Future Academy®'s Multidisciplinary Conference

# A Study of the Motives of Doctoral Students

Adriana Wiegerová[a]*

*[a]Department of School Education, Faculty of Humanities, Tomas Bata University in Zlín (Czech Republic)*

**Abstract**

The aim of the study is to find answers to the question of why young people decide to continue studying at the postgraduate level after completing their master's programme. At the heart of the study is the analysis of the motives which lead young, qualified persons that could take up employment, to become doctoral students.

Motivation for doing something is commonly referred to as a set of internal and external factors that influence the decisions or behaviours. Motivation changes at different points of time and in different situations. In this project we assessed the motives to become a doctoral student through the memories of PhD graduates. A qualitative analysis concentrated on the narration of 10 doctoral graduates who are currently working as instructors at Czech universities. All of them specialized in the field of educational studies and worked at a university for a maximum of five years after completion of doctoral studies. They were hired for the position of academic staff member, not for the position of postdoctoral fellow.

## 1. Introduction

Being an academic worker is not currently considered as a prestigious profession. Working in research and passing on new knowledge to others is not the desire of young people. However, working at a university is the

---

* Corresponding author. Tel.: + 420 576 037 430
  *E-mail address:* wiegerova@fhs.utb.cz

meaning of life for a group of people who allowed me to share their feelings during their career path and to show what this choice meant, what difficulties this choice caused in their case and what joy it has brought them.

The completion of academic training is related to doctoral studies. This is a study programme that is accredited and has certain subjects prescribed, but also obligations that the candidate must pass. Doctoral studies are completed by defence of a doctoral dissertation, which precedes the Ph.D. exam. Postgraduate studies have a freer composition of study subjects than for example master's degree programmes. This is natural because the preparation of the doctoral candidate should be primarily focused on the acquisition of research skills and this is also related to Ph.D. student profiling. It automatically envisages that the study will not be very structured, although this doesn't mean that there aren't clearly defined rules.

Doctoral studies are the third level of university education and with their focus and content they should teach students to orientate in research, methodology and strategies of scientific work. In terms of the subject of its research, each discipline has specific characteristics that predispose its methodological focus. This is also true in the field of educational research. Educational research is unique in that it is aimed at the systematic description, analysis and clarification of the phenomena of the educational reality from which the existence of different methods and approaches follow. It focuses on people and their possibilities and limits of the development of educational postulates.

The rules set out by universities in the preparation of doctoral students vary in individual study programmes. Differences are provided by the specificities of the university, respectively the faculty in which the degree programme is created. To obtain a doctoral programme is a prestigious matter for individual university departments. Accreditation for doctoral studies means for the university:

- increasing of the professional reputation of the workplace (a workplace, which has accredited doctoral programmes, has higher credit in the Czech Republic),

- obtaining of a higher level of financial remuneration of the workplace (inter alia, the quality of the university is evaluated by the number of doctoral students who have successfully graduated),

- the possibility of obtaining grant projects and portfolios (opportunities for the involvement of Ph.D. students in grant projects are generous in the Czech Republic),

- improving of publishing activity of the workplace,

- improving of teaching process,
- the existence of generational discourses that contribute to the professional status of the workplace.

In recent years, there has been an emphasis on improving the quality of doctoral studies in the programme Pedagogy. The Accreditation Commission of the Government is paying attention to scientific training concept, personnel background, research activity of the guaranteeing workplace, the quality of the publishing activity of guarantors and tutors, as well as the quality of the defended doctoral theses. (J. Mareš, 2013a)

Available statistics in the Czech Republic reported that the number of Ph.D. graduates in the programme Pedagogy has been declining in recent years. On the one hand it can be inferred that this phenomenon was caused by stricter inspection activity, but on the other hand it is also possible to talk about the disinterest in the third level of university study, which is losing its prestigious position in the society. It often happens that in practice, graduates of the first or second level of university study get more lucrative work positions.

There are several reasons why this is so:

1. The prestige of science and research is rather marginalized in contemporary society. There are also internal mechanisms of tension in scientific disciplines. One type of quality assessments is related to natural sciences, another to social science fields of research. Science and technology-oriented research is more in the foreground, it has a significant impact on the activities of enterprises and thus the public economy. Social science research does not seemingly bring new patents, new production processes and so on.

2. For employers, a graduate of doctoral studies is more expensive to employ than a graduate of bachelor or master studies. Moreover, this graduate has no experience, but in terms of age, he/she requires attention because he/she has certain demands and expectations. Communication with a worker who has higher qualifications is also changing. It is more demanding.

Graduates of master's or bachelor's degree more often decide to go into practice, it has the following benefits for them:

- a chance to gain work experience quickly,
- the possibility to start a family early and be able to provide for it ,
- the possibility to help one's parents (especially financially, which is a common phenomenon in the Czech Republic already during undergraduate studies),
- the freedom to control their own education (student´s life is no longer controlled by the exams and study requirements ,
- freedom in regulation of their free time.

The decision to begin doctoral studies (relating to the above) is not a trivial choice. Evaluating and analyzing what leads master's degree graduate to begin doctoral studies, is therefore difficult. There can be many motives. However, can we consider doctoral studies a lucrative option for a young person in contemporary society? And if he/she decides so, what leads him/her to this decision? These questions and the answers to them are the focus of this study.

## 2. Research methodology

As mentioned above, the research that we present, was realized with a group of ten doctoral graduates who found themselves in the position of academic worker at a Czech university. In our research, we identify them as academic workers at the university. All are profiled in the field of pedagogical research and they have worked at the university for a maximum of five years after the completion of doctoral studies. They have been admitted for the position of an academic worker, not a postdoctoral student position. Their job description therefore includes teaching, as they are in the position of university teachers. On the other hand, they should be actively involved in research projects, respectively they should initiate and create research projects themselves and their publishing activities should be extensive. This means that their work in the pedagogical field should be known and they should gradually profile in the field which they will present.

The basic research method that was used in the study was the *in-depth biographical interview*. Such interviews are:

- time-consuming,
- demanding on knowledge of the situation, in which the research participants exist,
- demanding on the formulation of questions that the researcher asks (there are not key issues, everything is important),
- demanding on the environment of conversation.

Thanks to this it is possible to obtain:

- deeper, more specific information,
- more precise data,
- intensive work with research participants (it is possible "to get more under the skin").

Research participants talked about their experiences, the situations which they experienced after graduation from doctoral studies as well as what they felt and feel. Two questions were the same in every interview, the first and the last one. The first was directed to capture memories of doctoral studies and the last was aimed at the assessment of the interview by the participants themselves. Each interview lasted about an hour, a sort of enter and exit into the

interview was held with each participant and it had an informal character (it was not recorded on a dictaphone), but its role in the research has its important place. This period lasted for another half an hour. The entry into any conversation is always associated with the introduction of why we are going to talk. This was also the case here. Initially, we addressed twelve potential research participants. Two decided not to engage in the research right after the entry interview. The next phase was to obtain the consent of the person who entrusts you with personal observations, opinions and describes a "piece" of his/her life. The exit from the interview is also an important part. The emotions fade away from each interview and it is necessary to let them settle.

After the realization of interviews a phase of transcripts and encoding followed. Custom analysis was processed on the principle of grounded theory, which means that we were looking for semantic categories to the individual elements of statements that were subsequently attributed to the category of a higher order. It was therefore an open coding. Data analysis in qualitative research was brilliantly described by the Finnish authors K. Backman, Y. Kyngas (1999, p. 149) as follows: "Data analysis recalls the discussion between items of data, emerging theory and the written notes of researcher and for researchers. The discussion is carried out in such a way that the data is deconstructed, conceptualized and assembled again in a new way. Codes and categories that are combinations of codes are generated from the data. The categories and assumptions derived from them are verified by the data, so that the individual categories compare with each other, with the data and the conclusions of the researcher."

*Collegial coding* was an important part of our research. It was one of the possible methods of the triangulation of the obtained data to ensure the validity of research. Collegial coding was carried out so that the first two interviews after overwriting were coded by two people simultaneously. The method of the describing and naming of the codes was compared in this process. Collegial encoding is time-consuming, but it is also demanding on the mutual cooperation of the people who are coding. Mostly two participants of such a model of coding get into situations where it is necessary to seek answers, to debate about and to name the phenomena that are monitored in the data. But the researcher gains certainty during this process that the phenomena that they perceive in the data subjectively, is seen by another expert, whose opinion is relevant in the present study.

## 3. Research findings

The motivation is commonly referred to as a set of internal and external factors that influence our decision or behaviour. Motivation changes at different times and situations, the observation of motives to become a Ph.D. student is captured through the memories of Ph.D. graduates in this part of the work.

The motivation to be/become a Ph.D. student is influenced by two essential factors:

a) **macrosocial** - such as employment,  the current labour market, social climate

b) **microsocial** - presented by the work of the university, faculty, experience which a young person acquires during his/her master's degree, inner maturation and one's own conviction

For example the second, microsocial, factor is preferred more for the motivation to become a teacher (see more Wiegerová, Gavora, 2014), both factors are in balance for the motivation to become a doctoral student. Their close links can be monitored. This phenomenon is confirmed by the study of J. Šturzová (2006).

The study found that the factors that influence the motivation of students for doctoral studies include:
- the development of their own education,
- the possibility of a professional career,
- obtaining a job, employment,
- a reasonable salary for people without experience.

Unlike the decision to become a teacher, where altruistic reasons are obvious (Bruinsma, Jansen, 2010), there are also material motives in the choice of doctoral studies.

*"At least the certainty of a minimum income in the form of scholarships was the reason for the selecting of doctoral studies in case that I don't find a job. In the end, I didn't even look for a job."*

**Motives to become a Ph.D. student** can be divided into two large groups. Sub-groups can be identified in each of them.

1. **External:**
   a) the fulfilment of someone else's ideas,
   b) role model influence,
   **c)** obtaining of financial income for people without experience.

2. **Internal:**
   a) desire to become a researcher,
   b) desire to be good in the chosen field,
   c) desire to get to the university,
   d) desire to extend the student life.

**Universities** also play an important role in the choice of the future doctoral student. So-called talented students (in this case talent is quite an exaggerated term, but it is used in the usual rhetoric of the university environment) are sought after for individual workplaces already during master's degree studies.

However, **family** and one's own **beliefs** and ambitions of the future doctoral student also play an important role in accession to doctoral studies.

*3.1. University as a source of inspiration for the decision to be a doctoral student*

Nowadays, universities are so to speak pushed to get clever candidates for doctoral studies. Recruitment and persuasion, of course, are happening even in entrance examinations at lower levels of studies, but in the case of doctoral programmes each university should select the best students.

*"So the motivation, the primary one, came from the leadership of the university when I got such a stimulus, whether I wanted to continue studying, and whether I would start working here. So that was the initial motivation."*

It's always good if they are students who were educated by the respective faculty and on whom the faculty could theoretically count as their future employees. . In addition to the obtaining of high-quality doctoral students, the obtaining of funds, which strengthen the economic position of faculties and universities, are also an important motivation for the university. Having Ph.D. students also means the obtaining of social status for the university in the scientific community.

For the decision to become a doctoral student from the student´s perspective, it is important how cooperation between students and the faculty works, how students feel in school. Students sensitively perceive and judge how the university ensures conditions for its employees and how it supports their personal fulfilment.

Also working motivation can be viewed as motivational disposition to work activity. J. Růžička (1992) describes the role of the so-called motivational profile as a relatively permanent preference. According to this, it is important that a young person interconnects his/her own needs, characteristics and feelings with an environment that becomes a potential workplace . If the universities identify this connection and its significance in the decision making of a young person, they can adequately choose their strategies to obtain them for doctoral studies.

Faculties are forced to shift their activities to the level of PR- strategies that help in attracting of new doctoral students. The most straightforward way to a future doctoral student runs through his/her teaching in the master's study programme, respectively through his/her master's thesis supervisor.

*"My master's thesis supervisor, now my dissertation supervisor  motivated/asked me and subsequently persuaded me to begin  doctoral studies."*

In this type of choice it is obvious that the preparation for audition is already associated with a particular person with whom a doctoral student is preparing a research project. But it is not the rule, because practitioners, who use the so-called combined study programme, may also be interested in doctoral studies. Their search is often easier. Just the adequate promotion of a study programme is enough. This is so because these people want to fulfil their desire to be good in their own field, be a recognized expert. Desire for a change of employment sometimes plays a role and a Ph.D. degree, respectively doctoral studies, are the gateway to this goal.

*"All colleagues told me that I am a good lecturer and I do a lot of things at school that might be of interest to some faculty. That motivated me to start doctoral studies."*

Also the strategies for the selection of future doctoral students are prepared adequately to the options and approved accreditation file. The selection of Ph.D. students at individual faculties and universities varies. From the analyzed responses from research participants we may say that the faculties set their **own criteria** for the admission procedure. Candidates for doctoral studies can enter doctoral programmes through:

- a selection procedure (audition)
  *"So I studied the internal form of studies and I had to file a formal request at our department, where the Departmental Board met, which assessed the prepared plan and design of the research. Of course, I had to prove some personal competencies in terms of the research implementation and on the basis of what the results were, in the sense that the person had a master's degree if he/she wanted to study in an internal or external form and the third criterion was, if he/she will choose a clinical or pedagogical section. So then this decision was determined."*
  *"I got to the doctoral studies, so I had to go through a so-called selection procedure. There was a committee which assessed the dissertation project, and subsequently they also assessed whether they will accept the candidate or not. So, project elaboration, the topic of dissertation and the subsequent interview with this particular committee. I am thinking if there was something specific, but I think then it was just such a variety of documentation that we had to send, a resume and so on, which was probably also assessed, but nothing more."*

- selection without audition, because the school needs doctoral candidates and offers job
  *"The professor enticed me, offered me a good topic ... so it was impossible to refuse ... and that's about all I'd like to say ... I'm beginning ... I'm starting the first year, four years are waiting for me ... and then we'll see ... not only the basis for all this doctoral study, but overall ... then he told  me that when I finish  I will have a  job waiting for me, so I was really tempted by this."*

- through other criteria, which are bound to the previous master's degree studies

  *"So I was admitted to doctoral studies, I participated in Student Research and Professional Activities, I graduated from university summa cum laude and I wrote an award-winning master's thesis. But I do not know to what extent it played a role, because I've got a feeling that they took everyone who applied."*

Objectively, it is possible to believe that the quality of the selection of candidates for doctoral studies subsequently affects their own studies. Moreover, the workplaces themselves, in which future doctoral students find themselves, have a significant role in their adaptation to the new role.

An interesting matter is the fact that students don't currently consider the advantage of travelling as a significant factor in deciding for further study. Perhaps, it is because the current possibilities of young people are different and travelling and exploring new countries, cultures and professional opportunities is no longer something that cannot be

achieved. It is a normal part of life that you don't need to "fight" for.

The university can play an important role in choosing the future candidate for doctoral studies by:
•   the quality of master's degree study programmes, in this context the quality is presented by teachers who work there,
•   the quality work of the supervisors of master's theses,
•   a quality environment that encourages the self-realization of the young person,
•   a sophisticated model of entrance examinations.

Students who are, so to speak, committed, become doctoral students. Therefore sufficient offer of incentives for his/her integration into the professional community also helps in his/her decision to continue in the studies.  This includes the full range of options:
•   involvement in the students' research projects,
•   models of involvement of students' scientific forces into activity in individual departments,
•   support of quality outputs from individual study programmes - such as scholarships and various awards for the quality of master's theses.

### 3.2. The family as a source of inspiration for the decision to be a doctoral student

In the time of the completion of a master's degree, the family is an institution that can play an important role in the decision of a young person. He/she can get into situations that he/she raises his/her own family. In this case, his/her life preferences change, as well as his/her choice of professional priorities. In this context, the functions of the family are changing, as this is already their own direct family, in which the future student has the role of a parent and a partner. However, the emotional and supportive commitment remains, because one´s  study wouldn't be possible without this factor. The family then becomes also the motive to finish one´s studies.

It is common that students who choose to continue in their study full-time don't have families of their own and they opt for the extension of the phase of their own childhood, respectively the extension of the student´s life. They have the advantages of students. This model is very common now. In this case, young people are very closely linked to their original family background, parents, siblings, grandparents.

The family has three basic functions for them**:**

1.   material - often associated with housing, meals,
2.   emotional - that is related to the feeling of safety and love,
3.   supportive - in terms of promoting professional desires.

What kind of attitude the immediate family has to the further study of the future doctoral student is very important for his/her feeling of safety and background. Doctoral studies are in fact linked to increased demands on working time. The family background support is a crucial factor for the decision to study further.

> *"Mom and dad were very proud of me when I graduated summa cum laude. . The decision to continue one´s studies  was simple. My parents supported me."*

The family can also be a direct motivating factor for the preference of future occupation

> *"My grandfather is my role model. He was member of the Scientific Council and at home we talked about it all the time. My uncle is a professor. Grandpa did not know that I want to study. He even had no idea. But then he was proud. He always motivated me and encouraged me."*

> *"My father was a teacher. I come from a family of teachers. He always said that to be a teacher is like*

*being an actor, one has to have talent. It motivated me to educate myself further."*

In these cases, it was directly scientific and teaching models within the family where the grandfather and the father in the second case were actively involved in teaching profession. . One was a member of the Scientific Council of the University and he talked about his work at home. The granddaughter was motivated to follow in her grandfather's footsteps and prove to him that she is able to have a similar professional career. In the second case, the role model of the father intensifies the desire to study further.

The family acts as a cohesive factor in all cases. It is a factor of professional socialization because it supports the choice to study, work on oneself, be successful, or even directly provides role models for study and then the selection of the profession.

### 3.3. One´s own conviction to become a doctoral student

One's own desire to achieve something is an important factor when choosing to become a doctoral student. Desire and motivation are closely linked to satisfying one's needs. The need usually arises when there is an imbalance in the social environment. It may be varied under the influence of the circumstances, experience, age, etc. If a person is missing something, he/she is in a situation that he/she feels the urge to change something, fix it, he/she needs to satisfy his/her needs. That is why he/she makes an effort, tries to ensure that his/her need would be satisfied. (Mareš, 2013).

In case of the choice to continue study in doctoral studies, the satisfying **need** is:

a) **to belong somewhere**, the future doctoral student is clear to what community he/she wants to integrate. He/she has derived it from the times of his/her master's degree studies. He/she wants to work in an academic environment and recognizes the rules, which are associated with this decision.

> *"So probably the biggest motivation was that I wanted to work as an academic, and I wanted to work actively in research, so it was probably the biggest motivation, that I knew I wanted to stay on campus and if I didn't have this motivation, I would go into practice and I wouldn't start doctoral studies."*

b) **cognition**, obtaining of new knowledge, new findings, new experience, get a space for self-realization,

> *"As a student I had studied various volumes of books from my field and I knew that I wanted to do it."*

c) **influence** - he/she wants to belong to a community, which has its goals, which is visibly different in the perception of ordinary people,

> *"I want to work with people who know how to talk, I want to learn to communicate and identify different views and opinions. I love this academic space, which is free to some extent but simultaneously also binds one. But I like it."*

d) **a visible future** - a clear vision of what I want in the future and where I want to work.

> *"I want to be in this community, I want to stay at the university. I enjoy it, so I have to keep working on myself."*

One's own convictions to be a doctoral student are influenced by satisfying:

- cognitive needs,
- social needs,
- need of an achievement,
- need of a perspective.

The effort to study is associated with a number of themes, such as:

- to prove to myself that I am better than that,
- to prove to others that I am able to do more,
- a desire for another position,
- a desire for education,
- a desire for the change of employment.

> *"The decision to study was connected with the fact that in the future I will not have to work at an elementary school. It bothered me that I didn't have time, the noise during the breaks bothered me. I felt that I am better than that and my surroundings supported my decision. "*

References must be listed at the end of the paper. Do not begin them on a new page unless this is absolutely necessary. Authors should ensure that every reference in the text appears in the list of references and vice versa. Indicate references by (Van der Geer, Hanraads, & Lupton, 2000) or (Strunk & White, 1979) in the text.

Some examples of how your references should be listed are given at the end of this template in the 'References' section, which will allow you to assemble your reference list according to the correct format and font size.

## 4. Conclusion

Similar findings on the motivations and needs can also be proven by a complex research, which a group of workers realized via questionnaires at Masaryk University in Brno (2009). This was a research inquiry which was tasked with describing the motivation of students of doctoral studies in the context of internal doctoral study programmes. This research also suggests that the motivation for doctoral studies is closely associated with:
- one's own decision,
- a conversation with a lecturer or a worker of the department,
- interest in scientific work.

It would certainly be interesting to see the subsequent application of doctoral students in science and research. The research, which is presented in this study, does not offer statistical data on the application of doctoral graduates in practice, but shows the way how they got to the position of an academic, what they experienced and what motivated them to stay at the university.

Therefore it seems that the differences in particular fields are not significant for the motivation of students and that engineers, scientists and pedagogues can be equally motivated. Master's degree preparation differs in various fields, but it isn't essential for the decision of the future student whether to begin or not to begin doctoral studies.

## References

Backman, K., & Kyngäs, H. A. (1999). Challenges of the grounded theory approach to a novice researcher. *Nursing and Health Sciences, 3*(1), 147-153.
Bruinsma, M., & Jansen, E. P.W. A. (2010). Is the motivation to become a teacher related to pre-service teachers´ intentions to remain in the profession? *European Journal of Teacher Education*, *33*(2), 185-200.
Mareš, J. (2013). Neviditelná skupina aneb co s postdoktorandy? *Pedagogická orientace, 23* (1), 5–26.
Růžička, J. (1992). *Motivace pracovního jednání.* Praha: VŠE.
Šturzová, J. (2006). *Zamyšlení nad otázkou smyslu univerzitního vzdělání ve společnosti výkonu.* Liberec: TU, p. 41-43.
Wiegerová, A., & Gavora, P. (2014). Proč se chci stát učitelkou v mateřské škole? Pohled kvalitativního výzkumu. *Pedagogická orientace, 24* (4), 510–534.