

# Survey on Doctoral Completion Time

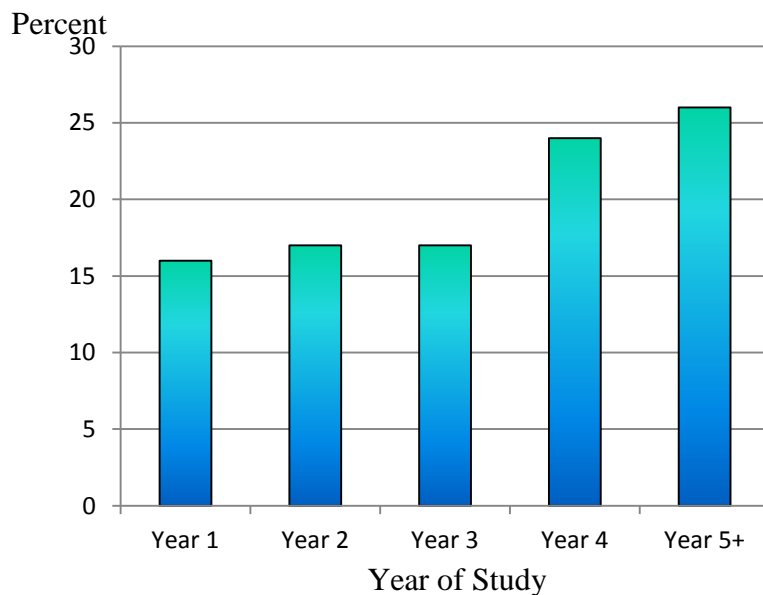
## Final Report

Degree completion times and associated factors have long been discussed at national and provincial meetings focused on graduate education as well as at individual universities. These discussions are largely data-driven (e.g. average completion times); however, there is growing emphasis on sharing best-practices that support timely completion. Supervisor-student relationships, funding and employment are commonly reported factors that can impact the time to completion, though it is less clear what actions might be most effective in facilitating timely completion.

An anonymous online survey of all actively registered full-time PhD students was conducted in the Fall of 2012. Students were invited to submit responses to 4 open-ended questions aimed at identifying strategies to promote timely completion as well as challenges that impede progress to completing on time.

A survey link was emailed to 1211 PhD students in mid-October and they were asked to submit their responses by the close date of November 15, 2012. Respondents were eligible to receive one of four cash prizes.

A total of 461 surveys were submitted corresponding to a response rate of 38%. All respondents provided information about their year of study (figure below) though 396 went on to answer the remaining questions (33% response rate).



**Figure 1** Distribution of respondents by year of study

## **Analysis**

All responses were read for each question to get a sense of consistencies and differences and to identify categories of responses by theme or idea. The key ideas within a category were then summarized to provide perspective on the variation of opinions expressed. The relative importance of a category was determined on the basis of the frequency with which it came up in the responses. In some instances the response could fall into more than one category; if the ideas expressed were related and a primary theme could be identified then it was categorized accordingly; otherwise it was counted in more than one category.

### *1. Changes to your PhD program that would increase the likelihood of completing your degree on time.*

Five percent of respondents indicated that changes were not required. The remaining responses are discussed under the thematic headings below.

#### **Program Structure**

Thirty-three percent of respondents indicated that changes to the program structure, clear articulation of expectations, timelines and requirements (and enforcement thereof) would increase the likelihood of timely completion. The course requirements were seen by many as extensive and some respondents suggested that the breadth requirements be revisited in an effort to streamline and reduce the time commitment. Progress was seen as being hampered by the unavailability of some courses and the lack of options in the summer months. Reducing course requirements for students who hold a Master's degree in the same discipline as their PhD studies was frequently noted, as was the desire that course content, structure and evaluation would provide a foundation for the research work.

There was a strong sentiment that comprehensive examinations are too onerous, that they should be early in the program and contribute to the development of the research proposal/plan to enable an earlier focus on the research.

Respondents stated that programs should better communicate expectations and timelines for completing milestones and support the achievement or adherence to the timelines. Clearly defining the scope/breadth/depth of work required would be helpful; guidance is desired.

#### **Funding**

Twenty-four percent of the respondents stated that better funding packages, more award money, and lower costs of education would assist in completing on time. The introduction of 'performance bonuses' for achieving milestones and reduced tuition or tuition waivers without adjustment of current funding levels were among the most common suggestions. More funding

from supervisors and non-employment income was seen as desirable to reduce the reliance on teaching assistantships, acknowledging that these activities can slow progress.

## **Supervision**

Twenty-one percent of the respondents said that effective supervision is important in timely completion. There was a variety of opinions that fell into this category though most reflected the need for effectual and frequent communication/meetings to discuss the research, set goals, define the parameters/scope of the research work, provide encouragement and feedback and confirm alignment between the expectations of the student and of the supervisor. Supervisors must provide mentorship in planning and guiding the research, encouraging manuscript format and supporting progress. Frustration about supervisor absenteeism, slow turn-around times on work/chapters and the lack of engagement of supervisors was apparent in many responses. Respondents stated that supervisors have a responsibility to provide mentorship that goes with accepting a student and to support the success of students under their supervision.

## **Other Factors**

Several categories emerged that each accounted for 5% of the respondents' statements.

### *Resources and Support*

This category captures many ideas/opinions that relate to support at the departmental level and from central sources. Respondents felt that departments should: track the completion/achievement of milestones; support supervisors in mentoring their students; ensure that adequate work space/lab space is available; and, promote a community of students to motivate and encourage each other. Several respondents indicated a desire for a comprehensive graduate handbook that informs students about program expectations, processes and resources. Workshops on writing, time management, career planning and assistance with job searches would be helpful (though some cautioned that too much could prolong completion times). Others noted that specialty training or advice (software tools, statistical analysis) would be useful and some called for a more efficient and 'speedy' ethics review process.

### *Teaching Assistantships and Teaching Fellowships*

The demands associated with TA/TF duties were considered excessive and detracted from graduate work. Recommendations to limit the number of TA/TF appointments for a student were common and some felt they should not be required to hold a TA/TF.

### *Thesis*

Perhaps this category should have been merged with 'supervision'; however, the matters raised could also fall under departmental or central responsibilities. Respondents commented specifically about the need for guidance and support in determining the form their thesis should take (general form or manuscript), and the establishment of criteria for quality, scope and completeness. Several lamented that it was difficult to know when the work was complete.

## *2. Incentives that would encourage timely completion*

Fifteen percent of those who responded indicated that no incentives were required. Two subcategories emerged in relatively equal proportions. One, reflecting the existent funding situation, that is, that the reduction in funding after year four was incentive enough and the other, that self-motivation was sufficient incentive. Some respondents in the latter subgroup took offense to the framing of the question or that it was asked at all.

### **Funding**

The most frequently occurring response (23%) was that funding packages during years 1-4 should have a higher dollar value as this would shorten completion times. Nearly half of these respondents specified that the funding packages should primarily be composed of stipendiary and award money (i.e., not employment-related income).

### **Job/Post-Doctoral Positions**

Eighteen percent of respondents indicated that having a job to go to (including a post-doctoral position) would be an excellent incentive to complete their degree. Some added that post-doctoral positions could be guaranteed to those who complete within 4 years. Some who expressed this view also noted that this was not within the control of the university; however more assistance in the job search would be helpful.

### **Financial Rewards/Bonuses**

Fifteen percent of respondents indicated that financial incentives could be useful. Several different ideas were expressed, with the most common relating to bonuses associated with achieving certain milestones, publishing a paper or meeting annual goals with the intent of recognizing particular accomplishments throughout the program of study. Others suggested completion bonuses. Of these, some suggested prorating (e.g., a certain amount if one completes after 4 years and a lesser amount after 5 years), others stated a lump sum upon completion within a defined timeframe would provide incentive. Other ideas included shared financial bonuses, that is, to the student upon completion and to the supervisor in support of another graduate student.

### **Tuition**

Responses that referenced tuition in some way accounted for 14% of the responses and fell into one of three subgroups. The first, accounting for 8% of responses, suggested that a tuition rebate would provide encouragement and this could be a rebate equivalent to one term up to one year upon completion within 4 years. Alternatively, a fixed rebate could be provided to those completing within 4 years and a lesser amount if within 5 years. Four percent indicated that tuition reduction once course work and comprehensives were complete would provide

incentive and 2% stated that an increase in tuition after year 4 would encourage earlier completion.

### **Supervision**

Nine percent of respondents noted that good supervision and supervisors who provided encouragement and helped set achievable goals and timelines were important in motivating timely completion.

### *3. Challenges that could impede timely degree completion*

Several categories that emerged from the responses to this question about challenges that could impede timely completion were the same as those identified in section 1 above, though the relative frequency of occurrence differed. This may reflect independency of factors, for example, inadequate funding leads to the need to work that detracts from studies, which in turn can be more acute if the student has a family. If a primary factor was not evident, the response was categorized under more than one heading. Unique themes also emerged in response to this particular question. Four percent of respondents stated that there were no challenges.

### **Supervision**

Twenty-eight percent of the respondents expressed that poor quality supervision could delay progress. Lack of accessibility and interaction, infrequent contact, lack of clarity about the research, a requirement to focus on work extraneous to the student's research, unreasonable/over ambitious scope, inadequate resources to support the research, lack of timelines and high pressure to publish prior to completing the degree were noted as barriers to timely completion. Several respondents expressed concern that the decision about when the research was done or the thesis was complete resided with the supervisor without the student having a clear understanding of the criteria considered in the decision.

### **Personal and Family**

Nineteen percent of respondents indicated that personal and/or family responsibilities and expectations, personal and/or family health, or dealing with family matters could prolong the time to completion. Personal issues, broadly stated, were noted by many respondents in the context of taking time away from their graduate studies.

### **Funding**

The inadequacy of funding packages was identified by 12% of respondents. Although several responses provided little to no accompanying information, others noted that poor funding packages resulted in the need to take on part-time employment, contributed to stress, and increased the likelihood of having to take time off.

## **Program Structure and Technical Issues**

Eleven percent of respondents identified challenges relating to the program structure. These included the requirement to complete too many courses, too much time spent doing coursework unrelated to their field of research, an inability to complete course requirements because courses weren't offered annually, mandatory requirements for fieldwork, and excessive lengths of time preparing for comprehensives. The need for timelines and milestones was frequently noted.

Technical challenges directly associated with research were reported by 11% of respondents. Specifically, equipment breakdown/malfunction, unanticipated problems with protocols, limited availability of test materials/subjects, or unexpected findings resulting in the need for further experimentation. While respondents often commented that these were unavoidable, they also indicated that assistance in finding alternative approaches would be helpful.

## **Work**

Ten percent of respondents indicated that work took valuable time away from their studies. The majority of these noted that TA/TF commitments were excessive and too demanding; some commented that fewer TAships at more opportune times in their program would be helpful. A few respondents stated that the time spent in seeking employment or post-doctoral positions in the final stages of their PhD delayed their completion.

## **Other Factors**

Several respondents suggested that the ethics review process was unduly lengthy. Other comments referred to poor housing, poor preparation for graduate work, shortfalls in their own writing ability and that they were too easily distracted from their work which was attributed to poor time-management.

## *4. Factors that helped in staying on track and completing milestones to promote timely completion*

A number of respondents (6%) simply stated that they had no comment or ideas to share, some specifically stated this was because they were very early in their programs.

## **Supervision**

Thirty-seven percent of respondents stated that a good relationship with their supervisor/advisor kept them on track and progressing well. Contributors to a productive relationship included good communication, understanding of shared expectations and timelines, constructive feedback, direction and support in meeting objectives, and concrete

goals. Several respondents indicated that flexibility and commitment were important attributes in a supervisor.

### **Self-Motivation**

Nineteen percent of respondents commented that their own motivation to complete is the principal factor in promoting timely completion. Being committed to the process, the work required, strong drive, and a desire to succeed and produce quality research were what kept them on track. Many stated that support from supervisors, the department, family and other was also helpful and reinforced their own motivation.

### **Departmental Support**

Support from the department in terms of setting clear timelines, expectations, milestones and providing resources, work space and promoting a sense of community among graduate students were identified by 13% of respondents as important. Some noted this was critical if their supervisor was less concerned about progression or providing a supportive work environment. Other factors under this category included support with completing applications for scholarships and attending conferences; both seen as valuable to their graduate experience and enabling timely completion.

### **Time Management and Planning**

Twelve percent of respondents stated that managing their time, planning their work, setting short and longer term goals, balancing commitments, and planning ahead to identify when particular resources might be needed and/or when meetings to provide updates or seek guidance would be useful was important in keeping their studies on track. Several also indicated that supervisor buy-in to their plans was helpful.

### **Other Factors**

Funding and the desire to move on post-graduation were expressed with equal frequency (~5% of respondents). Having adequate funding support through scholarships, awards and/or from their supervisor kept progress on track. Others felt that the motivation of moving on to a job or no longer being a student is what is moving them forward toward completion.

### *General Comments*

The survey was conducted to provide insight from individual doctoral students about factors that they consider important and impactful in terms of timely completion of the PhD degree. A small number of respondents (< 3%) felt that some aspect of the survey was insulting, though of these, most responded to the questions. The responses serve to identify several themes including funding, supervision, expectations, personal/family circumstances and support, which

in turn inform next steps that build on current initiatives or the exploration of new ones. It was clear that the comments from some respondents (about 5-10% depending on the question) were not based on their own experience but rather on what they thought might impact completion or what they have heard from others. In aggregate the information provides a useful snapshot of the perspectives of doctoral students. Their willingness to share their viewpoints and provide thoughtful responses is very much appreciated and will provide a valuable foundation for future discussions.