



Sixth and Final Annual Report of the DOMB Year 6, December 1, 2020 - November 30, 2021 including Six-Year Overview

Summary

The Doctoral Students' Representative (Doktorandombud, DOMB) was contracted by the board of the Doctoral Students Guild (Doktorandsektionen, DS) for the six-year period from December 1, 2015 to November 30, 2021, to advise, support and represent doctoral students at Chalmers. The position of the DOMB is neutral with respect to the rules but the DOMB, as stated in the job description, acts in the interests of the doctoral student. The DOMB's communications with doctoral students and all case files are confidential. In any situation the progression of the DOMB's actions, from remaining in the background to active intervention, is guided by the doctoral student. This sixth and final annual report presents information covering the entire six-year term of the DOMB, the DOMB's involvement for 2021 (Year 6) including events, trends in PhD background and gender as well as reasons for contact for the 2018 to 2021 period.

For the six-year term of the DOMB, the cumulative intake of all cases, was just over 300 individuals with about one new case each week. New cases in combination with on-going cases contributed to the number of active cases exceeding 110 per year in 2019, 2020 and 2021. About 30% of all cases were resolved or closed within about one year but roughly 40% of all cases were active for a period of one to three years. The evolution and longevity of some cases demonstrate the challenges of finding long-term sustainable outcomes.

In 2021 (Year 6), the DOMB's overall annual time commitment was 39.5%, placing it in the top two years of the six-year term of the DOMB. The average Chalmers-wide contact rate for doctoral students employed in a doctoral position (and those few on scholarship) was 13%, the highest of all six years. Four departments exceeded the Chalmers average with contact rates of 27%, 19%, 16% and 14% respectively. Three departments were just below the average (11.5 to 12%). The remaining departments were below the average (4 to 10%). Five departments trended up from 2020 (Year 5), including one that nearly tripled in contact. The contact rate of doctoral students employed elsewhere, e.g., Industrial PhDs, was 4%, an increase from 2.3% (Year 5). While a high contact rate is a concern, it does reflect that doctoral students have been able to contact the DOMB when needed.

Over the last four years (2018 to 2021), approximately 48% of the doctoral students in contact with the DOMB came from within the EU/EEA and 41% were non-EU/EEA, with 11% unknown or undeclared. This represents a noticeable shift towards non-EU/EEA doctoral students, up from 37% in the first four years (2016 to 2019) of the DOMB's term. During the 2018 to 2021 period, 50% of the doctoral students in contact with the DOMB were male and 46% were female with 4% unknown/anonymous. This can be compared to the Chalmers-wide distribution of about 70% male and 30% female doctoral students. Chalmers statistics do not appear to provide for a non-binary designation. With approximately 4% of doctoral students in the unknown/anonymous category, Chalmers should consider addressing this aspect of the diversity of its PhD population.

The dominant concern for doctoral students in contact with the DOMB, 50% for 2018 to 2021, an increase of 7% from the 2017 to 2020 period, was that of the supervision team and the related workplace environment. Work-related illness, return to work and the

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rehabilitation process accounted for 13% of the main reason for contact. Together these accounted for over 60% of the main reasons for contact. Problems associated with members of the supervision team holding multiple roles continued to be a significant concern. There was an increase in the number of doctoral students reporting they had been subjected to master suppression techniques.

The issue of a possible and unexpected (non-standard) end of the doctoral position in which students want to resign or sense possible withdrawal of resources was 6% (vs. 10% for 2016 to 2019). There was an increase in the number of doctoral students reporting feeling pushed to resign. Contact related to a wide range of rules and procedures was 16%, an increase from 13% (for 2017 to 2020) and, in part, related to the change in the Aliens Act and requirements for Permanent Residence. Requests for detailed information on notice periods for resignation also increased.

Contact for issues related to gender and family including parental leave and VAB, as well as harassment and racism was 9%, a decrease from 13% (2017 to 2020), but in line with the 8% reported for 2016 to 2019. Other issues such as ethics, plagiarism and IP and miscellaneous requests accounted for 6% of the main reason for contact.

Despite the existence of a new Appointment regulation for doctoral programmes there remains a reliance on long standing local rules and traditions, i.e., unwritten rules. This has the appearance of Groupthink, in which individuals in a group are or become quite similar in outlook and approach. The environment becomes one where, “We don’t do it that way here,” is normalized and new rules are not taken onboard.

Anticipated changes in Swedish Labour Law with respect to time-limited contracts are expected to affect the part-time, long-term contract model used for the Chalmers DOMB. This, in turn, has the potential to impact those doctoral students who request support over several years.

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1. Aggregate information, December 1, 2015 to November 30, 2021

Figure 1 shows the cumulative case load¹ experienced by the DOMB was about 50 new cases per year or roughly one case per week. For comparison, the cumulative intake of the previous Chalmers DOMB over the approximately ten-year period from January 2005 to September 2014 was 213² or roughly 21 cases per year.

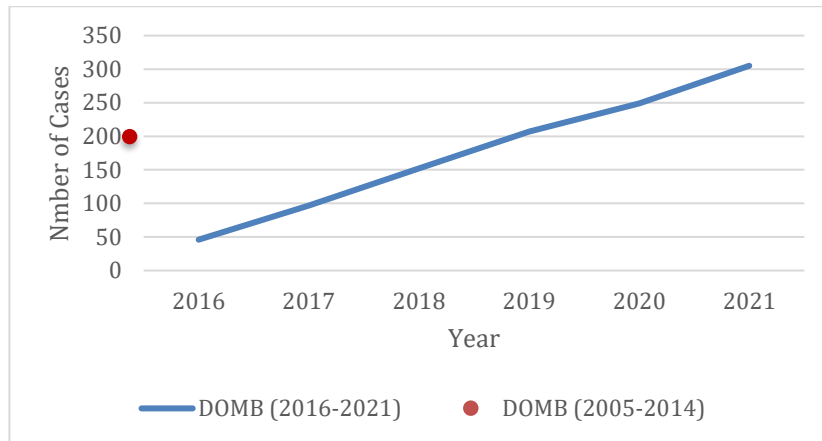


Figure 1. Cumulative intake from December 1, 2015 to November 30, 2021 and total intake for January 2005 to September 2014.

In addition to new cases, the DOMB had several on-going cases per week during the academic period between early September and late June. Figure 2 shows the number of active cases on a yearly basis with 2019 and 2021 having the largest loads with about 120 cases each.

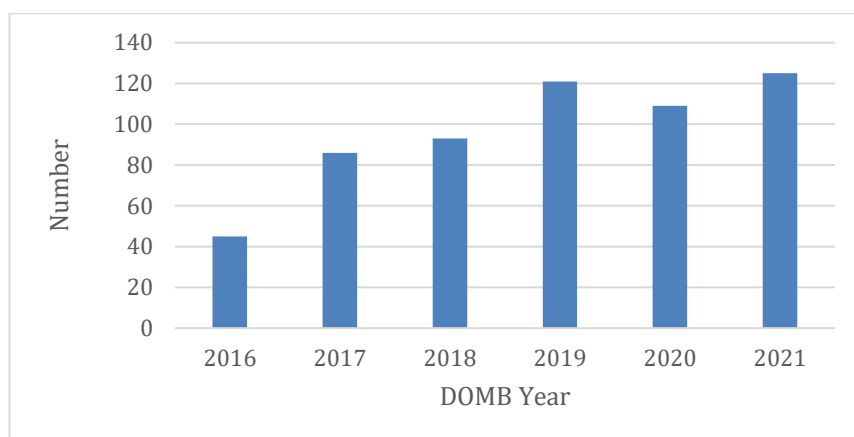


Figure 2. Active cases by year

¹ In this report, a case refers to a single individual, not to the different concerns raised by an individual.

² Bengt Stebler, "10 års ackumulerade doktorandbekymmer vid Chalmers", Forskar Utbildningsnätverkets möte vid LiU/Campus Norrköping 26-27 November 2014. Bengt Stebler had an unknown number of additional cases in 2015.

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During the DOMB’s six years, approximately 30% of all cases were resolved or closed³ within a year. This group includes those cases involving relatively straight-forward questions about specific rules. About 40% of all cases were resolved or closed between one and three years of activity. Roughly 10% of all cases were resolved or closed between three and five years of activity.⁴ A small number of cases, several of which were brought forward from the previous DOMB at the request of the individuals involved, exceeded the five-year mark. With about half of all cases contacting the DOMB over a period of several years, it is clear that it can be difficult to find long-term sustainable outcomes.

At the end of the DOMB’s contract, all remaining open cases were closed without resolution.⁵ Confidentiality will be maintained indefinitely unless there is a specific request, from the doctoral student, to share information with the incoming DOMB.

2. DOMB involvement Year 6 (2021)

Chalmers data

Although the principal concern is Year 6 (2021), it is useful to also look at trends in Chalmers in-programme enrolment. Table 1 shows, for 2017 and 2019 to 2021, the numbers of doctoral students employed in a doctoral position at Chalmers and the few on scholarship; those doctoral students employed as Industrial PhDs; those from universities without exam rights combined with those employed at Chalmers but not in a doctoral student position; and other/unfunded doctoral students.

Table 1 Enrolment data for 2017⁶ and 2019 to 2021⁷

Year	Chalmers PhD position	Scholarship	Industrial PhD	Other employment inside/outside Chalmers	Other / Unfunded	Total
2017	887	5	178	40	31	1141 (32% F)
2019	866	3	180	32	17	1098 (30.5% F)
2020	880	4	180	41	15	1120 (32% F)
2021	856	3	175	29	6	1069 (33% F)

Since 2017 there has been an overall decline in the number of doctoral students with a reduction of about 30 doctoral students in regular doctoral positions and, overall, nearly 70 active doctoral students. The decrease in other/unfunded doctoral students could be

³ A case can be closed without resolution of the problem.

⁴ In some cases, individuals left the university by choice or through graduation before issues could be resolved.

⁵ The DOMB remained available for support until the incoming DOMB was in place.

⁶ Doktorandarbetsmiljöprojektet 'DAM projekt', Magnus Åkerström and Helen Lejon, November 2017. CLS data added.

⁷ Data were captured by Central Administration in early December for 2019 and 2020 and early November for 2021.

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viewed as a positive trend provided it is not related to doctoral students feeling pushed in some way to withdraw from their studies⁸ nor to individuals withdrawing to access employment insurance.

DOMB contact data

In Year 6 (2021), students and Chalmers personnel were able to contact the DOMB by email and by mobile phone/sms. With some exceptions, all meetings from December 2020 to mid-September 2021, were carried out by phone or with Zoom, Teams, Google Meet or Skype. From mid-September to the end of November 2021, in-person meetings at a drop-in time or by appointment were also possible. Contact information on the DS website was updated when required. As indicated in previous years, doctoral students often fear the situation will worsen if it is known that the DOMB is involved. For these cases, the DOMB remained in the background while providing advice and recommending other support, e.g., Pe3. When requested, the DOMB's direct involvement through calls, email or meetings was provided.

In Year 6 (2021), the DOMB's annual time commitment was 39.5%, a decrease from Year 5 (2020) but still the second busiest year in the DOMB's six-year term and the year with the highest number of doctoral student contacts (see Figure 2). This cannot be fully attributed to Covid-19, Economy in Balance and changes in the Aliens Act since there were in Year 6 (2021), other very time-consuming cases. This was reflected by the number and nature of interactions with the Vice President(s) responsible for research education, Heads and Vice Heads of Department, SACO and Pe3.

The enrolment data in Table 1 above, were also provided on a departmental basis.⁹ 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 Chalmers¹⁰ but not in a doctoral student position. Chalmers-wide data and departmental data were then combined with the DOMB's contact data.

Figure 3 shows the 2021 (Year 6) average Chalmers-wide contact rate of doctoral students employed in a Chalmers doctoral student position (plus those on scholarship), along with the contact by department and other employment, with trending from 2020 (Year 5). The average Chalmers-wide contact rate was 13%, the highest ever contact rate observed by the DOMB and an increase from 11.5% in Year 5(2020). While a high contact rate is a concern, it does reflect that doctoral students can reach the DOMB when needed for advice and support.

Four departments exceeded the Chalmers average with contact rates of 27%, 19%, 16% and 14% respectively. Three departments were just below the average (11.5 to 12%). The remaining departments were below the average (4 to 10%). Five departments trended up from 2020, including one that nearly tripled in contact.

⁸ C2021-0462 §4.8, Appointment Regulation for Doctoral Programmes, only the student can withdraw from their studies

⁹ In 2019, only the Industrial PhDs were identified separately, by department.

¹⁰ No information on the extent of the doctoral studies, e.g., whether part time or full time was provided.

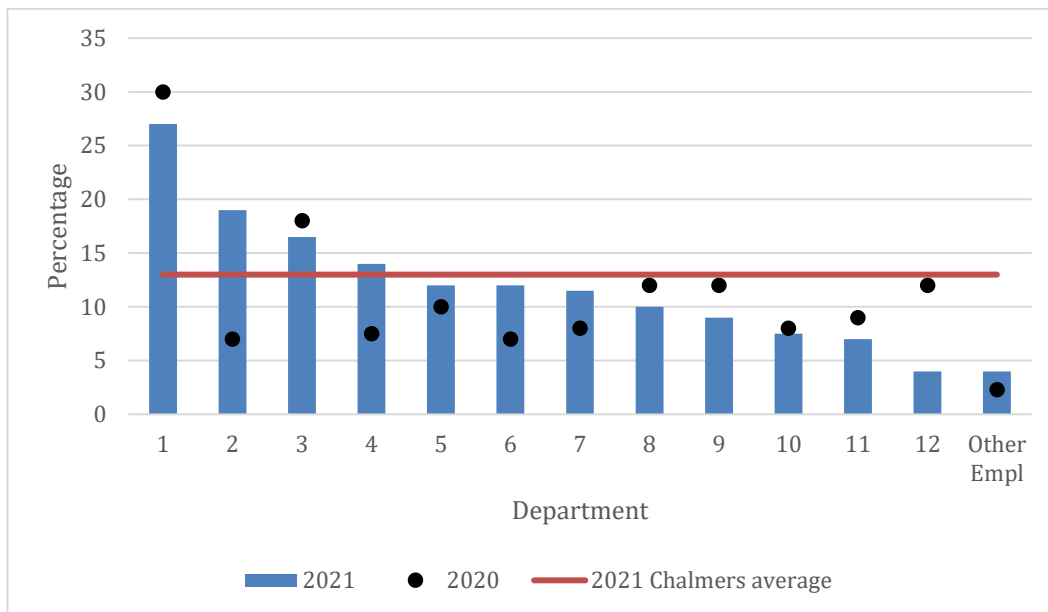


Figure 3. Year 6 (2021) Contact by students employed in a Chalmers doctoral student position (plus those on scholarship) and those in other employment, showing trending from Year 5(2020).

The contact rate of doctoral students employed elsewhere, e.g., Industrial PhDs, those from universities without exam rights, and those holding non-PhD positions at Chalmers was 4%, an increase over the Year 5 rate of 2.3%. This group of students tends to contact their supervisor and/or manager at their employer, however in 2021, proportionally more raised their concerns about Chalmers directly with the DOMB.

3. Trends in background, gender and reasons for contact, 2018 to 2021

Over the last four years (2018 to 2021) as shown in Figure 4, approximately 48% of the doctoral students in contact with the DOMB came from within the EU/EEA and 40% were non-EU/EEA, with 11% unknown or undeclared. When compared to the 2016 to 2019 period (Year 4 Report¹¹) this represents a perceptible shift from 37% to 41%, towards non-EU/EEA doctoral students in contact with the DOMB.

¹¹All annual reports can be found at <https://www.dokt.chs.chalmers.se/public/#DOMBAR>

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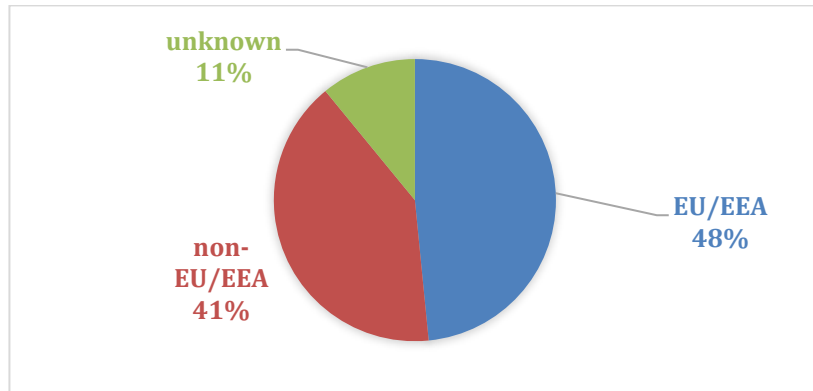


Figure 4. Background of all doctoral student cases, 2018 to 2021

As indicated in previous annual reports, doctoral students who reach out to the DOMB have important concerns. Most have first tried to resolve the issue on their own. While some issues are straight forward, others are challenging and involve multiple, complex emails and direct involvement with departments and other support such as other ombudsmen, Pe3 and the doctoral student's trade union. Figure 5 shows what the doctoral students identified as their main or, in many cases, current reason for contacting the DOMB in the four-year period from 2018 to 2021.

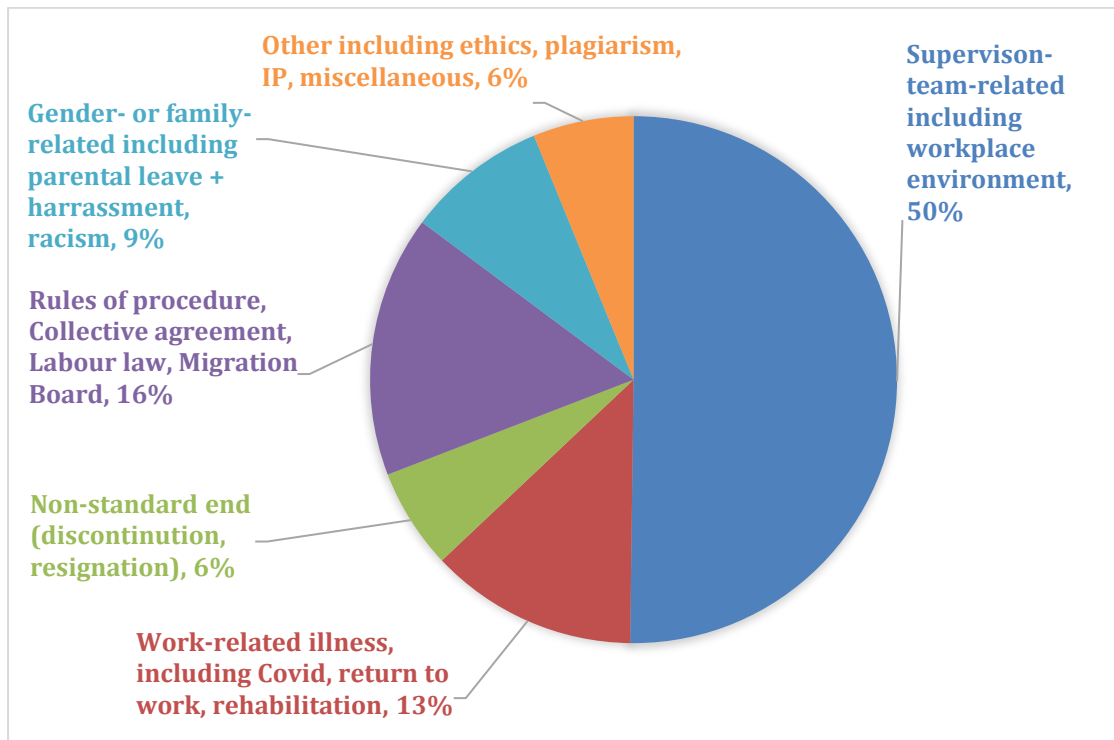


Figure 5. Distribution of main or current concern for all cases, 2018 to 2021

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Contact data continued to indicate that the dominant concern for doctoral students in contact with the DOMB was that of the supervision team and the related workplace environment. For 2018 to 2021, 50% of the doctoral students reported this concern, an increase of 7% from the 2017 to 2020 period (Year 5 Report). To put this in context, roughly 60 individuals in 2021 reported this concern – more than one per week for the entire year. Problems associated with members of the supervision team holding multiple roles continued to be a significant issue. The use of master suppression techniques was reported. The second area of concern, 13%, was that of work-related illness, including aspects of Covid-19, return to work and the rehabilitation process. Health concerns were broad but included burn-out. Concerns for personal health and safety were significant issues with Covid hygiene coming into play in 2020 and 2021. Doctoral students have indicated that there is a strong correlation between the supervision team and the related work environment and work-related illness. Together these accounted for over 60% of the main reasons for contact.

The issue of a possible and unexpected (non-standard) end of the doctoral position in which students sense possible withdrawal of resources, feel they are being pushed to resign or are considering walking away, was 6% (vs. 10%, 2017 to 2020, Year 5 Report). There were no processes using the new Withdrawal of Resources¹² procedure that came into effect in August 2020, that formally reached the stage of involving the DOMB. However, there was an increase in the number of doctoral students reporting they were being pushed to resign. In these cases, the doctoral students were advised that being pushed to resign might approach the threshold for the law on Provocation to Self-Termination.¹³

Contact related to a wide range of rules and procedures was 16%, an increase from the 13% reported in the Year 5 Report (2017 to 2020). Much of this difference can be attributed to the change in the Aliens Act with respect to Permanent Residence.¹⁴ This was an enormously stressful development for those doctoral students affected by the change. Requests for detailed information on notice periods for resignation (stated in the Collective Agreement) increased. This was also related to the aspect of a non-standard end. In the process for change of supervisor (initiated in C2020-0899, §5.3)¹⁵, the Head of Department should strive for an expeditious and transparent review of the matter, allow both the student and the supervisor to comment about the decision and provide a written decision. The additional stress of Economy in Balance and Covid-19 likely played a role, nevertheless doctoral students reported cases in which the change of supervisor process lacked transparency and was not expeditious.

Contact for issues related to gender and family including parental leave and VAB, as well as harassment and racism was 9%, a decrease from 13% in 2017 to 2020 (Year 5 Report) but in line with the 8% reported in the Year 4 Report for 2016 to 2019. Some of these cases were quite troubling with no long-term solution.

¹² C2021-0462 Appointment Regulation for doctoral programmes §9 and C2020-0925 Regulation regarding the withdrawal of resources for doctoral students

¹³ Provokation till egen uppsägning (Provocation to self-termination): Lag (1982:80) om anställningsskydd

¹⁴ <https://www.migrationsverket.se/English/About-the-Migration-Agency/Changes-to-the-Swedish-Aliens-Act-in-2021.html>

¹⁵ This requirement was first stated in C2020-0899 effective August 2020 and continued in 2021-0462.

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Other issues such as ethics, plagiarism, IP (intellectual property) and miscellaneous issues accounted for 6% of the main reason for contact. Miscellaneous requests included those with significant concerns for which the doctoral candidate requested total anonymity in all aspects of the case.

4. Events Year 6 (2021)

The DOMB made the following presentations by Zoom or Teams:

- January 20th – PhD Introduction Day
- February 10th – FUN, DOMB’s Annual Report
- March 22nd – CLG, DOMB’s Annual Report
- May 2nd – Presentation to ILG, E2
- June 9th – Presentation to the Faculty Assembly, SEE
- September 8th – DOMB Presentation to DS
- September 30th – PhD Introduction Day

5. Final remarks

Over the DOMB’s six-year term, some departments referred their students to the DOMB. In others it appears that contacting the DOMB was actively discouraged, including one in which doctoral students were told not to contact the DOMB as it will result in a *tick* against the department. Comments referring to the DOMB’s apparent *overfocus* on rules and rights were also observed. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, in Year 6 (2021) more doctoral students than ever reached out to the DOMB. Further, the DOMB’s annual time commitment remained high (39.5%) and the contact rate for those holding a doctoral student position (and the few on scholarship) was the highest (13%) recorded in the DOMB’s six-year term.

During the DOMB’s term, issues related to the supervision team including workplace environment combined with work-related illness were the dominant concerns. For the 2018 to 2021 period, these accounted for over 60% of the main reasons for contacting the DOMB. Throughout the DOMB’s term, but more so in the last few years, doctoral students reported the use of master suppression techniques¹⁶ in the workplace. One frequently reported master suppression technique was that of *projection*, in which a doctoral student comes forward with a concern, but the suppressor, rather than dealing with the concern, determines that it is the doctoral student who is the problem.

In Year 6 (2021), an increase in the number of time-consuming cases was observed and was reflected in the number of interactions with the Vice President(s) responsible for research education, Heads and Vice Heads of Department, SACO/trade unions and Pe3. While the effects of Covid-19, Economy in Balance and changes to the Aliens Act contributed some of these cases, others included, for example, faculty making reference to resignation rather than using the new process for Withdrawal of Resources (C2021-

¹⁶ For example, <https://staff.ki.se/master-suppression-techniques>

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0462 §9, C2020-0925). On several occasions this method may have approached the threshold of Provocation to Self-Termination (Lag 1982:80).

Despite the potential of the latest Appointment regulation (C2021-0462, and previously C2020-0899, effective August 2020) to address many of the concerns brought forward by doctoral students, there remains a reliance on long standing local rules and traditions. These unwritten rules are captured by the expression, “We don’t do it that way here.” One common example of this is the lack of observation of the letter from the supervisor to the Head of Department when a doctoral student exceeds or is planned to exceed the three-year mark before completing the Midway seminar or Licentiate degree (C2021-0462 §7.1) As a consequence, doctoral students may feel they are under-informed of their situation and/or that their pay increase is being deliberately delayed. The reliance on unwritten rules has the appearance of Groupthink¹⁷ in which there is a tendency for the individuals in a group to be or become quite similar in outlook and approach. The environment becomes one where, “We don’t do it that way here,” is normalized. Consensus then exists without challenge and when questioned, the concern is likely to be dismissed or ignored.

The first two Chalmers DOMBs enjoyed long-term positions with DS. However, in August 2022, the Swedish government is expected to bring in new legislation limiting contracts to one year after which a permanent position will be required. This will initiate a change in the DOMB model used since 2004, particularly with respect to those cases requiring several years of follow-up and interaction.

Finally, on a personal note. I would like to express my thanks to DS and all doctoral students for six truly inspiring years as your DOMB.



Chalmers DOMB, November 30, 2021

¹⁷ For example, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/g/groupthink.asp>