



# Questions to ask



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The PhD is an exciting professional experience, which some describe as a passion. A PhD student is expected to be excellent, creative, innovative, productive to work independently and to push the research question as far as possible. The adventure is a long one and, in addition to the many satisfactions, you will have to overcome moments of tension of loneliness and sometimes unexpected difficulties.

A solid reflection on your motivations, your skills and your long-term professional objective is essential.

To help you in this self-analysis, here are some questions you should ask yourself before committing yourself:

## 1/ Questions related to your profile

**What are the most interesting, easiest and most difficult things in my current job? What qualities set me apart from others?**

Knowing your strengths and weaknesses is the first step in any professional reflection. Among the strengths needed to complete a PhD: autonomy, proactivity, stress management, resilience.

**Am I a communicative person? What are my abilities to present and defend a project?**

- As a researcher, you will be required to explain your ideas, defend your point of view, present the results of your research to your peers or to the general public.
- Read the sheets «Managing your doctoral career» and «Promoting your research» for more information on thesis defense and scientific mediation.

**Am I an autonomous and proactive person in my work?**

Although your thesis supervisor is responsible for supervising you, a PhD student is expected to take initiatives and advance in his/her research in a relatively autonomous manner (1).

**Do I have good organizational skills?**

- The PhD is the first major research project that the PhD student has to manage. It develops over several years, and in order to complete it on time, good project management is crucial. Successfully completing a project is above all a matter of planning. This can be learned, among other things, with the support of your thesis supervisor. Most of the universities of the Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles (FWB) also offer training courses on these themes which will enable you to acquire these skills. One mistake often made is to underestimate the risks. Anticipate as much as possible and contact your supervisor as soon as difficulties arise. Also think about the administrative or pedagogical support tasks that are additional to the research work and require a great deal of preparation.
- Since you often work independently, you can choose the nature of your tasks, schedules and work location on a daily basis. This flexibility can help you to better reconcile your private and professional life, but it also reinforces the absolute necessity to be well organized, to plan and to project yourself in the long term. Indeed, this flexibility can be a double-edged sword. You will need to avoid being overwhelmed by the tasks of daily work, for example, or having to work long hours of overtime to achieve long-term goals. See also the 'Coping with difficulties' sheet for more information on work organization.



### **Am I able to manage working alone?**

- We often hear that the thesis is an individual work, therefore solitary, especially because you are working autonomously on your own project. Today, a large majority of PhD students work in a laboratory or a research unit and are not alone.
- In the universities of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, PhD students belong to a doctoral school where they meet PhD students from other universities. They also meet each other during colloquia, seminars and doctoral training courses. These are good opportunities to talk about their project, their experience, their difficulties.
- In some universities, PhD students also meet within a peer association, similar to student circles. This offers an opportunity to get involved in the university, or to take advantage of convivial moments.
- Read the Sheet «The Work Environment» for more information.

### **Am I able to manage my stress and to re-motivate myself in the off-peak moments?**

- The thesis is a long term work which requires a great deal of personal discipline, perseverance and good stress management. Although it is not always easy or natural, you will have to force yourself to set aside periods of time so as not to let yourself be overwhelmed.
- University services are available if you feel overwhelmed or have difficulty managing your stress or motivation.
- Read the «Coping with difficulties» sheet for more information.

## **2/Questions related to your motivations**

### **Should I start a thesis if the subject does not motivate me?**

- An essential motivation for starting a research career is a genuine passion for research in general. You will learn this profession by developing a project that interests you. Sometimes the theme is defined by the thesis supervisor, sometimes the proposal is yours. To be successful, it is important that the topic motivates you.
- Read the «Preparing for your doctorate» sheet for more information.

### **Am I passionate about research and the transmission of knowledge? Do I want to participate in the progress of science to improve society?**

- When we talk about the progress of science, it does not mean that you have to do a thesis with the idea of becoming a Nobel Prize winner! If your research does not necessarily revolutionize science, it will bring an important advance in the understanding of your subject (2). Being a researcher means communicating your research to your fellow researchers.
- Being a researcher also means presenting your approach and discoveries to the general public. You have to learn to popularize your research in order to be understood by everyone.
- If you are an assistant, or if you are planning an academic career, you will be called upon to supervise students or to teach. It is therefore necessary to be trained in teaching methods.
- Read the « Promoting your doctorate » sheet.

### **Am I ready to work (at least temporarily) abroad?**

- Nowadays, an academic career is seen in an international perspective, with the aim of opening up to other practices, other cultures and to develop one's network. The new contacts created during an experience abroad are considered as a key element in the constitution of excellence and collaboration among researchers.
- After the PhD, a post-doctorate in an institution of excellence in a country other than the one where you defended your thesis is essential. The Observatoire de la Recherche et des carrières scientifiques (ORCS) indicates that people in a situation of post-doctoral mobility are 2.84 times more likely to pursue an academic career two years after the end of the doctorate than people who are not (3).
- If you do not plan to start a post-doctoral fellowship or to continue in an academic career after your PhD, international mobility is always a plus for your profile, appreciated by employers. It attests your openness to the world.
- Alongside long-term mobility, we should also talk about short research stays carried out during your PhD: conferences, colloquia, internships. Taking part in international colloquia is essential to communicate your research, to make yourself known, to discover the work of others, and thus to advance your work through formal and informal exchanges.

**The co-joint thesis is also a great opportunity to do international research from the very beginning of your PhD.**



### Will a thesis allow me to get a better salary?

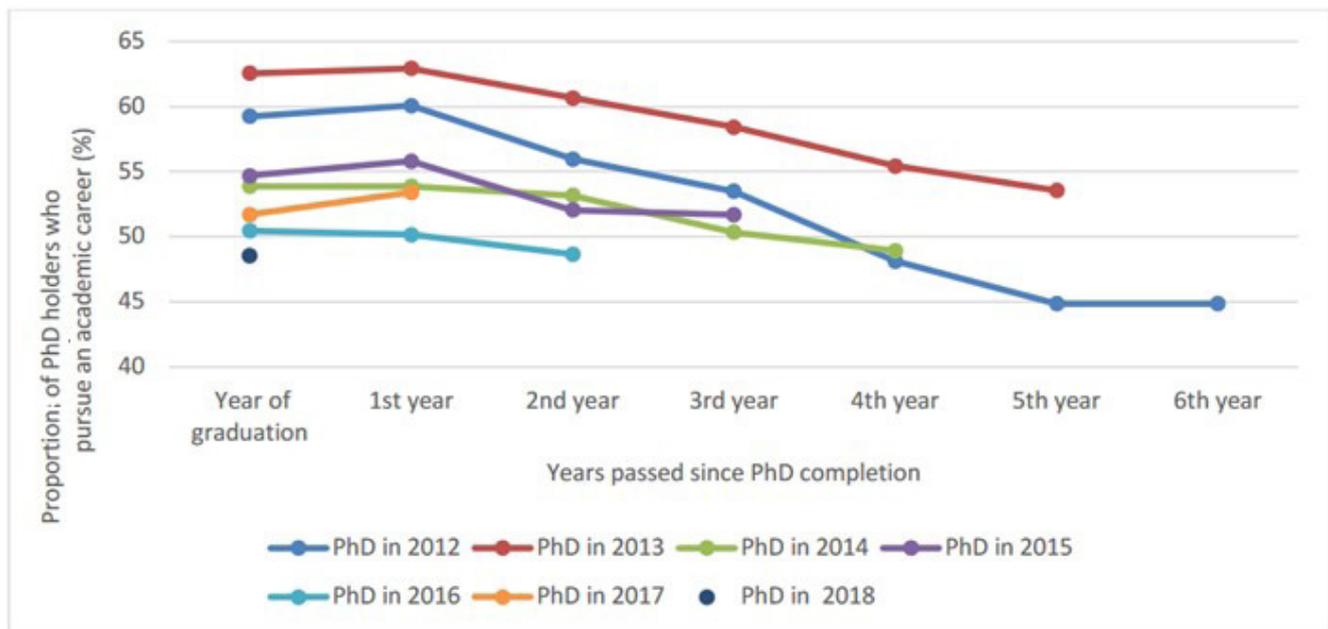
- Scholarships and PhD salaries, in our environment in French-speaking Belgium, are often higher than the salaries of young graduates in SMEs. However, most employers do not value the 3-6 years of PhD as professional experience. You will have to negotiate the time spent on your PhD when you are hired, especially if you leave the academic world.
- The PhD will enable you to acquire valuable skills to take on positions of responsibility. For this reason, PhDs rapidly progress in their careers and often develop an executive career.

### Am I ready to consider a career outside of academia?

- The significant increase in the number of PhD students and PhD graduates in higher education has not been accompanied by a commensurate increase in the allocation to universities, which cannot increase the number of their academic positions. According to data from the Conseil des recteurs francophones (CReF), in 2014 there will be one academic (or full-time equivalent) for every three PhD students (4).
- According to the latest ORCS report, many PhDs are now turning to other employers after their thesis (see Figure 1 below). Read the "Post-Doctoral Employment Opportunities" sheets for more information.

**Do you like learning?  
Do you like the researching?  
The PhD could be the perfect next move of your professional career.**

FIGURE 1: ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION «HAVE YOU PURSUED AN ACADEMIC CAREER SINCE YOUR THESIS DEFENSE?» (2018 (N =997) (5)



### Am I prepared to live for several years on a fixed-term contract?

- Funding for PhD students is generally limited to the duration of the PhD, which is expected to be 3-4 years full-time, extended to 6 years for assistants who supervise students on a part-time basis. Dr. Véronique Halloin, General Secretary of the Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique (F.R.S-FNRS), describes the post-doctorate as a "period following the PhD and the defense of a thesis which should enable the doctor to deepen his/her knowledge, to improve his/her skills and to develop professional competences" (6). Upon graduation, the post-doctoral term is also of limited duration; typically, several years of post-doctoral experience are required before obtaining a permanent academic position (7).





### 3/Issues related to your career plan

**What ideal position could I imagine having in 5-10 years? After my thesis, in which sector or field of activity would I like to work? For what type of position?**

- The PhD is a training in the profession of researcher and a first professional research experience. It must make sense in your long-term professional project and therefore be part of it.
- If you wish to work internationally, the PhD can be a good “passport” because it embodies the prestige of the highest academic degree and its added value is recognized by both the private and public sectors.
- Although it is crucial to do some real thinking about the career path you want to take, if you are unsure about it, don't panic. Nowadays, careers are very rarely linear, a person changes direction several times. Very often the doctoral training helps to build this reflection further...

**What are the specific skills that employers are looking for when hiring PhDs in the sector I want to work in?**

- Employers, whether public or private, expect PhDs to be creative, innovative, competent, open-minded and multilingual. From the outset, think about acquiring the transversal skills and knowledge required in this potential future profession. Also consider doing a research stay in companies/organizations in the field in which you wish to work if you do not wish to develop an academic career.
- If the career you wish to undertake does not require a PhD or if you think that the PhD does not correspond to your personal and/or professional expectations, reconsider the interest of developing this project. It is often better in this case to apply directly for a job in which you will be able to develop the expected skills.

**What strategy could I put in place to enhance the value of my PhD outside the academic world?**

- Companies have stayed away from the academic world and still consider researchers as hyper-specialized people who do not necessarily have the skills and professional experience they are looking for (8), especially to work in a team or to develop a commercial attitude. It is then up to PhDs to demonstrate to recruiters and employers the value of their profile and research experience.
- To do this, they must themselves be aware of their skills, develop them and be able to present them.
- Here are some concrete proposals to prepare you to take up the challenge: participate in training in transversal skills to develop those you lack and enable you to develop your personal effectiveness; if your mandate permits, do a short research stay in a company or public organization; participate in scientific popularization activities to practice your skills and open yourself up to society.
- Read the “PhD assets” and “Transversal competences” sheets.



**If I engage in a thesis, what additional knowledge and skills would I like to develop or deepen, compared to those developed during the master's degree? How will the knowledge and skills I would have acquired during my thesis help me to access the career I would like to embark on after the PhD?**

→ Take the necessary steps to undertake the activities and training that will first help you to carry out your research project. Also seek to develop your skills. This will not necessarily be offered to you by your thesis supervisor or your research centre; it is your responsibility to take the necessary steps to develop them.

**For more information on post-doctoral career opportunities, consult the «Post-Doctoral Employment Opportunities» and «Post-Doctoral Research Opportunities» sections of the «PhD Welcome Pack».**

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The PhD@Work project aims to strengthen and enhance the transversal skills of researchers. It is an integrated and inter-university project which has several sub-objectives: to continue the effort already made to strengthen the transversal skills of PhD students and PhDs, in better adequacy with the needs of the socio-economic world; to promote these skills to recruiters in order to improve the employability of PhDs and to support innovation; to develop supports, tools and support for professional integration; and to organize communication and events aimed at PhD students and PhDs as well as academics and companies. The project leader is the ASBL Objectif Recherche and the partner universities are UMONS, UCLouvain, USaint-Louis Brussels, ULB, UNamur and ULiège.



The PhD Welcome Pack was written by UNamur in collaboration with the partners of the PhDs@Work project.

