

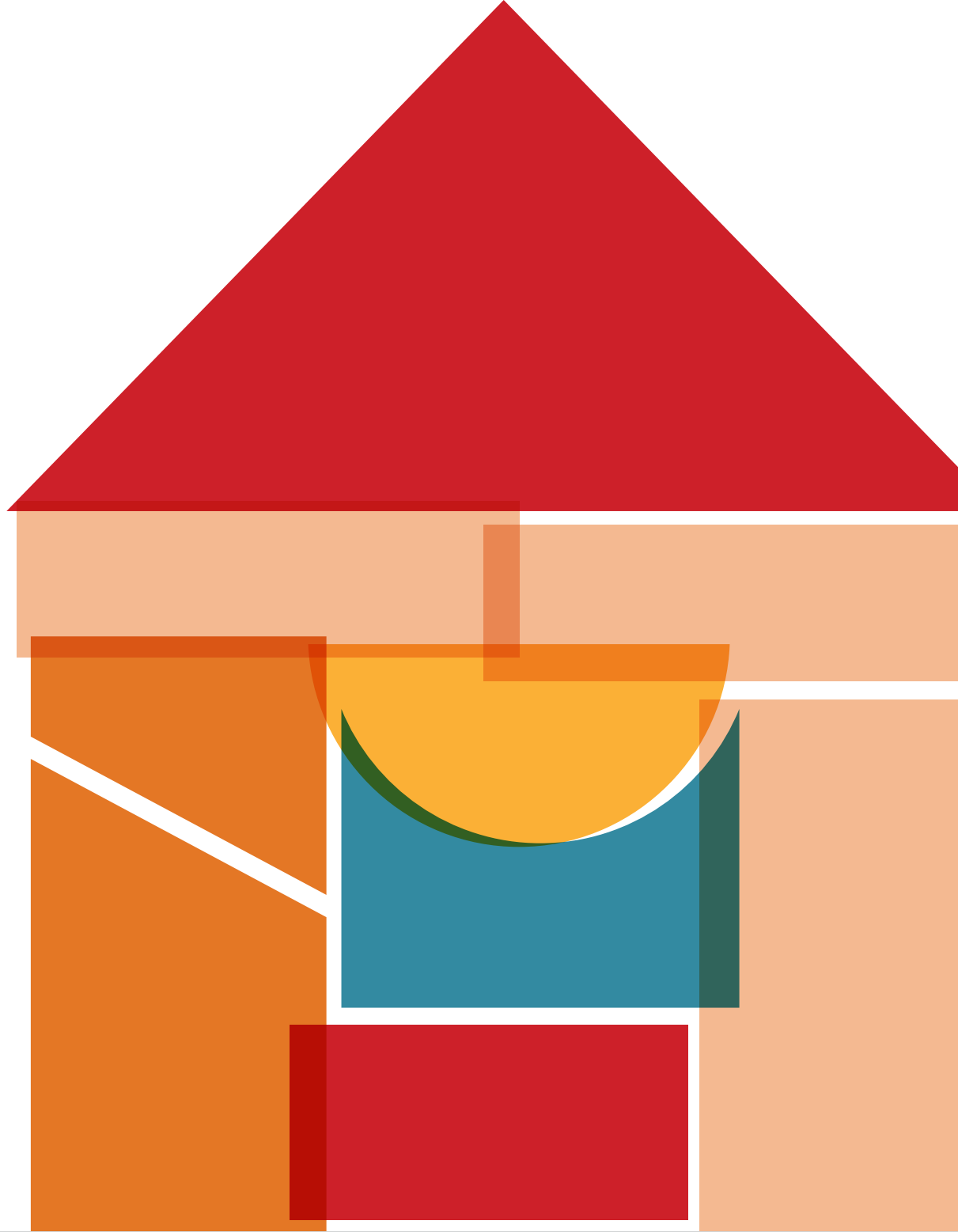
A practical guide

HANDBOOK

Onboarding doctoral candidates

ASSOCIATION FOR
PROFESSIONALS IN
DOCTORAL EDUCATION

PRIDE
Network



This handbook was created in the scope of the PRIDE “Professionals in Doctoral Education” Network working group on doctoral candidates’ onboarding.

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About the Handbook

This handbook emerged from discussions during the PRIDE Network Masterclass on onboarding* in doctoral education, held in Dubrovnik in August 2022. Following the masterclass, a motivated group of participants decided to engage in an ongoing European-wide working group to delve deeper into the onboarding process, its connection to the doctorate, and the most effective ways to implement it.

The subsequent process involved extensive information gathering and literature review, complemented by a survey among PRIDE members and other universities in the summer of 2023. The result is the handbook you have before you.

The members of the working group all manage and coordinate doctoral education within a support unit of their university. Their intention has been to put together a handbook that would be inspirational and helpful for themselves and people in similar positions in European universities. While it can still offer insights and guidelines for university management, institutional policies, supervisors and the broader academic community; the primary target group is administrative staff, responsible for managing doctoral education. They may benefit the most from the examples of best practices provided here.

How this handbook works

At the core of this handbook are elements of onboarding processes from real cases collected during the working group's research. These elements are shared to empower institutions to choose, implement, and further develop aspects that align with their unique needs, acknowledging the diversity across different institutions, while being designed to inspire new practice.

To enhance clarity, each element is defined in generic terms and accompanied by examples showcasing its diverse implementations. The handbook further supports and encourages institutions to develop each element by providing articulated goals, identifying potential risks, and suggesting adequate adjustments to various institutional contexts and processes. As such, the handbook refrains from prescribing a singular route to the onboarding of doctoral candidates*. Instead, the various elements detailed here are intended as flexible suggestions to inspire the implementation and evaluation of new practices.

Timely and comprehensive information empowers doctoral candidates to contribute effectively to academic research. This handbook focuses on structural procedures to encourage cultural, social, and professional integration, ensuring candidates feel welcomed in their academic environment and prepared for the journey that lies ahead.

Designed to be dynamic, this handbook is intended to evolve over time. As participating institutions develop and implement their own onboarding processes, we invite them to contribute their experiences to the working group (see the [call for contributions](#)). Such collaborative effort ensures a continuous learning and reflection of ongoing best practices.

The symbol * signals key terms used in this handbook and links to their definition in the [glossary](#).

Introduction

Onboarding and its relevance

The origins of onboarding

The concept of onboarding* dates back to the early twentieth century, and refers to a formalised process to welcome and integrate new employees into an organisation. Originally emerging as a response to evolving workplace dynamics, it is recognized today as a critical component of human resource strategies.

In the private sector, a positive onboarding experience is today understood to be pivotal to enhancing employee retention, engagement and productivity. A tailored onboarding strategy helps new hires quickly adapt to their roles and align with the organisation's goals and culture. (Bauer 2010)

At many universities, there is a very well-developed process of onboarding for general and administrative staff, or at least one in development.¹ Their structure and content are often similar to those found in the private sector, and indicate that knowledge of onboarding processes already exists within the institution. For academic staff however, and especially for doctoral candidates* (who are usually in temporary employment), such processes are often only exceptional and rarely go beyond an orientation day. The consequences for doctoral candidates, not only on performance and motivation, but also on their mental health, seem obvious, but have yet to be studied in depth.

Nevertheless, universities are increasingly adopting onboarding approaches for incoming doctoral candidates, with the goal of optimal engagement and academic success. Navigating doctoral training programmes and academic culture can pose challenges for newcomers with limited knowledge and experience in the field. By offering support, the onboarding process transforms high expectations, rigorous training, and complex research requirements into more manageable pieces, easing the transition into this new phase of the academic journey.

¹ See two examples from Harvard University:

<https://hls.harvard.edu/staff-dashboard/human-resources/resources-for-managers/onboarding-new-employees/>,
<https://facultyresources.fas.harvard.edu/onboarding-overview-new-faculty>.

Advantages of onboarding processes in place

Supervision and the doctoral journey

The working group acknowledges that an academic supervisor*, aided by institutional resources, plays a central role throughout the onboarding process. However, in the PRIDE survey of European higher education institutions, only 30% of respondents include supervisors in the onboarding process.

Establishing a strong advisor-advisee relationship between supervisor and doctoral candidate is critical in doctoral education. An onboarding process presents a structured and supportive opportunity for supervisors and doctoral candidates to clarify and align expectations, allocate responsibilities, and establish the foundations of constructive working practices and productive communication (Hillebrand & Leysinger 2023; Masek 2017). An onboarding process managed by the doctoral administration of the university works in parallel with and in support of, that of the supervisor(s).

While the supervisory relationship is not the direct focus of this handbook, its critical importance in the doctoral journey has been addressed by several authors. The recruitment and integration of new doctoral candidates into a supervisory relationship deserves a separate and more comprehensive treatment, which will not be addressed in this guide. That said, many resources presented in this handbook can be useful tools for the supervisors to establish the supervisory relationship during and beyond the onboarding process.

EXAMPLES

University of Tartu

Expectation management worksheet and supervision agreement

<https://ut.ee/en/phd-supervision#beginningyourstudies>

University of Copenhagen

Handbook on supervision, “To lead the way”

<https://phd.ku.dk/english/process/>

University of Jyväskylä

Doctoral study supervisors and their responsibilities

<https://www.jyu.fi/en/for-students/instructions-for-doctoral-students/supervision-and-study-counselling-for-doctoral-students>

Doctoral Programmes

Doctoral programmes have unique expectations and requirements for their doctoral candidates, which can vary significantly from one institution to another and even vary within different departments. Onboarding helps doctoral candidates understand what is expected of them in terms of coursework, research, teaching, and other responsibilities. It also provides a soft landing, by informing candidates about their new surroundings and essential services and resources, from the outset. In this sense, it facilitates an effective and rapid start to the doctoral journey, allowing doctoral candidates to focus on their research and academic goals.

Integration and Community

With the diverse backgrounds and need for cultural adaptation typical of today's doctoral research environment, onboarding assists in integration and encourages a sense of belonging in the academic community.

A structured onboarding process can provide opportunities to build networks among doctoral candidates and their peers, senior faculty members, and the services and staff available to support them. A network of colleagues, advisors and mentors* established early in the doctoral process can be invaluable when these resources and guidance are needed later.

Well-Being

The doctorate can represent a challenge for the mental health and emotional well-being of those who engage in it (Wellcome 2020).² Onboarding can provide doctoral candidates with insights into the potential stressors and emotional demands they may encounter – and the information and resources they need to better manage them. Clear instructions about the institutional procedures to solve interpersonal issues may have a significant role in lowering some of the risks that the doctoral journey might entail.

Completion

Given the benefits outlined above, a well-structured onboarding process can contribute to higher retention rates and better academic outcomes. When doctoral candidates feel supported, informed, and part of a community, it can be reasonably expected that they are more likely to persist in their studies and achieve their doctoral degree. Long-term studies on this subject would be a valuable resource in designing an effective onboarding process.

Career Preparation

Onboarding can introduce doctoral candidates to opportunities for professional development, including skills training programmes, and workshops, seminars and conferences focused on career development. This early exposure encourages preparation for future careers throughout the doctoral process and allows for the shifts in motivation and interests that can occur (Skakni 2018).

² See the resources on the ReMO Cost Action on Researcher Mental Health homepage: <https://projects.tib.eu/remo/>.

Knowing about the resources available in terms of research facilities, libraries, funding opportunities and academic support services can help doctoral candidates find assistance where and when they need it, and thus make the most of their time. Being encouraged from the outset to think about the doctorate as a step towards another chapter in life, and more than as a project to be completed in and of itself, supports motivation towards completion as well as better career preparation as a whole.

In summary, the main advantages of onboarding processes for doctoral candidates are:

- contributes to expectation management and productive working practices between candidates and supervisors;
- clarifies regulations and doctoral programme requirements;
- provides orientation to relevant academic support services;
- contributes to building networks;
- develops the sense of belonging;
- increases well-being;
- increases satisfaction and completion rates;
- encourages an open mindset when thinking about future career steps.

Chapter I

Onboarding of doctoral candidates across Europe: the current situation

As part of the initial phase of the project, the working group focused on gathering insights into the prevailing practices of onboarding* doctoral candidates* within European higher education institutions. To achieve this, the group designed and conducted a comprehensive survey.

Leveraging the extensive reach of the PRIDE network, the survey was distributed via email to over one hundred higher education institutions across Europe. This data collection spanned the period from June to August 2023, resulting in 55 responses from 20 countries (one answer per institution only). A majority of responses originated from public universities, with eight additional contributions from private universities or research institutes.

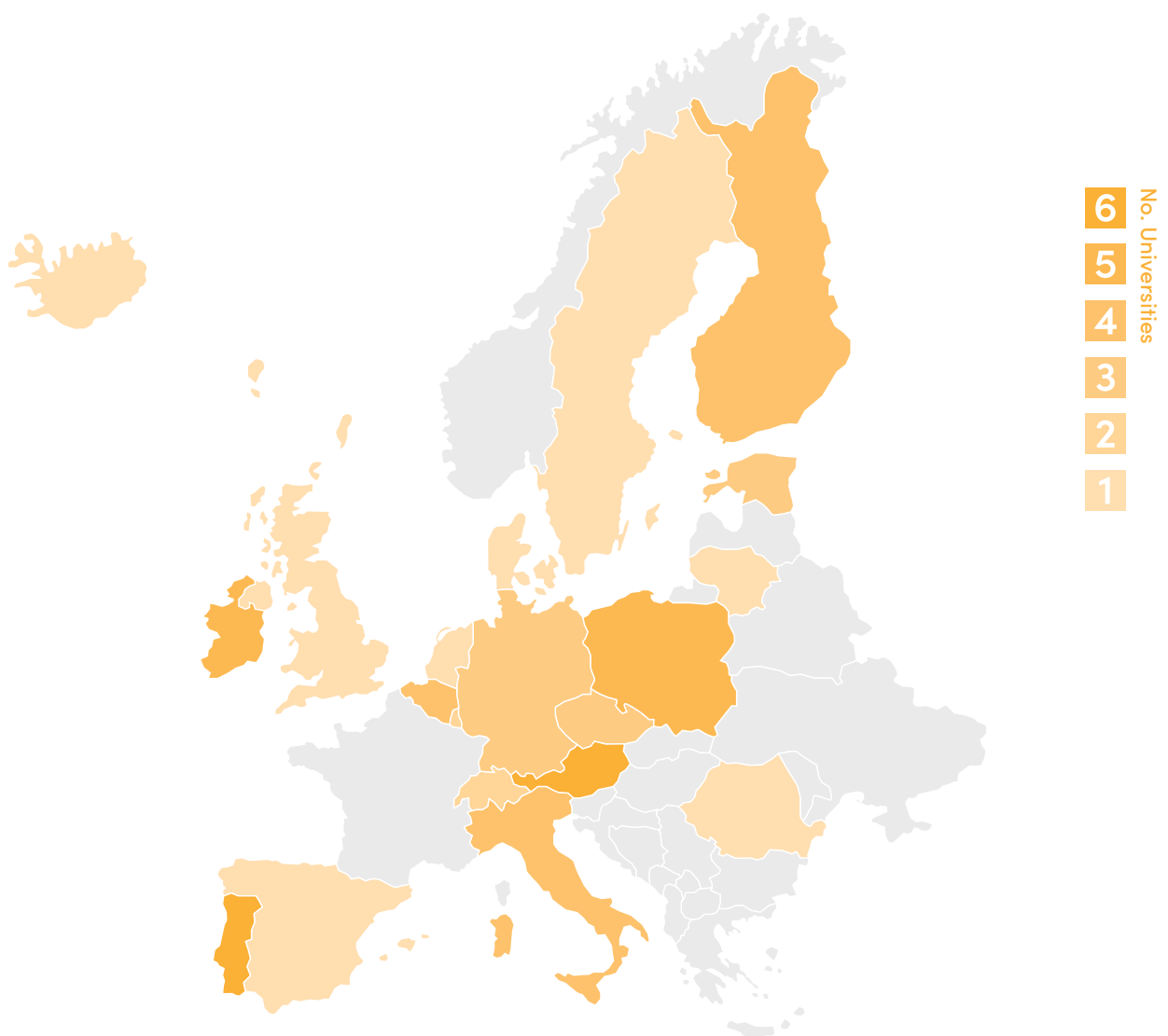


Figure 1. Numbers of European universities and research institutes based on country of origin who participated in the survey on the onboarding of doctoral candidates.

More than half of the participating universities had established a formalised onboarding process, while a significant number had integrated at least one onboarding element into their practice. It is noteworthy that less than one quarter of the universities engage in the regular review or collection of feedback regarding their onboarding procedures, indicating that onboarding processes for doctoral candidates are still in the initial stage of development. Feedback mechanisms, when employed, primarily take the form of questionnaires, often lacking qualitative methods (like interviews or focus groups).

The responding institutions were considerably diverse in their annual intake of doctoral candidates, ranging from 11 to 1200. More than 80% of the respondents indicated they had a doctoral school*, despite the wide variety of interpretation of its role and structure within the university. Doctoral schools have a prominent role in onboarding activities in more than half of the responding institutions, alone or in collaboration with central support units. Faculties, institutes, and other organisational units were mentioned less frequently as overseeing the process, while human resources offices (HR) are involved in the onboarding process in a quarter of responding institutions.

Responses regarding the duration of the onboarding process revealed a spectrum, ranging from a few hours to a year. Despite discrepancies in the interpretation of what the onboarding process entails, the data underscored the identified milestones, including a formal welcome, orientation events, training programme, and additional elements contingent upon the evaluation procedures for doctoral candidates. Survey responses highlighted a diversity of approaches to the organisation of onboarding, influenced by resources, duration, evaluation procedures, and training programmes. Clear patterns emerged, emphasising the influence of local policies, university regulations, institutional structures, and available resources on the definition, scope, and content of onboarding processes across different universities.

Based on the results of the survey and additional literature review, the next chapter presents an inventory of the key elements that emerged. The onboarding process is a result of intricately linked factors, depending on the specificities of the admission* process, the employment status of doctoral candidates, the requirement for individual plans*, and the methods employed for candidate evaluation. This nuanced understanding is crucial for tailoring effective onboarding practices to the specific context of each institution.

Chapter II

Onboarding elements

The onboarding elements presented in this chapter have been identified by comparing the onboarding* practices of the universities of the working group, and extending these observations with the information collected through the survey, to highlight common patterns and objectives. Additional inspiration was provided by the literature on onboarding in the private sector and in the academic sector for general and administrative staff discussed in the introduction.

For the purpose of this handbook, onboarding refers to activities and information provided during the initial phase of the doctoral journey, commencing from the moment of admission* until the first assessment of doctoral candidates*. The working group considers it essential to recognise onboarding as an ongoing process, with its impact extending beyond the doctorate.

Some elements, such as the “welcome” and the “induction phase”, are very closely connected and touch upon similar topics. They are often combined in general orientation activities, or, on the contrary, organised by different departments. For example the welcome event can be organised by the rectorate for all admitted doctoral candidates, while the induction phase can be organised by the doctoral schools* or faculties, to provide specific information that may vary across different disciplines.

Of all the elements presented in this handbook, the progress review is the most directly connected to the overall span of the doctorate. It extends beyond the initial months, further integrating the benefits of an effective onboarding process into the successful completion of the doctorate, and good preparation for the next career stage.

To have a structured and successful onboarding process it is not necessary to implement all the elements listed in this chapter. The needs, resources and structure of each university determine which elements can be implemented to provide the greatest benefit. For universities without a structured onboarding process who explore this handbook for inspiration, it is important to mention that it is not required nor advisable to implement all the onboarding elements at once. It is recommended to identify one or two elements that would be most effective with the available resources and start from there. Other elements can always be implemented at a later stage.

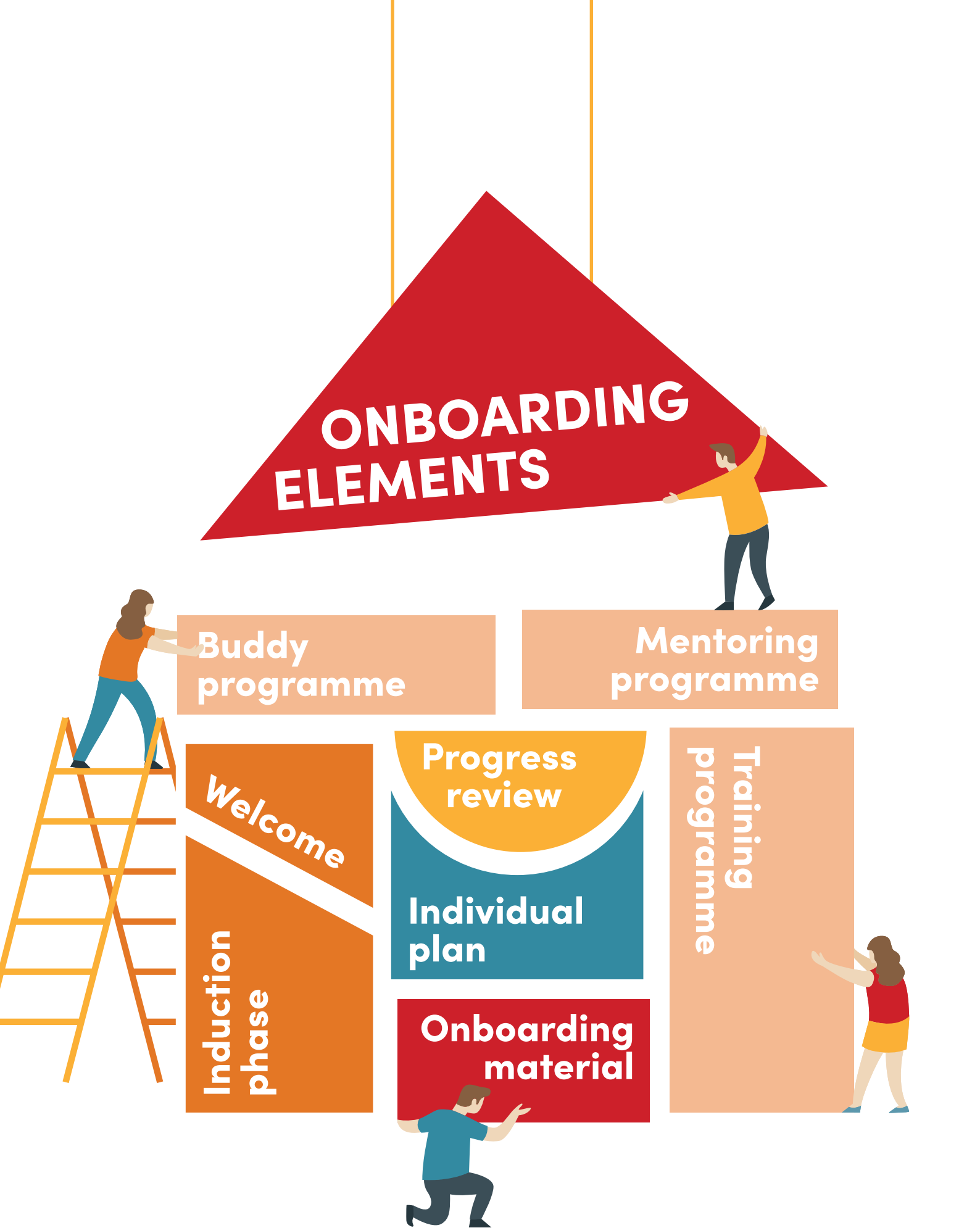


Figure 2. Visual summary of onboarding elements

Onboarding elements description

Welcome

Goals

The main goal of any “welcome” is to make new doctoral candidates feel recognised, and to start their time on a positive note by building a connection and a sense of belonging to the institution. It demonstrates an institutional, explicit acknowledgement of the doctoral candidate's* arrival at the institution as well as within the academic community. This is psychologically important, since it sets the foundation for the whole doctoral journey. For the university, it is an opportunity to make a good first impression by warmly welcoming and introducing doctoral candidates to institutional structures. For doctoral candidates, it is a first opportunity for networking and to get familiar with the context in which the doctoral experience will take place. In the long run, it is expected to contribute positively to the university's reputation, as satisfied alumni are likely to share their positive experiences.

Definition

It is not so easy to define a “welcome”. However, whether it includes a formal welcome from a senior member of the university or a social reception, the key feature is that it should occur in the first months of arrival at the university. Having a “welcome” at the beginning of the doctoral journey is very important as it is a first introduction to the university and can impact the experiences and expectations for the whole period of doctoral study, as well as the feelings towards the institution. When the “welcome” is part of a formal event such as (a) welcome day(s), it is often integrated within the induction phase, combining a social aspect of community building through interaction with different university officials and peers, with an informative aspect of more concrete introduction to services and administrative procedures. More than half of survey respondents organise such an event.

Potential content and format

The survey showed that the content of such welcome events has a strong emphasis on topics like the organisation of study, programme requirements, contacts for further support, and student organisations. Topics such as research integrity or employment contracts were much less common.

Some institutions (40% of survey respondents) distribute welcome packages which may take the form of goodie bags. The goodie bags may contain university souvenirs, such as a pen and notebook, maps of the campus, relevant onboarding material like a checklist, candidate's handbook, etc. Alternatively, some universities provide online welcome packages providing important information, links or even videos.

This “welcome” may be in the form of a welcome day, with formal greetings from senior university officials such as the rector, a vice rector or a dean. Welcome speeches may kick off information sessions from relevant units, such as HR, finance, library, teaching and learning centre, graduate center, IT services, etc. In these cases, it is important to include other, more advanced, doctoral candidates in the welcome event. In their position as colleagues and peers, they can further introduce institutional regulations and culture, while also talking about their own challenges.

Welcome events, when they take place at the faculty level or within the doctoral school*, can also be a platform for new doctoral candidates to introduce themselves to their peers to get to know each other as a cohort or a group. This can happen in a formal or more informal way, such as retreats or lunchtime seminars.

To allow flexibility in case of an asynchronous start date of the doctoral candidates, the “welcome” could include an informal introduction of the candidates to their department on their first day. The welcome can be conducted by the supervisor* or colleagues separately from the official events, with a focus on getting familiar with the environment and members of the department, receiving the necessary keys/cards and access to the intranet, etc.

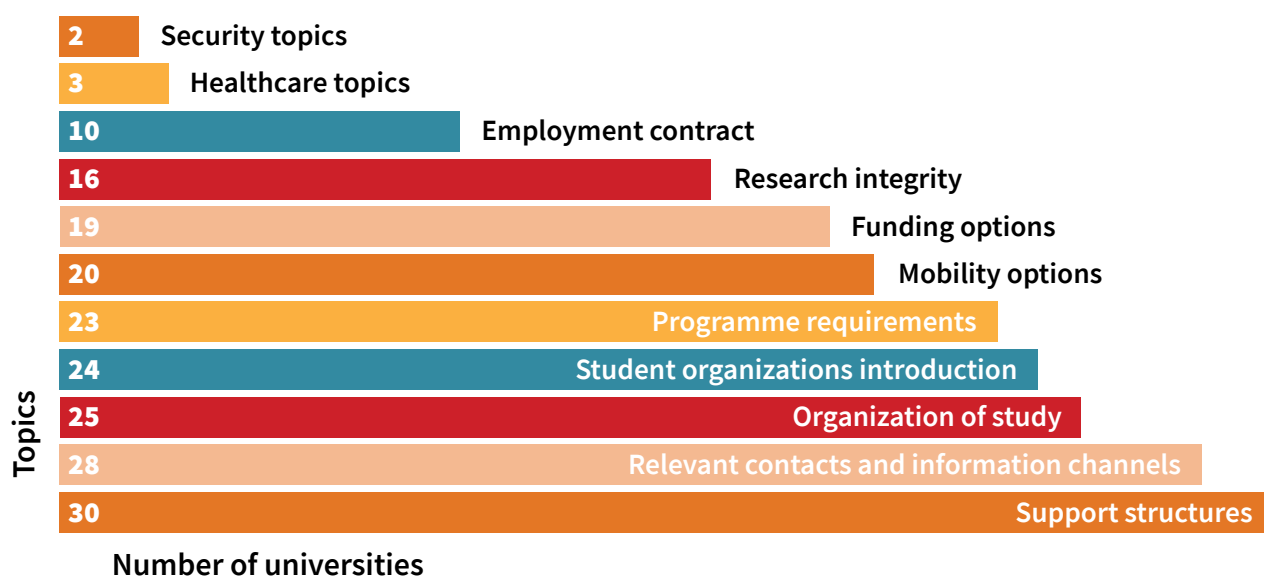


Figure 3. Reported topics at welcome events, based on survey results.

Risks and their potential solutions

Without an official welcome, a new doctoral candidate can experience a range of emotions, from frustration and confusion in an opaque system, to solitude and the impression that their presence is not valued by the institution. Subsequent integration in the institution will be harder, and it may have a negative impact on the university’s reputation.

Planning for this onboarding element should consider that doctoral candidates might not (be able to) arrive at the expected time or at the same time with the rest of the cohort. Depending on the admission* period and procedure, a “welcome” may demand significant resources over a longer period of time for the contact points in the organising unit. It is thus important to have an alternative to an in-person welcome in the form of a welcome pack or dedicated welcome webpages to signpost incoming doctoral candidates to institutional requirements and support. The need for proper support and introduction to the new environment is even more critical for international candidates with different cultural and professional backgrounds. For this target group, adjustments or expansions of certain topics should be considered.

Additionally, a welcome event can entail several organisational tasks involving multiple units at the busiest time of the academic year. It can be a challenge to get all units on board, put together an adequate programme with relevant speakers, find available rooms, etc. To ease these organisational challenges, it may be helpful to consider giving an overview of relevant topics without requiring the presence of every unit represented at the event, or alternative formats such as videos to introduce all relevant contacts.

Evaluation

For an evaluation of the official welcome, we suggest some indicators below, as the format and available resources can vary significantly by institution:

- number of participants (including their relation to the number of staff involved), taking into account if the welcome is a mandatory or optional part of the programme;
- candidate's familiarity with the services available in the university;
- participants' satisfaction survey to evaluate the event, welcome package, etc.;
- candidate's comfort and familiarity with their workplace.

EXAMPLES

University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna

Welcome Event

<https://www.mdw.ac.at/stdw/waehrend-des-doktorats/>

University College London

Welcome Event

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/doctoral-school/doctoral-journey/first-steps>

Trinity College Dublin

Orientation for Postgraduate Students

<https://www.tcd.ie/students/orientation/postgraduates/>

Induction phase

Goals

The main objective of the induction phase is to provide structure at the beginning of the doctoral journey with essential information and requirements, and to help doctoral candidates* get acquainted with the institution. It is an important period for both institutional integration (learning to navigate the university system and being introduced to its culture) and social integration (meeting university staff and peers).

An induction phase can give tools and opportunities for the doctoral candidate to become part of the academic research environment and get a better sense of their role in this system, through networking, training and support.

Definition

The induction phase refers to a period of time after the initial “welcome” during which doctoral candidates receive general information about their doctoral studies, the institution and its culture, as well as opportunities to integrate in the new environment.

The induction phase can provide international students with the additional information and support they often need to overcome legal, language and social barriers in order to be successfully integrated into the academic community.

With a variable length, lasting from a few hours to several months, depending on the specific onboarding programme as well as needs and resources of its organisers, this phase can take place in different formats. Some examples include orientation days or weeks, webinars, introductory courses, etc. Participation in the induction phase may be mandatory or voluntary.

Potential content and format

The overarching question for the organiser of the induction phase is how to provide relevant information to different subgroups of doctoral candidates effectively, in which language and in which format. It is advisable to take into account the annual timeline of admission* (including whether the cohort starts at the same time, or if candidates start at random times throughout the year), as well as available human resources, to be able to afford a standard offer to all candidates during the initial period of their doctoral studies.

The induction phase is an opportunity to introduce the university, faculty, department and/or institute, the doctoral programme and its requirements, organisation of studies and its timeline and milestones, and services available for candidates, if not already provided in the “welcome”. Other potential topics that can be covered are: options for funding, mobility, training and development opportunities, relevant contacts and support structures, student organisations, and information about the employment contract.

This phase can act as an introduction to research culture, including field-specific training in topics such as research integrity, open science, data management, intellectual rights, etc. Due to the fact that the formal “welcome” is often combined with the induction phase, the survey showed very similar results as those given in the previous chapter. Most institutions focused their induction on programme requirements and the presentation of support structures.

Based on survey results, welcome events are usually organised by central support offices in collaboration with faculties and institutes, or by the doctoral schools*. In the case of induction events, however, faculties and institutes have a more important role, together with the doctoral schools.

An online format can be suitable for the induction phase, in the form of materials, e-courses, on-line modules, pre-recorded talks, etc. If there is the possibility to organise in-person activities, it can be useful to involve more experienced candidates to share what they deem critical or challenging for the first-year candidate. Besides providing networking opportunities, this can also serve as motivation for new doctoral candidates.

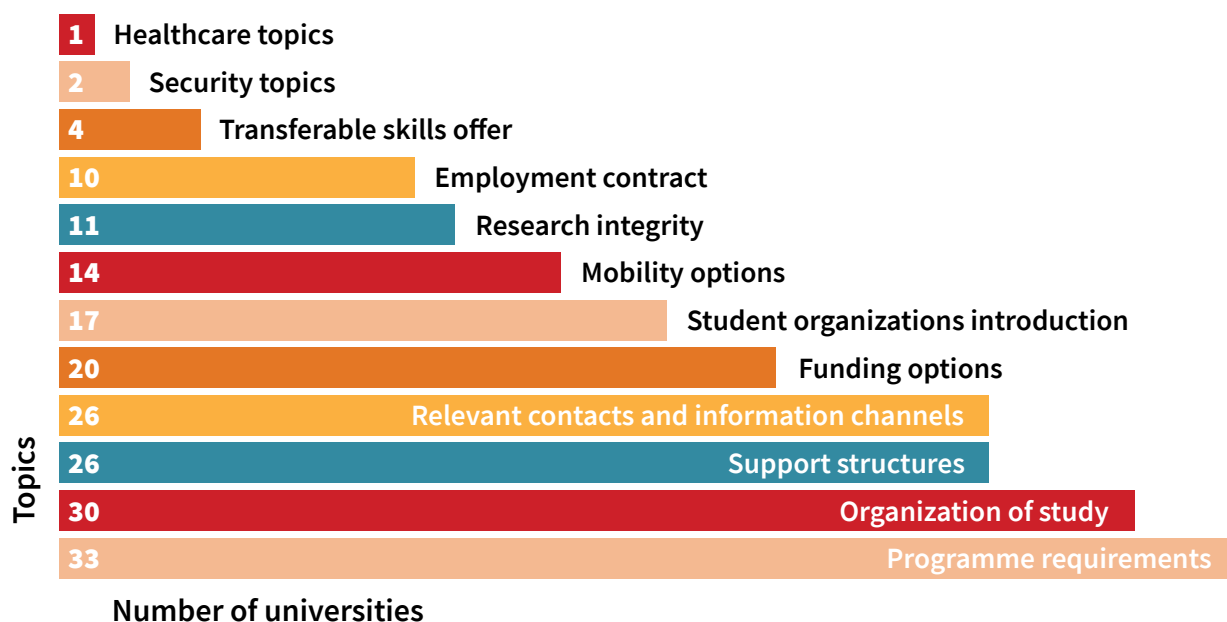


Figure 4. Reported topics at induction events, based on survey results.

Risks and their potential solutions

The induction phase as a term is subject to different interpretations and therefore difficult to define. Rather than a one-size-fits-all model, it is important to consider different approaches that are suitable to a specific institutional structure.

To design an optimal and effective induction phase, it is advisable to start with the admission timeline, and relevant milestones and deadlines for the doctoral candidates, taking into account the size of the target group and the different needs of potential subgroups. A review of the struc-

ture and content of the doctoral programme, including its mandatory elements and relevant support services, will provide the basis for a comprehensive onboarding programme. Ensuring adaptability within its construction will allow for new topics and trends in training to be integrated.

To avoid an overload of information at the beginning, it is advisable to organise an induction phase over an extended period of time. Online resources can help with storing relevant information so that it is always accessible.

If the provided materials and events are not mandatory, it might be difficult to attract candidates to attend and interact. However, any mandatory programme will require the implementation of a control system. An alternative is to elicit the support and feedback of programme directors and supervisors*. Their involvement will have the benefit of an increase in the visibility and attractiveness of the offered activities, especially when developing a new onboarding activity.

Evaluation

Because the induction phase can vary significantly in format and structure across institutions, devising a universal assessment method is challenging.

Potential indicators of success of the induction phase may include the doctoral candidate's satisfaction (collected through surveys), retention rates and/or attrition, the number of participants in the induction activities (particularly if the participation is voluntary). These metrics may however be influenced by many other factors.

EXAMPLES

University of Vienna

PhD Orientation Week

<https://forschung.univie.ac.at/en/services/events-trainings/phd-candidates/phd-orientation-week/>

University of Galway

Postgraduate Research Students Orientation

<https://www.universityofgalway.ie/graduate-studies/currentstudents/postgraduateresearchstudentsorientation/>

University of Liege

“Let's start a PhD” seminar

https://www.recherche.uliege.be/cms/c_9191297/en/let-s-start-a-phd

Onboarding material

Goals

The goal of onboarding* material is to provide essential information in a way that is visible, well-structured, and communicated appropriately. Moreover, as a constantly available resource to support the activities of the onboarding process, it is sufficiently flexible to provide the relevant information at any time it might be needed.

Besides its informative function to ensure that all candidates* start on equal footing, the overarching aim of onboarding material is to clarify candidates' responsibilities and options, and so facilitate the alignment of expectations.

Definition

Onboarding material refers to a collection of information and resources the university provides to new doctoral candidates. These materials facilitate a successful start for doctoral studies, help new doctoral candidates become acquainted with the university's policies, procedures and culture, and clarify expectations and responsibilities in their new position.

Onboarding material gives doctoral candidates a general framework to start their studies successfully at their university, making sure that the candidate is able to plan and conduct their work in a grounded way.

Potential content and format

Onboarding material comes in different formats that correspond to the university structure and organisation of doctoral studies, as well as to subgroups of doctoral candidates. Around 60% of universities in the survey make their onboarding materials available in an online format. This material can include a web page for new candidates, a checklist and timeline for the first semester, orientation presentations or online onboarding modules, a survival guide, a handbook for candidates and/or supervisors*, and an individual plan* for doctoral studies.

The material should refer to the university's regulations, procedures, as well as customary practices, informing the candidate of the crucial milestones, documents, and deadlines of the onboarding period. It is advisable to include materials regarding the relationship with the supervisor(s), such as an expectation management template and an official agreement with supervisor(s), programme requirements, and evaluation criteria, as well as guidelines regarding employment if that applies to the institution.

Onboarding material often includes information on courses and/or training, focusing on the requirements and options for the first year. The material may suggest the appropriate training for the whole duration of doctoral studies, with a suggested timeline and skills framework to help with the planning process as well as self-reflection.

In addition, the onboarding material typically provides the relevant contact points, emailing lists and homepages in the university.

Risks and their potential solutions

The effectiveness of onboarding material can be hindered by several factors, including information overload, institutional changes, a lack of structure within and between different materials, and insufficient clarity.

New doctoral candidates and supervisors may struggle to find the material due to insufficient communication, or find it not helpful for the above-mentioned reasons.

Depending on the provider of the material it may be challenging to accommodate all needs, to ensure that the material remains updated, and that any revised editions are in use. Online material is easily updated, but can be difficult to find. Printed materials, on the other hand, entail greater expense and can become quickly outdated.

To ensure the material is useful for the doctoral candidate, an appropriate balance should be kept between general and faculty- or institute-specific information. The diverse subgroups of candidates (international and local, with and without a grant, stipend or employment contract, etc.) require specific approaches, and communication in an appropriate language.

Well-coordinated communication is critical. It needs to include material at every stage of the onboarding process (e.g. events, emails), to ensure that both central and faculty-based contact points provide the same information, to make the connections between different materials, and preferably to provide a single “entry point” that the candidate can access easily, revisit, and find all relevant information (including links).

Evaluation

One commonly utilised tool is a simple questionnaire that gathers feedback on participant satisfaction and the perceived usefulness of the material. It may be conducted separately or as part of an onboarding-related or general survey. To complement this approach, analysing homepage traffic and tracking downloads of the accompanying documents can offer valuable insights. This quantitative data can help verify the material's reach among the intended audience.

For refining and updating the material, internal communication and feedback, depending on individual situations (e.g. between the central support unit and academic units), is essential. The staff providing support for the candidates are well-versed in the daily inquiries and problems. They can provide insight into the usefulness of the material, as well as whether the candidates have obtained the information.

EXAMPLES

UCT Prague

Survival guide for doctoral candidates

<https://phd.vscht.cz/phd-students>

Aarhus University

Onboarding the PhD programme

<https://phd.nat.au.dk/for-phd-students/onboarding-the-phd-programme>

University College London

Doctoral journey

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/doctoral-school/doctoral-journey>

Individual plan

Goals

The individual plan* provides a structure and clear milestones for studies and training, research, and career development. Explicit study objectives and career perspectives can increase the candidate's* motivation and, as a result, lead to increased completion rates.

The individual plan enables continuous monitoring of progress and evaluation of the candidate's journey. It lays out the respective responsibilities of the candidate and the institution and helps align expectations for the doctoral journey or parts of it. In addition, a plan enables targeted participation in skills development training.

Definition

By individual plan, the working group intends the doctoral candidate's programme of activities for the duration of their doctoral studies. 82% of survey respondents mentioned a formalised individual plan.

An individual plan can have various titles, formats and goals in combination with the following aspects:

- an individual study and/or research plan, which covers the scientific curriculum the doctoral candidate will follow in agreement with their supervisor*;
- an individual development plan, which takes a larger perspective to include the future career path of the doctorate holder and, through an analysis of the current situation versus future goals, plots the course of professional development to be taken;
- an individual training plan is often part of a development plan and includes objectives for skills development;
- some universities have implemented an agreement as part of the onboarding procedure, e.g. supervision or dissertation agreement.

Individual plans differ from many of the other elements in this handbook, as they are focused entirely on the individual doctoral candidate and established in discussion with their supervisor or an appointed committee*.

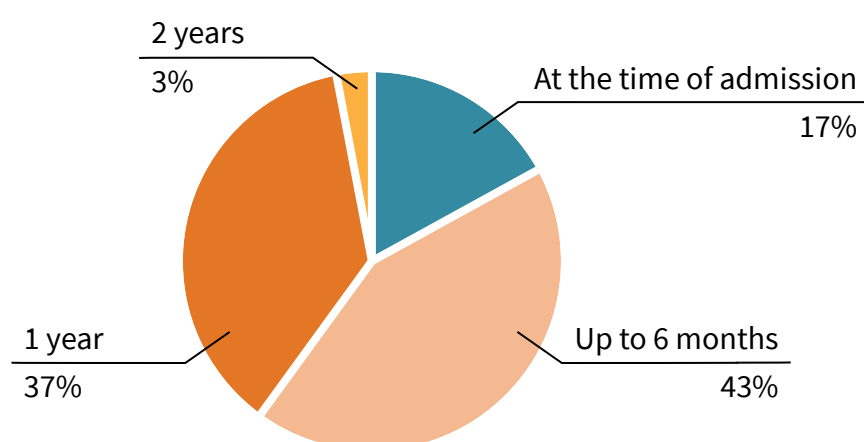


Figure 5. Deadlines for submitting the individual plan at 45 institutions (82% of survey respondents) with a formalised process in place.

Potential content and format

The practice and various forms of an individual plan depend on the particular, local structure of doctoral programmes, doctoral studies in general, admission* and recruitment procedures, and the candidate's evaluation procedures in place. It is also important to take into account whether the plan contains activities for the whole duration of the doctoral journey, or if it includes only some elements of the programme or a shorter period (e.g. one year). This will determine whether the plan is submitted only once or several times (e.g. annually) during the doctorate.

An individual plan may contain one or more of the following elements:

- milestones for research, training, and career development;
- timeline for seeking ethical approval from the institution to conduct research, e.g. qualitative studies using human subjects;
- an outline of the research project, with a plan for compiling data and writing the thesis;
- timeline for publications and preferred journals;
- participation in and presentations at professional events, e.g. conferences;
- teaching, supervising bachelor and master theses, gaining pedagogical competencies;
- review of need/wish to carry out off-site research, e.g. industrial partner, research collaborator's institution;
- dissemination and popularizing the doctoral research;
- identification of necessary tools and means with which to deliver the above, including funding, schedules, stays abroad, internships, collaborations with partners beyond academia, self-analysis for professional self-improvement, etc.;
- funding agencies to be targeted;
- principles for communication and meetings with different actors during the doctorate, such as supervisor(s), thesis advisory committee, mentors*, doctoral boards, etc.;
- impact assessment.

Risks and their potential solutions

While the individual plan can contribute to the successful planning of a doctorate and getting the most out of the available training and timely graduation, it also has several major risks.

From a purely academic perspective, the individual plan can be perceived as a purely bureaucratic assignment. Supervisors may not support the idea of careful research and study planning, and/or not feel qualified to help with career planning. The same applies to doctoral candidates, who may not perceive an individual plan to be helpful or manageable. Therefore, the objective of the individual plan and its benefit for the candidate should be clearly stated during onboarding*. The different functions and outcomes of compiling and following a plan may be a worthy topic for a separate session. In addition, the individual plan should be carefully designed to correspond to the programme, as well as supervision practices and evaluation procedures, with a goal of supporting, not overwhelming, those involved.

To mitigate risks, the objectives, milestones, guidelines and forms should be well planned, clear and explicit. During the onboarding process, an explanation of the goals and forms, as well as the procedure of creating, implementing and adapting an individual plan and its relation to evaluation processes, will all help to broaden the understanding of its benefit for the candidate. It can be helpful to provide reassurance to both supervisor and doctoral candidate that the doctoral

programme coordinator does not have an active, evaluative role in the individual plan. To pre-empt the potential for feelings of failure or of being overwhelmed when research goes awry, it is important to ensure that the doctoral candidate understands that any plan is better than none: that plans are intended to be adapted to the progress of research, or lack of it. The doctoral candidate's peers and administrative staff can provide a wider support structure.

Evaluation

The practice of an individual plan is best monitored through an evaluation procedure. Evaluation committees*, programme directors, doctoral candidates and other involved parties can provide relatively rapid feedback on how the format and respective regulations and guidelines work in practice. In the long term, managerial data such as graduation rates, percentage of drop-outs and the relationship to the number of candidates using the individual plan can be useful.

Questionnaires and exit polls can be mined for relevant data. For example:

- satisfaction of candidates with individual plan regulations: its form, functionalities, and its usefulness during the course of studies;
- satisfaction of candidates with the support for their studies in general: research, training and career development planning;
- alumni surveys on their preparedness for employment after graduation, and its connection to planning tools.

EXAMPLES

University of Tartu

Individual plan for research and studies

<https://ut.ee/en/planning-and-completing-doctoral-studies>

University of Jyväskylä

Doctoral study plan

<https://www.jyu.fi/en/for-students/instructions-for-doctoral-students/doctoral-studies/doctoral-study-plan>

University College Dublin

Research and Professional Development Planning

<https://www.ucd.ie/graduatestudies/researchstudenthub/trainingdevelopment/researchprofessionaldevelopmentplanning/>

Training programme

Goals

Doctoral programmes tend to be mainly research-oriented, with an emphasis on technical and discipline-specific skills and research abilities focusing mostly on skills used in academic careers (Hasgall & Peneoasu 2022).

The goal of an extensive training programme that provides doctoral candidates* with a set of topic-specific and transferable skills* is to support them on their academic journey (i.e. building resilience, improving scientific writing), contribute to the timely conclusion of the doctoral journey, foster their personal development, and promote a more comprehensive understanding of potential career paths (either academic or beyond) (Bogle & Maes 2014).

Especially when the training programmes are organised centrally, doctoral candidates have the further opportunity to meet and share knowledge, perspectives and experience with peers from other institutes or faculties.

Definition

Training programmes are composed of a variety of topics that reach from the research-specific and technical to more generic, or transversal, competencies. To foster inter-sectoral careers as well as to enhance effective and successful careers in all relevant sectors of the society (including academia, industry, public administration and non-profits) the European Commission created “ResearchComp: The European Competence Framework for Researchers”³. This framework includes seven competence areas – cognitive abilities, doing research, managing research, managing research tools, making an impact, working with others, and self-management – with 38 competencies that can be developed by all doctoral candidates regardless of their area of research.

Potential content and format

Around 65% of survey respondents provide training programmes for doctoral candidates in different ways and formats: some universities have introductory courses, some have separate training events for first-year doctoral candidates, or even for the whole lifecycle of doctoral studies. The form of delivery can vary: from in-person to online or hybrid, from workshops, seminars, lectures, and summer schools to an online module, etc. The most common topics, based on the survey results, are summarised in the chart below.

A training programme can be offered by different units of the university, depending on resources and topic, such as graduate centres, HR departments, doctoral schools* or research support units.

Some institutions grant credit points for the training programme. In some institutions, the training programme is integrated into study plans or curricula as an official requirement. In others, it is an elective and extracurricular activity, and understood to be part of individual career planning.

³ ResearchComp: The European Competence Framework for Researchers

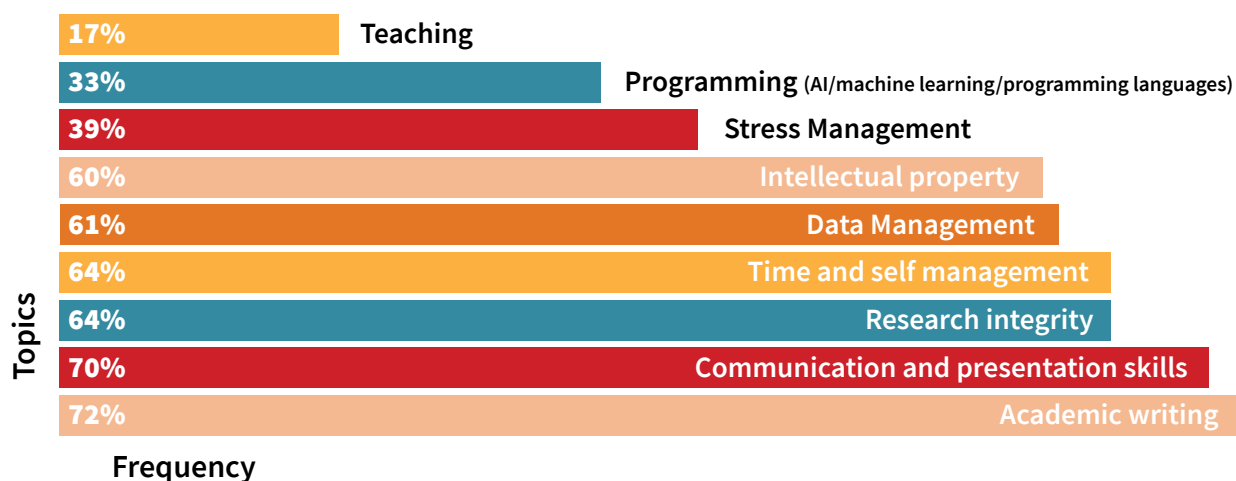


Figure 6. Potential content of training programme, based on survey results.

Risks and their potential solutions

The biggest challenge in designing a training programme for doctoral candidates is to ensure a well-balanced and (ideally) customized offer that meets the needs of the candidates and motivates them to participate.

Without a university-wide training programme, the risk of redundant training offers will increase the costs for the university, the work necessary to find available trainers, and create confusion within the researcher community. Coordination across different departments or doctoral schools can reduce costs, improve attendance by coordinating promotional efforts and combining different pools of candidates, and foster exchange and peer learning across the university.

Another risk is the design of a programme that does not correspond to real needs. To mitigate this risk, the ResearchComp framework mentioned above can be used as a starting point. A quality assessment process, based on surveys and/or focus groups, can ensure relevance of content, with feedback from candidates, supervisors, alumni and employers (FNRS 2022).

When a training programme is not part of the mandatory curriculum and attendance is voluntary, doctoral candidates may perceive it as a time-consuming additional workload. Clear communication needs to be given on the value of this “extra” work for professional development, and should be addressed to supervisors as much as to doctoral candidates.⁴

The use of external trainers in skills training programmes may lead to prohibitive costs. In such a situation, trainers may be sourced internally. Post-doctoral candidates or administrative staff based on their expertise can be a viable solution, although it may be necessary to provide additional train-the-trainers support. This strategy has the added value of bringing the doctoral candidates into contact with on-site experts, and facilitating potential follow-up. Internal trainers are able to connect the general topic to university-specific requirements and good practices (e.g., intellectual property or ethical approval procedures), which can be essential for a candidate’s research. Such an approach can also provide career development opportunities to the trainers.

⁴ For a review of the value of transferable skills training for doctoral holders, see Bitusikova & Borsekova 2020. <https://docenhance.eu/recommendations-for-integration-of-transferable-skills-training-in-phd-programmes/>

Evaluation

An anonymous feedback form can be used to evaluate individual training events and facilitators. Depending on how the training programme is organised, the evaluation can be implemented by the quality assurance unit of the university, or directly by the doctoral school. A standardised form allows the comparison of different trainers, or to monitor the same training event over time.

As mentioned above, continuous monitoring of the actual needs of doctoral candidates supports the customisation and regular adaptation of training offers. Surveys among alumni can be used to collect information about the use of competences acquired during the doctorate in their current position, and to identify other necessary skills that might be lacking. Additionally, monitoring developments in the job market can give insight on the necessary skills for prospective employees in different sectors, and on which skills need to be addressed as part of doctoral training.

EXAMPLES

University of Vienna

Trainings and workshops for doctoral researchers

<https://forschung.univie.ac.at/en/services/events-trainings/phd-candidates/trainings/>

Carlis Project

Intersectoral training guide

<https://carlis.saia.sk/en/main/main-outputs/intersectoral-training-guide/>

University of Lausanne

“Getting the thesis off to a good start” workshop

<https://unil.ch/graduatecampus/en/home/menuinst/ateliers/la-these-de-a-a-z.html#bien-demarrer-sa-these>

Buddy programme

Goals

Most importantly, a buddy* programme supports the rapid orientation of doctoral candidates* to their new campus and surroundings. It can provide support in resolving administrative issues at the beginning of the doctoral journey, and can be very important for social integration in the peer community. A buddy programme can help overcome invisible barriers by supporting networking and collaboration across the academic hierarchy. And last but far from least, the social integration facilitated by this type of support can prevent doctoral candidates from isolation and other stress factors.

Definition

A buddy programme pairs more experienced doctoral candidates – the “buddies” – with new doctoral candidates to help them find their way at the university and in the local area. Particularly valuable in the first few weeks, they can assist in practical matters, show interesting and important places, and answer questions about typical local customs or regulations. They also introduce the incoming doctoral candidate to the group of candidates in the same study programme or department, to facilitate social integration. This latter point is especially interesting, given recent focus on the high number of mental health issues among early career researchers (Mattijssen 2021, Wellcome 2020: 36–40).

Only 30% of survey respondents mentioned a buddy programme for doctoral candidates, organised either at central level, by the doctoral school(s)*, at the institute/faculty level, or a combination of them.

Potential content and format

The buddy programme is targeted to newcomers, often particularly to international candidates, and in some universities it includes bachelor and master students. The format usually involves one buddy paired with one newcomer, but in some cases one buddy is assigned to a small group of newcomers.

The buddies introduce newcomers especially to institutional and office etiquette, relevant locations and services (departmental kitchen, libraries, meeting rooms, sports facilities, (mental) health services), support services for administrative issues (doctoral studies requirements, residence permits, etc.), networking, peer community events, feedback questionnaires or interviews.

Some universities provide a structured programme with social events, workshops, feedback sessions and a clear timeline (varying from 3 months to 1 year), others offer the possibility to informally contact the buddy when needed.

Risks and their potential solutions

The buddy system is voluntary and individual, so the impact of the buddy's support depends on the buddy's personality, time capacity, etc. It is hard to secure a proper service for all new candidates across the whole institution due to a lack of buddies. It may be beneficial for the institution to set up some reward-based system for buddies, which typically includes either acquiring credit points or receiving university merchandise.

It is crucial to properly and clearly define the role of the buddy to minimise difficulties arising from the informal relationship nature of the programme. To perform well, the buddies need to be informed accurately (via websites, brochures, workshops, training, or supervision). A regular and engaging promotion of the buddy system may help attract new buddies from among experienced doctoral candidates.

Evaluation

For management purposes, it may be useful to track the number of buddies and the participants in the programme and other analytical/statistical data. A simple questionnaire to find out if the new doctoral candidates have everything they need and are satisfied with the programme would also be a valuable resource. Interviews with newcomers can be used for more detailed data and/or information on individual cases. Finally, a questionnaire can be used to get useful feedback from the buddies on their experience and the functionality of the programme.

EXAMPLES

University of Vienna

Faculty buddy programme

<https://wirtschaftswissenschaften.univie.ac.at/en/internationalsupport/buddy-programme/>

Charles University

Buddy programme

<https://cuni.cz/UKEN-1440.html>

University of Galway

Postgraduate Research Mentoring

<https://www.universityofgalway.ie/graduate-studies/currentstudents/postgraduateresearchmentoring/>

Mentoring programme

Goals

The goal of a mentoring programme for doctoral candidates* is to foster a nurturing and collaborative research environment and enhance the mentees' research skills, academic success, and overall professional development. Mentoring can bridge the gap between theory and practice, ensuring that emerging scholars are well-equipped to succeed in their chosen field.

Definition

A mentoring programme for doctoral candidates is a structured and supportive initiative designed to facilitate academic and professional growth. These programmes typically pair doctoral candidates with experienced faculty members or professionals based on their research interests, career goals, and areas of expertise. Mentors* are recruited from outside the supervisory team* to allow them to provide impartial advice to the candidate. Ideally, doctoral candidates will be paired at the outset of the doctoral programme to ensure that their mentors are available throughout the onboarding* process and beyond. Mentors offer valuable insights, share their knowledge, and help mentees navigate the challenges and complexities of their research journey.

Potential content and format

Mentoring of doctoral candidates is a multifaceted process that encompasses various essential elements. The main role of a mentor is the holistic personal and professional development of the mentee. To do this successfully, the pairing of mentor and mentee should be well considered and based on mutual interest.

Mentors play a key role in nurturing competencies, knowledge, attitudes, self-confidence, professional identity, and motivation. They can provide emotional support and practical help for doctoral candidates in navigating the challenges of doctoral research.

Through mentor-facilitated networking opportunities, doctoral candidates can expand their professional connections, ensuring that they benefit from more diverse experience and a broader support system that extends beyond their primary supervisor. Where mentors are private sector professionals, they can also serve as a crucial bridge to the non-academic sector, often acting as “gatekeepers” for future career opportunities.

Mentors foster cooperation, communication within the research institution, and, when necessary, can support conflict resolution. In this way, a robust mentoring programme serves as an invaluable resource for doctoral candidates, preparing them not only for academic success but also for a successful career trajectory.

Risks and their potential solutions

A mentoring programme is dependent on an adequate number of mentors available who can be suitably matched with individual doctoral candidates. It is worth noting that there can be a risk of overburdening female professors and mid-career faculty members with mentoring roles, due to both caretaker bias and well-intentioned efforts to support women in science. Balancing these roles equitably is crucial for fostering an inclusive and supportive academic environment.

Managing expectations on both sides is vital for a productive mentoring dynamic. Having very informal unstructured mentorship arrangements can lead to confusion on the role and responsibilities of the mentor and mentee, with the result of misunderstandings and misaligned objectives. To address this issue, providing well-structured mentor training programmes through workshops and resources will ensure clarity on selection criteria for effective mentors, and put emphasis on the necessity to establish clear roles and rules of engagement for the mentor and mentee.

Evaluation

The success of a mentoring programme for doctoral candidates can be objectively evaluated by examining:

- the number of mentors and mentees participating in the programme, as an indicator of both the interest in, and need for, such a programme within the academic institution;
- the frequency of mentor-mentee interactions, as a reflection of the depth and consistency of support provided.

However, for a more in-depth analysis, the following mechanisms can be used:

- a short feedback questionnaire, as an instrument to determine satisfaction levels among both mentors and mentees;
- a process to track the doctoral candidate's personal effectiveness and professional development over the course of the doctoral programme;
- career tracking surveys to determine the long-term impact of the mentoring programme, revealing how well it equips doctoral candidates for their future professional endeavours.

The use of a combination of all of these evaluation elements ensures that the programme remains dynamic and responsive to evolving needs.

EXAMPLES

UCT Prague

Mentoring

<https://pkc.vscht.cz/personal-development/mentoring>

University of Tartu

Mentoring programme

<https://ut.ee/en/mentoringprogramme>

University of Luxembourg

ADVANCE mentoring programme

<https://www.uni.lu/en/about/gender-equality/advance-mentoring-programme/>

Progress review

Goals

The progress review includes the monitoring and evaluation of both the structure and milestones of the doctoral journey (including objectives for the doctoral candidate*), and support for the candidate in their academic and personal development. It aims to increase the probability of on-time graduation and the effectiveness of doctoral studies.

The review is also an opportunity for doctoral candidates to self-evaluate and, depending on the evaluation procedure, receive feedback and suggestions from outside their supervisory team*. In the working group's observations, doctoral candidates report that a personal presentation of their progress can be rewarding and motivating. The format can also work well as a form of peer-to-peer review.

In addition to an assessment of the progress being made by the doctoral candidate, the progress review is an opportunity for the doctoral candidate and supervisor* to check in with each other (or with a third party) to ensure that working relationships are functional and effective for all. It can also serve as a 'smoke alarm' to highlight issues beyond everyday routine that need to be addressed.

Definition

A progress review is an evaluation procedure designed to check on a doctoral candidate's progress in research, studies and personal development. In most cases, it is a prerequisite to continue doctoral studies. Of all the elements presented in this handbook, the progress review is the most directly connected to the overall arch of the doctorate. It extends beyond the initial months, and acts to extend the benefits of an effective onboarding process into the successful completion of the doctorate and good preparation for the next career stage.

91% of survey respondents report having formalised the progress review and, together with the individual plan*, it is the most established onboarding element in European universities. In the majority of universities, evaluation takes place between six months and 1.5 years from the beginning of doctoral studies, and every year after that. In some universities, the progress review is understood as a mid-term evaluation, and takes place two years after the start of the doctorate.

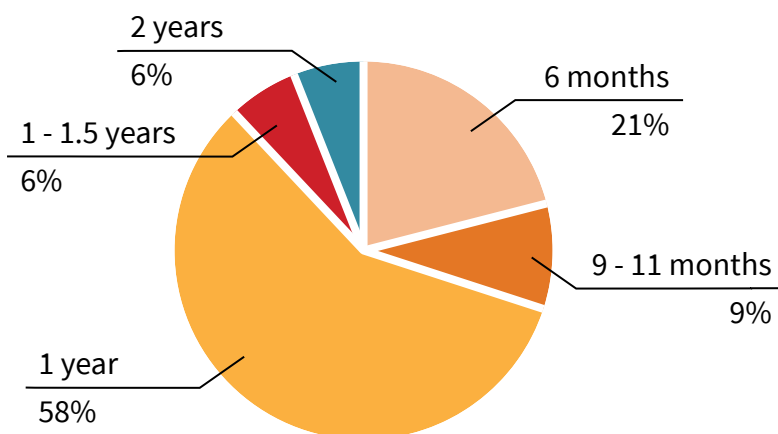


Figure 7. Deadline of the first progress review at 50 institutions (91% of survey respondents) with a formalised process in place.

Potential content and format

The progress review typically includes an official report and a meeting with the supervisory team or an assigned evaluation committee*. The evaluation procedure may focus only on the progress of the thesis, or more generally on the candidate's performance in fulfilling the conditions of the doctoral programme. It can follow different schedules depending on the university or faculty, and it may be an annual event. The progress review procedure can vary within the university, depending on departmental or faculty regulations. It will also vary in time and in alignment with the stage of the doctorate: in terms of the progress made to date, and for the goals to be set for the next phase.

Typically, the candidate is asked to submit a progress review report as a self-assessment or in collaboration with their supervisor. The report may include additional documents like articles or manuscripts. In some universities, a candidate's report must include a supervisor's assessment on their progress. Reporting is often managed through the university's digital system to track the progression of all doctoral candidates.

The progress review can be conducted as a closed meeting with the candidate and the assigned committee, or as an event open to other candidates. In some instances, the progress review is divided into a closed meeting to focus on performance and/or development, and an event where doctoral candidates of a specific unit present their research. In addition to study regulations, the process can be dependent on whether the doctoral candidate is an employee of the university, or only has a student status.

Contingency plans are a necessary part of the progress review, and provide room for unexpected delays in the research. They can be aligned with the planned project timeline defined at the outset of the doctorate, often as part of the individual plan.

Risks and their potential solutions

Unclear evaluation procedures or milestones for the doctoral candidate will hinder efficient preparation and planning. Conversely, an excessively rigid process may fail to accommodate the specifics of a research project and individual circumstances. Both scenarios can lead to the perception that the progress review is merely an administrative hurdle, with the result that this important milestone is given less priority than it deserves.

When insufficient priority is given to the progress review, several risks emerge:

- for doctoral candidates or supervisors, the risk of not receiving enough substantive feedback, or receiving no feedback at all;
- the process being seen as an administrative process with boxes to be ticked instead of concrete steps to be taken;
- a lack of agreement on the process from the outset.

To prevent these risks, it is critical to have clear evaluation procedures and milestones that align with the structure of the doctoral programme. These should be communicated as a support to the doctoral candidates and supervisors, rather than as mere bureaucratic steps.

A centralised check-in process may create concerns of confidentiality (for doctoral candidates) or intrusion on a privileged relationship (supervisor). At the same time, without a wider support

system and evaluation board, the candidate may become isolated when encountering difficulties with their supervisor or in advancing their study and research, as well as in their career preparation.

Evaluation

The quality and effectiveness of a progress review can be measured in several ways :

- doctoral candidates' satisfaction surveys, with a section on the progress review;
- oral feedback from the evaluating committees or supervisory team;
- degree of preparation or confidence when setbacks occur.

EXAMPLES

University of Ghent

Self-reflection report

<https://www.ugent.be/en/research/doctoralresearch/self-reflection-report.htm>

Trinity College Dublin

Postgraduate Research Students: Assessment and Progression

<https://www.tcd.ie/graduatestudies/students/research/assessment-and-progression/>

University of Lausanne

Annual thesis survey

<https://unil.ch/graduatecampus/en/home/menuinst/doctorantes/pendant/suivi-annuel.html>

Conclusion

The onboarding process for doctoral candidates plays a crucial role in facilitating a smooth and efficient start to their doctoral journey. The **welcome** and **induction phases**, separately or in combination, are the elements that, together with well-structured **onboarding material**, can set the stage for a successful start to the doctoral journey. Effective onboarding assists in orientation as candidates are equipped with essential information and resources at the outset, as well as feeling better integrated, as onboarding fosters a sense of belonging within the academic community. **Buddy** and **mentoring programmes** are useful additions to encourage integration at the beginning and, in the case of the mentoring programme, guidance throughout the doctorate and beyond. An **individual plan** and **progress review** provide a structure and clear milestones for studies, research, and career development, enabling continuous monitoring and evaluation of the candidate's progress. Harnessing the potential of the **training programme** from the perspective of onboarding can aid in the development of the transferable skills that are critical for success in the doctoral journey and beyond. By promoting active engagement and setting clear expectations for all stakeholders, the onboarding process not only enhances productivity (and quality of the doctoral outputs) but can also serve to mitigate dropout rates and maintain optimal mental well-being. Ultimately, a well-structured onboarding process can contribute significantly to the timely completion of the doctorate, ensuring that candidates are well-prepared and supported throughout their academic path.

This handbook targets administrative staff who support doctoral education and researcher development. It provides them with flexible guidelines and suggestions for implementing and evaluating onboarding practices, with the adaptability necessary to meet the specific needs and contexts of different institutions.

The onboarding process varies in phases, initiatives, resources and duration, as discussed in the specific sections of the onboarding elements. Readers are encouraged to choose, implement and further develop aspects of the handbook that align with their institution's unique needs and context. As the survey results highlight, effective coordination between central support services and faculty-specific services is essential in order to implement a successful onboarding process.

Furthermore, the handbook acknowledges the diverse profiles of doctoral candidates: international and local, full- and part-time, employed or not, and with varying funding arrangements; and with that, underscores the importance of providing a tailored approach to meet the specific needs of each group. This includes clear communication, appropriate language use, accessible information channels and diversified materials, consistent messaging across central and faculty-based contact points, as well as initiatives in different formats and timings. By acknowledging this diversity, institutions can contribute to a research culture based on inclusivity and accessibility.

Evaluation procedures of the impact of an onboarding process (effects, satisfaction) involve feedback from evaluation committees, programme directors, supervisors, doctoral candidates, alumni and other stakeholders. They assess the effectiveness of the onboarding initiatives, with long-term data analysis for continuous improvement. The creation of such a feedback loop is important for refining and updating the materials, as well as adjusting the initiatives to meet the evolving needs of doctoral candidates and supervisors. By continuously evaluating and adapting onboarding processes based on feedback and best practice, institutions can create a supportive research culture where doctoral candidates thrive in their academic journey.

As stated in the introduction, the working group’s goal extends beyond the pages of this handbook. We aim to cultivate and elaborate the topic in a broader context. With this in mind, we invite all readers to join a vibrant community of higher education experts to exchange insights, share their own experiences, and be inspired by others. We encourage active participation through our call for pilot projects and successful examples (see the [call for contributions](#)).

This collaborative endeavour aims to foster the implementation of innovative onboarding strategies, such as the recently piloted adaptation plan* exemplified by UCT Prague. We strongly encourage all readers to enrich our evolving catalogue of good practices by sharing their successes and lessons learned.

Finally, the authors gratefully acknowledge the invaluable support of the PRIDE “Professionals in Doctoral Education” Network, which not only provided the essential context for the creation of this working group but also consistently motivated and promoted our efforts, contributing significantly to the dissemination of our results.

Case study: UCT Prague

The University of Chemistry and Technology, Prague (UCT Prague) initiated an extensive renewal of their onboarding process as a direct result of the research done by the PRIDE working group. As such, it is an excellent example of how an institution can evaluate their existing onboarding processes, map expectations and needs, as well as to develop an onboarding process that is adapted to context, using elements presented in this handbook.

As a first step in the development of a revised onboarding process, UCT Prague conducted a survey among doctoral candidates and staff on their experience of onboarding. The survey collected recommendations and assessed openness to implementing new practices, and was supplemented by interviews with doctoral candidates. The data and subsequent analysis helped to inform the elements of the process, including onboarding materials and events. In parallel with this internal survey, interviews were conducted with HR representatives in private companies in the Czech Republic.

This parallel analysis gave insight into alternative practices and strategies of successful onboarding, and enabled a suitable adjustment to the academic context. The outcome was the creation of an adaptation plan (a form of the individual plan element outlined in this guide).

An adaptation plan* is a comprehensive document for the supervisor and doctoral candidate, which includes some of the onboarding checklists and information, as well as suggestions for three types of conversation: onboarding interview, ongoing interviews and an annual interview.

The pilot phase was initiated in the fall of 2023 and will be finalized in the fall of 2024. See the case study on PRIDE [onboarding homepage](#).

Glossary

Adaptation plan: A systematic and personalised strategy designed to facilitate the seamless integration and transition of new doctoral candidates into a research programme or academic institution. This plan addresses the unique needs, expectations, and challenges faced by doctoral candidates as they embark on their research journey.

Admission: The process of enrolling doctoral candidates in the university after verifying their compliance with university requirements that can vary across countries and disciplines (e.g. previous academic degrees, qualifying exam or interview, research proposal) (Haggall et al 2019: 25–26). For the purpose of this handbook, admission is considered to be the start of the onboarding process. For the purpose of organising an onboarding process, it is relevant to consider if the candidates are admitted at the same time or start at various times throughout the year. Secondly, onboarding differs for candidates who have student status and for those who are (additionally) recruited as employees of the university.

Buddy: Buddies are more advanced doctoral candidates at the university who guide incoming doctoral candidates (often international) to familiarise with the university and the local area. Especially at the beginning, they assist in practical matters, introduce the new doctoral candidates to the local customs, and facilitate their integration within the community. Buddy programmes also exist at undergraduate level, and in some cases are not restricted by the type of study at all.

Doctoral candidate: The status of doctoral candidates as well as preferred terminology is based on state legislation and ongoing practice at the given institution. In accordance with recognized European networks and platforms (such as EUA-CDE, Eurodoc), we argue that doctoral candidates should not be defined by the term “students” as they perform a role of early-career researchers and should be recognized as such with adequate support from the institution. Therefore, the brochure purposely uses the term “doctoral candidate”. Furthermore, this term includes different types of doctoral studies, such as the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) or the Doctor Artium.

Doctoral school: This widely used term has various forms, both in terms of mission and in its position within the organisational structure of a university. The wide variation in use and meaning can lead to confusion when it comes to comparing the best practices. Based on the conducted survey, there is no correlation between the size of the university (number of doctoral candidates) and the form or agenda of the doctoral school. State legislation and national university practices tend to play a more important influence on the matter. As it is understood in this document, the main agenda of a doctoral school is to support doctoral candidates by providing transversal training. That said, some have an administrative role in terms of enrollment and study agenda, and in some cases there is also responsibility for recruitment. Doctoral schools organised at the level of study programme(s) or faculty units tend to play a more significant role in administrative affairs, as opposed to doctoral schools based on a research field or central unit of the university, where research and funding topics are more emphasised. In either case, the target group of activities are doctoral candidates: only a minority of respondents in the survey explicitly stated that their doctoral school aims to enhance the performance of supervisors, though most of the doctoral schools work in collaboration with them to support the doctoral candidates. Ca. 82% of survey respondents have a doctoral school, and an additional 9% had a differently designated support unit (e.g. graduate study office).

Individual plan: A programme of a doctoral candidate's activities, typically for the duration of their doctoral journey. It varies in detail and format in accordance with national legislation and university regulations. Based on concrete practice, properly detailed and well formalised individual plans can provide clear expectations for all stakeholders and have preventive effects. The individual plan may be accompanied by other supportive practices (e.g. memorandum of cooperation between supervisor and doctoral candidate).

Mentor: A mentor is an expert in the field who can share their professional experience with their mentee to help them gain a better understanding of the field and who can provide guidance to the professional development of the mentee. The mentor can be based at the same institution, or in an external organisation, depending on the needs of the mentee and on the structure of the programme.

Onboarding: In this handbook, onboarding refers to activities and information provided during the initial phase of the doctoral journey. Commencing from the moment of admission, often marked by an in-person matriculation, it involves incorporating milestones at various intervals. It is essential to recognise onboarding as an ongoing process, with its impact extending beyond the doctorate. Arguably, onboarding could be defined as starting from before the admission, with the application or even earlier, e.g. learning about doctoral studies at introductory events for Masters students. Based on responses to the survey, there are differences in understanding as to where the process of onboarding should end: one perspective considers the process as a set of initial introduction activities conducted in various forms (like welcome days, welcome packages, short-term courses, etc.); others mark the end of a successful process by the first assessment of doctoral candidates. This milestone can be used as optional feedback for the provided activities. The onboarding process and its aims are directly linked to offboarding, i.e. the last part of the doctoral journey. Successful onboarding contributes to a well-thought-out plan for the whole duration of doctoral studies, and thereby to a timely graduation, as well as giving a strong basis for career planning.

Supervisor: The supervisor is responsible for providing guidance and resources for the implementation of the research project and supporting the progress of the candidate according to the programme requirements. Guidance is achieved through transparent communication and consistent expectation management, to ensure that the doctoral candidate can develop ownership of the research project and acquire the necessary skills to conduct it successfully.

Supervisory team / evaluation committee: The supervisory team or evaluation committee is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the progress of the research project, the professional development of the doctoral candidate, and the supervisory relationship, providing advice and support to the doctoral candidate and the supervisor.

Transferable skills: Skills learned in one context (in this case doctoral research) that are useful in another (for example, future employment, whether in research, business, etc.). They can serve as a bridge from study to work and from one career to another, as they enable subject and research related skills to be applied and effectively developed in different work environments (Weber et al 2018).

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