

## **Crisis as opportunity**

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During a global pandemic when business school leaders are preoccupied with virtual learning, budgets, and student bubbles, where do doctoral programmes feature on the list of priorities? Ask **Julie Davies, Nicola Palmer, Elena Braccia, Karen Clegg** and **Mark Smith**

# Crisis as opportunity

**F**ar from being the Cinderella of business schools, we believe that doctoral researchers are key to knowledge production and advancing the business and management education field. Yet because of their relatively small size, doctoral programmes may have been overlooked in the current crises.

In order to network and share insights into how we are continuing to ensure high standards in doctoral education within the business school portfolio during the COVID-19 crisis, we launched the first in a series of EFMD webinars specifically focusing on doctoral programmes in business schools. These webinars aim to support the community of academics and professional service staff who are working in doctoral education in the business and management field.

Based on discussions from the first webinar, we draw on multiple perspectives. These range from engaging current students at different stages of their doctoral journeys to facilitating peer support and promoting regular and meaningful two-way communications. This is to sustain a vibrant research community virtually, positive well-being, and student progression. We also consider support for (new) faculty, the need to revisit research designs, adapting research training, programme content, and remote vivas. At the same time, we need to be conscious of the importance of ensuring continuity and of taking personal circumstances into consideration. This includes issues of different types of students and potential inequities. Additionally, we reflect on inductions for new doctoral students and the importance of record-keeping.

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### Overview

Ten years ago, in *Global Focus*, Sue Newell discussed a doctoral programme for the twenty-first century that combines the best of American and European approaches. A decade later, we reflect more broadly on how to support business school doctoral programmes in the quite different context of a global pandemic. Often in a crisis, communications and decisions are centralised to ensure clarity and agility, as well as consistency and fairness to reduce anxieties and alleviate immediate problems.

Our discussions of doctoral programmes at EFMD's first doctoral programmes webinar during the crisis underlined the importance of providing a general framework that is communicated centrally. This is important so that students and their supervisors can continue in a safe and sustainable way and to avoid mixed messaging at different levels. At the same time, there is a need for a case-by-case, individualised approach to supporting key stakeholders on doctoral programmes. This is important if we wish to retain current students and help them graduate as well as to ensure a healthy pipeline of new students and vibrant research cultures. In addition, we consider crisis leadership in terms of future strategies.



First, we highlight the emergency response phase, the immediate practical and methodological challenges faced by doctoral students, faculty, and managers in business and management schools arising from COVID-19. Second, we note university-wide responses which support doctoral programmes and specific initiatives in business schools with examples from different countries. Third, we discuss future challenges post-lockdown as various vaccines are rolled out in a context of an unprecedented financial crisis and protests about social inequalities. In summarising the results of the first webinar, we emphasise the nine Rs of robust doctoral programmes. Finally, we highlight positive initiatives that have arisen from the crisis that we see as opportunities to sustain as we look forward to recovery.

### Doctoral distress

While some doctoral students may be powering ahead, writing up their dissertations from home with occasional Zoom calls to keep in touch, others are distressed and distracted by disrupted plans. For example, international students (and faculty members) may be suffering in isolation far from home, worried about expiring visas and how they will find flights to travel back to their families. Some students may be uncertain

about their finances with the loss of paid work and about their future career prospects. Others may be in multiple-occupancy households with anxieties about mental health and well-being. Clearly, some will face difficulties in accessing technology and reliable internet connections, and finding an appropriate space to work. Furthermore, the generational profile of doctoral students means that some face the challenges of additional care duties, home schooling, or maintaining a career.

International students who have returned to their home country may be worried about operating in different time zones from their supervisors and respondents. Some worry about lost opportunities to practise another language in their host university in person. Depending on the stage of their doctoral journey, there may be real concerns about students' access to fieldwork, for example ethnographic studies. Postponed conferences and placement opportunities, lack of access to respondents who have been furloughed, fired, or who are too busy to participate in data collection are further considerations. There are also issues for research-funded projects which do not permit time extensions or have no additional funding to support completion. Students at the end of their doctorates may be worried about their doctoral examination, virtual vivas, and career prospects.



## 2k+

The Postgraduate Research Student Liaison Officer at the University of York (UK) continued to represent and liaise with the institution's 2000+ research students and shifted the tone of a session on "how to survive your PhD programme" to focus on how to 'thrive'



*At Sheffield Hallam University (UK), the introduction of a Virtual Café scheme and 'Focus Thursday' online study group recognised the threat of loneliness to a population of students who are already at risk from a mental health and wellbeing crisis*

### Immediate responses

In reflecting on doctoral programmes in business schools, we first consider the hygiene factors and hierarchy of students' individual needs (to draw on Herzberg and Maslow) that were vital in ensuring continuity during the outbreak of the pandemic. For professional service staff in business schools, the initial priority was to be to account for all doctoral students – especially those from overseas. They needed to document the students' physical locations, their well-being, and completion plans. They also checked to ensure supervisors were in touch to consider any issues of hardship or requests for extension of registrations. The next phase led to processes for keeping in touch regularly to ensure that students kept on track, with some institutions giving automatic three- to six-month extensions on request. Adequate record-keeping was a way to ensure no student was missed and that a duty of care was maintained for all students and project funders. Universities sought to ensure students had access to peers in online communities and that student services such as mental health support were readily available.

A further distinct phase was the continuation of virtual doctoral training and community solidarity to sustain momentum. For example, the Postgraduate Research (PGR) Student Liaison Officer at the University of York (UK) continued to represent and liaise with the institution's 2000+ research students and shifted the tone of a session on "how to survive your PhD programme" to focus on how to 'thrive'. The programme's peer-run sessions, now run online with input from existing PGRs and alumni, are recognised as providing a lifeline alongside the Graduate Student Association's "Smash Isolation" campaign. York's European Doctoral Summer School which should have taken place in Maastricht over four days with a handful of exceptional

students is now being run online and is open to 180+ people.

Elsewhere, at Sheffield Hallam University (UK), the introduction of a Virtual Café scheme and 'Focus Thursday' online study group recognised the threat of loneliness to a population of students who are already at risk from a mental health and wellbeing crisis. At the University of Nottingham (UK), training and development has focused on sharing experiences and coping strategies. COVID-19 blogs have been posted online for postgraduate researchers to develop a sense of community with advice on adjusting to the impacts of the crisis both personally and for their research.

The current situation has demonstrated an appetite for inter-institutional collaborations with invitations to research seminars (delivered as free webinars) offered more widely. Five years after the publication of Vitae's (2015) "Who Shares Wins" paper, restrictions on face-to-face activities, events and resources within institutions have enabled the seeds of a new model of doctoral training to emerge. Equally, some of the accessibility challenges to doctoral student mobility are now viewed more sympathetically, alongside the relaxation of rules around spending of research funds. Meanwhile carbon footprints have been reduced overnight.

For the most part, doctoral students in business and management studies do not usually require access to physical laboratories, especially if they are writing and have collected their data, and are able to work remotely. If their research respondents are too busy to complete questionnaires or interviews, students may be encouraged, for example, to revisit their literature review or to call research participants and collect data individually, or alternatively to use publicly available datasets.

# 180+

York's European Doctoral Summer School which should have taken place in Maastricht over four days with a handful of exceptional students is now being run online and is open to 180+ people

## Ongoing challenges

On the other side of lockdown, employability challenges in the context of an unprecedented financial crisis will need particular attention. The diversity of postgraduate research students in business schools has always meant that there has been a need to support the career aspirations of full- and part-time researchers, young and mature, alongside acknowledging the executive job pressures faced by DBA students. Employability pathways are unclear yet there remains a need to support our students as they navigate an uncertain economic future.

On a more positive note, the pandemic context allows for the emergence of new online competences. By training doctoral students to present online, we enable them to differentiate themselves positively to potential employers. Grenoble Ecole de Management (France) moved quickly to a system of on-line vivas for doctoral students to both support progression and equip students for online job interviews. Meanwhile the students' experiences in supporting the school's pedagogy as *animateurs* in on-line environments allowed them to demonstrate their competences for new pedagogical challenges.

At the other end of the doctoral education pipeline, communicating messages to prospective students and committing to building a community around them remains a key challenge. The need to build relationships and trust across postgraduate research supervision remains a priority. Buddying and peer support are essential for their successful integration.

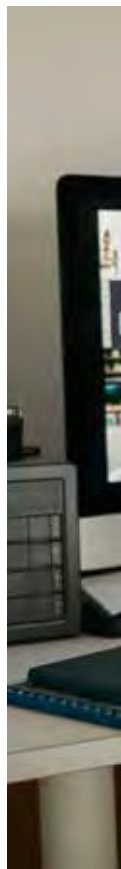
At the Stockholm School of Economics (Sweden), where neither nation and institution were locked down, the challenge of managing periods of quarantine for incoming international students required planning for arrivals ahead of formal induction schedules. Pre-departure and welcome meetings were identified as crucial to ensure connectivity and avoid attrition. It has been vital to communicate where the key points of contact are available on and off campus.

## New norms going forward

Concerns over returning to campus will remain during 2021 and there is a need to reassure new and progressing postgraduate research students across all business schools. Doing so requires reflection on our traditional behaviours and practices and the adoption of new norms going forward.

We recommend nine Rs:

- 1. (Re)set** clear goals and expectations and check in on these frequently to support productivity and motivation, e.g. using SkillsForge ([skillsforge.com](https://skillsforge.com)), an online student progress tracker.
- 2. Rapport** – it is vital to maintain the momentum of supervisory meetings in order to support the redesign of research and/or plans accordingly.
- 3. Research skills**, continue learning and developing a broad skill set for employability. In consultation with students and faculty, sustain research training, webinars, events, e.g. explaining your thesis in three minutes. Some amazing free webinars have been available during the pandemic alongside careers support as well as virtual writing retreats.
- 4. Regular reminders** of available institutional support to encourage student solidarity, reduce stress, support mental and physical health, exercise and keeping in touch. Centralised policies and support can reduce the burden on supervisors as frontline contacts for doctoral students so that they can concentrate on individual support for their students.
- 5. Routines** that encourage motivation and progression including designated workspaces, using productivity tools such as the Pomodoro technique, writing groups and virtual retreats.
- 6. Record keeping** – note evidence of how COVID-19 has affected research productivity as this may require additional funding or time extensions.
- 7. R&R** – rest and recovery, self-care, and small acts of kindness for students and supervisors.
- 8. Recognition** – celebrate small wins, sustain a positive attitude, and sense of gratitude.
- 9. Resilience** – reflect on how students can demonstrate evidence for future employers of their progress on their doctorates and their perseverance under difficult circumstances.







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## Conclusion

We are hopeful that new ways of working and collaborating within business school doctoral communities will continue to provide inspiration as we move towards realising intentions for more blended offerings in doctoral education. New technologies have brought us closer together at a distance. We are optimistic that in the context of the multiple public health, economic, social and climate challenges, doctoral education will remain a key priority in business schools.

Only time will tell whether there will be an increase in applications to business school doctoral programmes due to the economic downturn. Despite challenges of doubts about the value of a doctoral degree, international travel restrictions, and funding constraints, doctoral degrees remain a vital part of the business school portfolio.

With the doctoral education community, we look forward to interacting with colleagues at future webinars in the EFMD doctoral programmes series.

### The EFMD Doctoral Community conference

The EFMD Doctoral Community conference will be online from May 10-12 hosted by the Vienna University of Economics and Business:

<https://events.efmdglobal.org/events/2021-efmddoctoral-programmes-conference/>

The event will feature speakers who are doctoral programme directors and managers, central university executives, and representatives from the EUA Council for Doctoral Education, ETS Global and FindAPhd.

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