact rates in Year 4 (2019) experienced a doubling and quadrupling of contact respectively in Year 5 (2020). Also, two departments that were over the average in Year 4 (2019), had a significant reduction in contact rate in Year 5 (2020).

The contact rate of doctoral students employed elsewhere, i.e., Industrial PhDs, those from universities without exam rights, and those holding non-PhD positions⁶ at Chalmers, was 2.3%. This group of students tends to contact their supervisor and/or manager at their employer when help is needed.

⁴ In 2019, only the Industrial PhDs were identified separately, by department.

⁵ With the 2019 pattern of distribution of participation, the average contact rate for 2020 was 12.3%.

⁶ No information on the extent of the doctoral studies, e.g., whether part time or full time was provided.

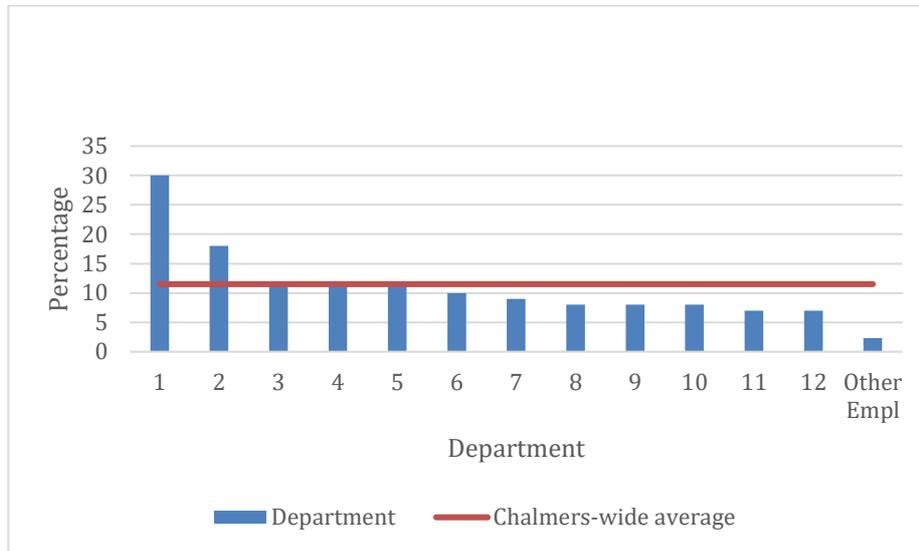


Figure 1. Year 5 (2020) Contact by students employed in a Chalmers doctoral student position (or on scholarship) and those employed elsewhere.

Finally, it should be noted that the contact rate for a small group of other/unfunded doctoral students who remain in their doctoral programme, exceeds 35%. This high level of contact, albeit for a small group, is concerning and should be monitored. Further, with the new Appointment regulation (C2020-0899, 4.8) that states that only the doctoral student can withdraw from the graduate programme, the size of this group is likely to increase.

2.2 Background and gender

Over the last four years (2017 to 2020) as shown in Figure 2, approximately 48% of the doctoral students in contact with the DOMB came from within the European Union (EU⁷) and 36% were non-EU, with 16% unknown or undeclared. When compared to 2016 to 2019, this represents a slight shift from EU-based doctoral students (52% to 48%) to non-EU based doctoral students (33% to 36%) in contact with the DOMB.

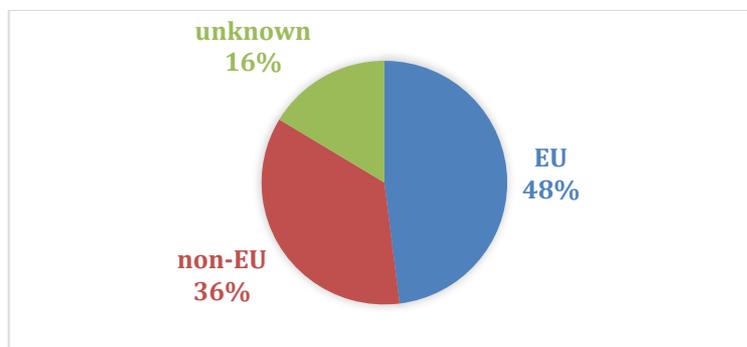


Figure 2. Background of all doctoral student cases, 2017- 2020

⁷ The term EU, in this case, includes EEA countries such as Norway and Switzerland.

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Approximately 56% of the doctoral students in contact with the DOMB were male and 37% were female (7% unknown) compared to the Chalmers-wide distribution of about 70% male and 30% female doctoral students. The Chalmers statistics do not appear to provide for a non-binary designation.

2.3 Reasons for contacting the DOMB

As indicated in previous annual reports,⁸ doctoral students who reach out to the DOMB have important concerns and most have first tried to resolve the issue on their own. While some issues are straight forward, many more are challenging and involve multiple, complex emails and multiple meetings including by phone and Zoom, Teams or 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.

In Year 5 (2020), the DOMB's annual time commitment⁹ was 41%, an increase over all previous years. With Covid-19 and Economy in Balance (EiB), a small increase had been anticipated but the increase from 38% (in Year 4, 2019) to 41% (in Year 5, 2020) cannot be fully attributed to Covid-19 and EiB. It is fair to say that there were more cases of a very-time consuming nature in 2020 than in previous years and this was reflected by an increase in the number of interventions raised to the Vice President responsible for research education.

Figure 3 shows what the doctoral students identified as their main or, in many cases, current reason for contacting the DOMB. Cumulative data continued to indicate that the dominant concern for doctoral students in contact with the DOMB, 42% for 2017 to 2020, was that of the supervision team and the related workplace environment. This represents a slight decrease from the value of 44% stated in the Year 4 Report for 2016 to 2019. Problems associated with members of the supervision team holding multiple roles continues to be an issue. The second area of concern, 13%, was that of work-related illness, return to work and the rehabilitation process. This is essentially unchanged from 14% stated in the Year 4 Report. Doctoral students have indicated that there is a strong correlation between these two main concerns and together they account for 55% of the main reason for contact.

Contact for issues related to gender and family including parental leave, as well as harassment and racism increased to 13% from 8% reported in the Year 4 cumulative summary. This trend should be watched as it may represent an undesirable change in the doctoral workplace environment at Chalmers.

Contact related to a wide range of rules and procedures was 13%, essentially unchanged from the Year 4 Report value of 14%. The issue of a possible and unexpected (non-standard) end of the doctoral position in which students express feeling pushed to resign, sense possible or threatened discontinuation or are considering walking away, was 10% (vs 10%, Year 4 Report). Other issues such as ethics, plagiarism and IP accounted for 9% (vs 10%, Year 4 Report) as the main reason for contact.

⁸ <https://www.dokt.chs.chalmers.se/public/#DOMBAR>

⁹ Based on 1700 hours per year for consistency with previous reports.

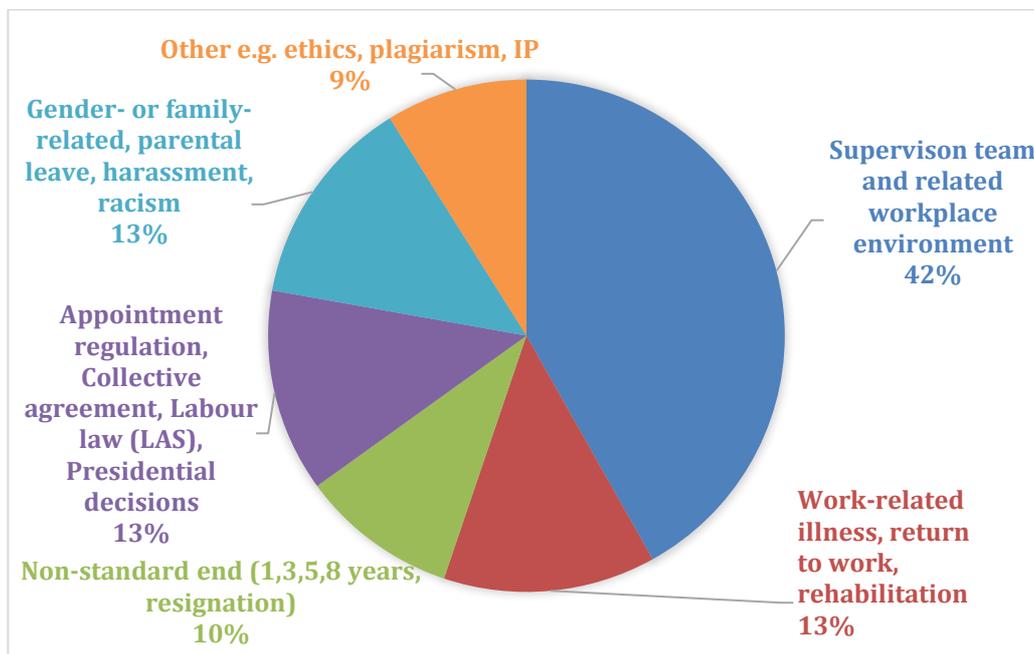


Figure 3. Distribution of main or current concern for all cases, 2017 to 2020

3. Other DOMB activities

In 2020, the DOMB was consulted on several changes for the new Appointment regulation (C2020-0899) and Withdrawal of Resources (C2020-0925). These two documents which came into effect in August 2020, represent a substantial step forward and have the potential to address many of the concerns which have been raised by doctoral students. While certain stated exceptions to the effective date are given in C2020-0899, there remain several uncertainties as to what parts of the old Rules of Procedure (C2014-0464) may remain in place after the August 2020 effective date.

During Year 5 (2020), more concerns and issues than in any previous year were raised directly to the Vice President responsible for research education. Due to confidentiality, only a partial list can be included:

- A request to consider the Disciplinary Committee (C2018-1825) and its application to doctoral students including the composition of the Committee which includes students from the Student Union but not DS and includes a Student ombud (studerandeombud) but not the DOMB.
- A request for a directive or response focussed specifically on Covid-19 issues being experienced by doctoral students.
- While recognizing the very valuable contributions of Safe at Chalmers (Trygg på Chalmers), a request for consideration of its investigative process and, in particular, how to ensure the confidential nature of the process.
- Three separate requests for interpretation of certain aspects of the new Appointment regulation (C2020-0899, 14).

In January 2020, the DOMB was interviewed by Ruth Woie-Svensson, Risk Controller with Chalmers.

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Due to Covid-19, the spring PhD Introduction Day was cancelled. The April 27, 2020 National meeting of all DOMBs, supported by DS and co-hosted by Gothenburg University, was also cancelled. Other presentations were:

- April 23rd – FUN, *DOMB's Annual Report*
- September 8th – DS, *DOMB Presentation*
- September 30th – *PhD Introduction Day*

4. Remarks

While it is very good that doctoral students are comfortable approaching the DOMB, it is troubling that the DOMB's annual time commitment has risen to 41%. In 2020, an increase in the number of time-consuming cases was observed and is reflected in the number of requests raised to the Vice President responsible for research education. The emergence of Covid-19 and Economy in Balance (EiB) also contributed to some of the additional time commitment. A Chalmers policy to deal with Covid-19 issues faced by doctoral students was developed quickly. The broad situation around EiB has not been as clear. It appears that the consequences for the affected doctoral students such as possible changes of supervisor and examiner, effect on contract and even office space were not considered ahead of time and must now be addressed on an ad hoc basis.

The average contact rate of doctoral students across all departments was 11.5% for those students employed in a Chalmers doctoral student position (or on scholarship). Two departments exceeded this by a significant amount. Issues related to the supervision team and work-related illness have continued to account for more than half of the main reason for contacting the DOMB. A significant increase in contact in the area of gender and parental leave, harassment and racism, has been observed and is worrisome as it may represent an undesirable change in the workplace environment.

The new Appointment regulation (C2020-0899) is a welcome development and expected to address many of the concerns previously brought forward by doctoral students. However, there is no transition policy in place and there appears to be an ad hoc approach to the adoption of C2020-0899, accompanied by a reliance on long standing local rules and traditions that might not be in line with the new Appointment regulation.



Moyra McDill, Chalmers Doktorandombud (DOMB), January 22, 2021.