

Individual Differences in Quality of Life among Doctoral Candidates

الفروق الفردية في جودة الحياة لدى طلبة الدكتوراه

Meziane Lamia * مزيان لمياء

mezianelamia31@gmail.com

Bentahar Bachir بن طاهر بشير

bentahar.bachir@univ-oran2.dz

University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed, Algeria/ Psychology

[DOI:10.46315/1714-015-001-038](https://doi.org/10.46315/1714-015-001-038)

Received: 15/ 07/ 2025 Accepted: 29/ 12/ 2025 Published :16/ 01/ 2026

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Abstract:

This study examines a body of research that illuminates the individual differences among doctoral students. These studies have revealed striking variations in how students perceive their academic tasks, assess their own capabilities, and navigate the complex demands of scholarly inquiry along with the accompanying emotional pressures. They have also highlighted divergences in metacognitive approaches and in the degree to which students engage positively or negatively with the research environment. Furthermore, notable disparities have emerged in students' understanding of well-being and their ability to balance the demands of their studies with personal and social life. In addition, certain studies have brought to light differences rooted in cultural backgrounds and institutional contexts, as well as those linked to gender and the distinct experiences it entails. Collectively, these indicators underscore the multiplicity of pathways that characterize the doctoral journey, dispelling any notion of a singular, uniform experience. The following sections will explore these individual differences in greater depth, shedding light on their various dimensions and manifestations.

Keywords: Quality of life; Doctoral students, Individual differences; Social support; Mental health.

ملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة مجموعة من الأبحاث التي تسلط الضوء على الفروق الفردية لدى الطلبة الجامعيين في مرحلة الدكتوراه. فقد أظهرت هذه الدراسات تباينا ملحوظا في الطريقة التي يدرك بها الطلبة مهامهم الأكاديمية، وفي تقييمهم لقدراتهم الذاتية، وكذلك في كيفية تعاملهم مع متطلبات البحث العلمي المعقدة والضغوط الوجدانية المرافقة لها. كما بينت اختلافات في أساليب التفكير فوق المعرفي، وفي مستويات التفاعل الإيجابي أو السلبي مع بيئة البحث. وبرز أيضا تفاوت في إدراك الطلبة لمفهوم الرفاه والتوازن بين متطلبات الدراسة وحياتهم الشخصية والاجتماعية. إضافة إلى ذلك، كشفت بعض الأبحاث عن فروق مرتبطة بالثقافات والسياقات المؤسسية، وأخرى متعلقة بالنوع الاجتماعي وما يصاحبه من تجارب مختلفة. هذه المؤشرات جميعها تعكس تعدد مسارات الطلبة في تجربة الدكتوراه، مما يجعلها بعيدة عن الصورة النمطية الموحدة. وسيتم في الأقسام القادمة عرض هذه الفروق الفردية بمزيد من التفصيل لبيان أبعادها ولامحها المختلفة. كلمات مفتاحية: جودة الحياة؛ طلبة الدكتوراه؛ الفروق الفردية؛ الدعم الاجتماعي؛ الصحة النفسية.

* - Author correspondent: mezianelamia31@gmail.com

1- Introduction

Doctoral education represents one of the most intellectually rigorous and personally demanding journeys in higher education. Far from being a uniform process, the doctoral experience is shaped by a complex interplay of individual, institutional, and socio-cultural factors that give rise to profound variations among students. While the pursuit of a doctorate is often idealized as a path reserved for the exceptionally capable and resilient, emerging research paints a more nuanced picture: one that acknowledges the diverse ways in which doctoral candidates perceive, interpret, and respond to the multifaceted demands of advanced scholarly work.

A growing body of studies has illuminated these individual differences, revealing how doctoral students diverge not only in their cognitive and metacognitive approaches to research, but also in their emotional coping strategies, perceptions of well-being, and abilities to balance academic obligations with personal and social lives. Such differences are frequently intertwined with broader contextual elements, including cultural norms, gendered experiences, and the structural characteristics of institutions and doctoral programs. These variations do not merely represent peripheral curiosities; rather, they lie at the heart of understanding what sustains or undermines doctoral success and overall quality of life.

The significance of investigating these individual differences extends beyond the scholarly domain. Doctoral students' mental health challenges, struggles with self-regulation, and experiences of isolation or inadequate support have been increasingly linked to attrition, delayed completion, and diminished research outputs—outcomes that carry serious consequences for both individuals and academic institutions. Conversely, identifying protective factors and adaptive strategies can inform the design of supportive environments that enhance resilience, foster intellectual engagement, and ultimately contribute to more meaningful and sustainable doctoral experiences.

The research gap stems from the absence of an integrative review that brings together the cognitive, emotional, social, institutional, and cultural dimensions, offering a holistic account of how these factors interact to shape the doctoral student experience. Much of the existing literature examines these elements in isolation, underscoring the need for an analytical synthesis that reconstructs the broader landscape of this experience and traces its core developmental pathways. Against this backdrop, the present study synthesizes key findings from a selection of empirical investigations that collectively map out the heterogeneous landscape of doctoral student experiences. By examining how doctoral candidates differ in their self-perceptions, affective and metacognitive processes, interpretations of well-being, and engagements with social and institutional contexts, this work seeks to move beyond simplistic, monolithic portrayals of doctoral education. Instead, it aims to highlight the multiplicity of pathways through which doctoral students navigate their scholarly journeys.

This research aims to provide an analytical literature review that integrates the findings of leading studies on doctoral student experience, focusing on individual differences, quality of life, institutional and social support, and cultural and gender contexts. It also aims to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework that clarifies how these dimensions interact to shape the academic experience of doctoral students, thereby supporting the development of more effective and sustainable policies and programs.

The insights drawn from this synthesis not only deepen our understanding of the doctoral process but also hold critical implications for policy makers, university administrators, supervisors, and doctoral candidates themselves. By appreciating the diverse profiles and needs that characterize the doctoral population, stakeholders can better tailor interventions, support structures, and pedagogical practices to cultivate environments where all doctoral students have the opportunity to thrive—academically, socially, and personally.

2. Research Methodology

This paper adopted the Narrative Analytical Review methodology to analyze the literature comprehensively and flexibly without adhering to the strict procedures of systematic reviews.

First: Literature Review Methodology

This study adopted the Structural Narrative Review methodology to analyze recent literature addressing the experiences of doctoral students, their individual differences, their quality of life, and the factors affecting their academic and psychological well-being. Clear steps and precise criteria were followed in selecting and analyzing the studies to ensure credibility and scientific rigor.

Second: Literature Search Strategy

The studies were collected by searching reliable scientific databases, including:

- Google Scholar
- Scopus
- Web of Science

These databases were used for their comprehensiveness and accuracy in indexing research related to higher education and the doctoral student experience.

Third: Keywords Used

A set of relevant keywords and phrases was used, employing logical search operators (AND, OR). The most important of these were:

- "PhD students"
- "PhD experience"
- "quality of academic life"
- "psychological well-being"

- "individual differences"
- "cognitive strategies"
- "work-life balance"
- "female PhD students"

These keywords were chosen to cover the various psychological and academic aspects addressed in the literature.

Fourth: Time Period of the Studies

The research was limited to studies published between 2012 and 2025, for two main reasons:

1. To keep pace with the modern challenges facing PhD students.
2. To include the most recent and influential literature in this field, such as the studies by Thao et al. (2024) and Teng et al. (2025).

Fifth: Inclusion Criteria

A set of conditions was established that studies must meet to be included in the review. These are:

1. The study must be published in a peer-reviewed journal or be a recognized doctoral dissertation.
2. It must clearly address the doctoral student experience, quality of life, or individual differences among them.
3. The study must be experimental, qualitative, quantitative, or a reliable analytical review.
4. It must be written in English or Arabic and available in full text.
5. It must fall within the specified time period (2012–2025).

Sixth: Exclusion Criteria

Studies that:

1. Focus on undergraduate or master's students without addressing doctoral students.
2. Are not subject to peer review, such as newspaper articles or non-academic reports.
3. Do not address well-being, quality of life, academic experience, or individual differences.
4. Address areas outside the context of higher education or the university experience.

Seventh: Final Sample of Selected Studies

After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, eight key studies were selected as the most relevant and in-depth on the topic:

- Cantwell et al. (2012)
- Haynes et al. (2012)
- Cantwell et al. (2017)

- Schmidt & Hansson (2018)
- Sverdlik et al. (2018)
- Evwerhamre (2020)
- Thao & Trut Thuy (2024)
- Teng et al. (2025)

This group was chosen because it covers the most important themes related to individual differences, well-being, gender, cultural context, work-life balance, and institutional factors.

Eighth: Methodology for Literature Analysis and Summarization

Thematic analysis was adopted to extract the main themes across the selected literature. The analysis steps included the following:

1. In-depth and repeated reading of the studies.
2. Extracting the core concepts relevant to the doctoral students' experience.
3. Identifying common patterns among the studies, such as:
 - Individual cognitive and emotional differences
 - The effects of gender and cultural context
 - Balance between academic commitments and personal life
 - The relationship between academic supervision and quality of life
4. Grouping these patterns into major thematic themes.
5. Integrating the data and identifying general trends and gaps in the literature.

3- Summary of Selected Studies

3.1- Cantwell, R. H et al. (2012)

This study sought to illuminate how doctoral candidates navigate the formidable intellectual and emotional demands of PhD study, with a particular focus on individual differences in affective and metacognitive dispositions. Drawing on data from 263 candidates at two Australian universities, the researchers employed rigorous statistical analyses to uncover two distinct profiles and three fundamental dimensions of doctoral metacognition. Contrary to the common presumption that doctoral students uniformly possess advanced self-regulatory capacities by virtue of their elite academic standing, the findings revealed considerable variation in how they conceptualize their scholarly tasks, evaluate their capabilities, and engage with the inherent risks and uncertainties of the doctoral journey. The study underscores that success in doctoral study is not solely predicated on cognitive prowess but equally demands sophisticated emotional management, resilience, and self-regulation. Inadequate handling of these intertwined challenges can give rise to problematic candidature, delays, or attrition—outcomes that bear significant personal and institutional costs.

Thus, the research advocates for a more nuanced and compassionate approach to doctoral education, urging supervisors and institutions to recognize and respond to these individual differences by fostering environments that cultivate adaptive coping strategies and robust metacognitive development. In doing so, it aspires not merely to improve completion rates but to enrich the very fabric of the doctoral experience, rendering it a more sustainable and transformative endeavor.

3.2- Haynes et al. (2012)

This study sought to explore diverse aspects of well-being among female doctoral students, enriching understanding of how these factors influence stress levels, academic achievement, and personal life satisfaction. The sample comprised eight female doctoral candidates enrolled at a high-research-activity university, offering insights into their experiences and perspectives. The study employed semi-structured interviews and metaphor analysis to interpret how these students conceptualized well-being. Findings revealed that participants viewed well-being as an evolving individual and social process, unique to each woman. They demonstrated the capacity to develop realistic social, economic, and personal expectations linked to their doctoral studies, which helped them define optimal personal balance across their multiple roles.

3.3- Cantwell, R. H et al. (2017)

In this study, a national cohort of 1,390 doctoral students completed an extensive suite of metacognitive instruments designed to assess how they manage the affective, intellectual, and contingent demands inherent in advanced scholarly work. The analysis of their responses uncovered notable individual differences in reported metacognitive behaviours. Through sophisticated cluster analysis, three distinctive profiles emerged: Constructive Engagement, reflecting proactive and reflective approaches to doctoral learning; Struggling to Engage, indicating inconsistent or tentative metacognitive practices; and Disengaged, typified by minimal or maladaptive involvement with the complexities of doctoral study. At the core of these patterns lay each student's epistemic framework—their fundamental conceptions of knowledge and learning—which proved crucial in determining the suitability of their approach for navigating doctoral challenges. Remarkably, membership in these clusters was largely independent of demographic or candidate-specific factors, suggesting that such epistemic orientations transcend typical background variables. These findings highlight that effective doctoral education cannot be confined to technical supervision or procedural guidance alone. Instead, it necessitates intentional support aimed at cultivating students' deeper epistemic growth. By addressing these foundational dimensions, both supervisors and institutions can better equip doctoral candidates to meet the profound intellectual and personal demands of

advanced research, fostering scholars who are not only technically proficient but also epistemically resilient and thoughtfully engaged.

3.4- Schmidt et al. (2018)

This study underscored the critical importance of doctoral student well-being, directly tied to long-term academic productivity and competence. By reviewing 17 studies, it evaluated well-being models and research methodologies, conducting a SWOT analysis to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in this body of research. Based on its findings, the study proposed a multidimensional perspective on doctoral well-being, stressing the necessity of a student-centered approach that addresses academic, social, and psychological needs through sustainable programs targeting well-being across all stages of doctoral study. It highlighted the importance of comprehensive supervisory support that integrates both academic and psychological guidance, alongside strategies for balancing personal and academic life. The study also emphasized enhancing social connectedness among students and supervisors to build a supportive environment that reduces feelings of isolation. It called for further research to better understand the dynamics of doctoral student well-being, thereby improving academic quality of life and sustaining productivity in higher education.

3.5- Sverdlik et al. (2018)

This study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of doctoral students' experiences, focusing on factors affecting their psychological and physical health and success in doctoral programs. Through a review of 163 empirical studies, it highlighted external factors (such as supervision, social and financial support) and internal factors (such as motivation, writing skills, and self-regulation) that shape doctoral experiences. The study concluded that strategically activating these factors is essential to promote student success and well-being, offering evidence-based guidance for students, faculty, and support entities to achieve balanced and positive academic experiences. Based on these findings, the study proposed a range of strategies including training in self-regulation and stress management, establishing academic and social support networks, and enhancing supervisory quality through approaches that boost student satisfaction. It also stressed the importance of tailored support programs that address students' individual needs based on their disciplines and backgrounds, with the goal of sustainably improving well-being and academic success.

3.6- Evwerhamre (2020)

This study investigated work-life balance experiences among international full-time doctoral students in UK higher education. It aimed to understand how these students maintained balance between the demands of their academic research (work) and their personal lives, considering challenges such as financial needs, language barriers, attrition risks, and visa requirements. A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was employed to explore participants' experiences and perceptions. Twenty-six doctoral students from a university in North West England were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. Data were analyzed with the thematic analysis framework by Braun & Clarke (2006). Findings indicated that financial constraints were the primary challenge, compounded by isolation from being away from families, even though many lived with spouses and children. Nevertheless, the desire to complete the PhD motivated them to develop coping strategies such as prioritization, planning, and scheduling. Family and community support, alongside assistance from supervisors and institutional workshops and seminars, contributed to reinforcing their work-study-life balance.

3.7- Thao et al. (2024)

This qualitative study explored the factors influencing the academic trajectories of doctoral candidates within a specific cultural and geographic context. Through in-depth interviews with three participants, the research uncovered a range of themes reflecting the dynamics of the PhD experience. The study highlighted the pivotal role of institutional support in shaping their academic paths, alongside the impact of cultural and familial expectations as critical external factors. Personal resilience and adaptability emerged as essential for success, with the findings underscoring the importance of personal relationships and collaboration as vital tools for academic growth. Additionally, the study emphasized the significance of global exposure and the quality of supervision in fostering both academic outcomes and personal development, as well as balancing work, life, and emotional well-being within a rigorous academic context. The research also pointed to the value of curricular flexibility, integration of technology, and access to research resources in supporting in-depth inquiry and innovation. Moreover, it stressed the importance of a continuous feedback culture and the strength of interdisciplinary approaches. Despite certain limitations, such as limited participant diversity and a geographically focused sample, the findings offer valuable insights for academic institutions, supervisors, and students, underscoring the need for comprehensive support and flexible strategies to enhance the doctoral journey.

3.8- Teng et al. (2025)

This study investigates gender differences in doctoral student satisfaction, addressing a critical gap in existing research. Drawing on data from 6,372 doctoral students across 108 countries in the 2019 Nature Global Doctoral Student Survey, it reveals that women report notably lower satisfaction levels than men, with a 3.88% higher likelihood of dissatisfaction. The analysis shows that this disparity is largely driven by women's greater exposure to gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and the persistent struggle to achieve work-life balance. Moreover, overworked female doctoral students and those from low- and lower-middle-income countries face even deeper dissatisfaction. These findings underscore the complex challenges female doctoral candidates navigate within academia, often compounded by heightened mental health risks. As satisfaction profoundly influences academic engagement, productivity, and career trajectories, such gendered differences have far-reaching consequences. Despite the steady rise in female participation in doctoral programs worldwide, systemic inequalities continue to undermine their experiences. By applying and extending the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model to doctoral education, this study offers a robust theoretical lens for understanding these dynamics. It enriches the literature by moving beyond small-scale or anecdotal evidence, providing large-scale empirical insights into the mechanisms shaping female doctoral students' satisfaction. Practically, the study highlights the urgency for universities to implement stronger policies against discrimination and harassment, offer supervisor training, and support doctoral students' efforts to balance personal and professional demands. Ultimately, these measures are essential to fostering a more inclusive and nurturing environment that empowers all doctoral scholars to thrive.

4- Reflection on These Studies

Taken together, these studies converge on a profound insight: the doctoral journey is far more than an intellectual endeavor confined to the mastery of specialized knowledge or research techniques; it is an intricate, deeply human experience that interweaves cognitive, emotional, social, and even existential dimensions. A striking commonality across these works is their collective rejection of the simplistic notion that doctoral success is guaranteed by intellectual ability alone. Instead, they all emphasize—each through its unique lens—the indispensable role of affective and metacognitive capacities such as resilience, emotional self-regulation, and the ability to navigate ambiguity and setbacks.

Cantwell et al. (2012, 2017), for example, reveal the remarkable diversity among doctoral students in how they conceptualize their work, regulate their learning, and engage with inherent risks, challenging the stereotype of the uniformly self-directed, cognitively elite PhD candidate. In parallel, Haynes et al. (2012), Evwerhamre (2020), and Teng et al. (2025) illuminate how well-being is neither ancillary nor merely personal but deeply embedded in the very fabric of doctoral progress, showing that gender, financial strain, cultural context, and the quality of social ties all critically shape the doctoral experience.

Another theme that resonates through these studies is the centrality of institutional support—be it through supervisory quality, peer networks, tailored training programs, or university policies that explicitly integrate psychological well-being with academic goals. Schmidt et al. (2018) and Sverdlik et al. (2018) both advocate multidimensional, student-centered approaches that move beyond procedural guidance to embrace holistic support systems, recognizing that ignoring the emotional and social burdens of doctoral study carries steep costs, including delayed completion, diminished scholarly engagement, or attrition.

Equally compelling is their shared assertion that the doctoral journey is intensely individual. These studies collectively caution against one-size-fits-all frameworks, underscoring that doctoral students bring unique epistemic beliefs, personal histories, and socio-cultural contexts that profoundly influence how they experience and manage the demands of advanced research. This underscores a pressing need for flexible, compassionate, and personalized approaches in supervision and institutional programming.

Moreover, these studies all elevate the imperative of fostering environments where doctoral candidates feel connected, supported, and understood. Whether through structured opportunities for peer interaction, supervisors who attend to the emotional as well as intellectual trajectories of their students, or mechanisms to combat isolation and discrimination, they unite around the vision of a more humane doctoral education.

Ultimately, what ties these works together most powerfully is their collective call to reimagine doctoral education not as a narrow academic hurdle but as a transformative life chapter—one that requires universities and supervisors to nurture not only competent researchers but resilient, reflective, and emotionally healthy individuals. This holistic view aspires to make the doctoral experience sustainable, meaningful, and genuinely enriching, ensuring that doctoral graduates emerge not only as experts in their fields but also as well-rounded scholars capable of thriving amidst the complexities of academic and personal life.

It is worth noting that, despite their shared emphasis on the importance of individual differences and quality of life among doctoral students, these studies vary significantly in their

methodologies, sample sizes, and research contexts. For example, some studies, such as Cantwell et al. (2017), relied on large-scale quantitative approaches involving extensive national samples (1,390 doctoral students), which allowed for the identification of general patterns in metacognitive behavior. In contrast, other studies, such as Haynes et al. (2012) and Thao et al. (2024), adopted in-depth qualitative approaches based on interviews with small, focused samples, which provided deeper insights into subjective experiences and specific cultural contexts.

In addition, some works incorporated extensive literature reviews, such as Schmidt et al. (2018) and Sverdlik et al. (2018), which analyzed a large body of prior studies to present a more integrated picture of the factors shaping quality of life and the doctoral research experience.

While this methodological diversity enriches the findings and broadens their applicability, some studies remain limited in terms of sample size or geographic scope. This highlights the need for further applied and comparative research across diverse academic settings to deepen understanding and develop supportive practices that account for individual and cultural specificities.

5- Conclusion

The diverse studies encompassed in this review unveil a truth of profound significance: the doctoral journey is far from a uniform, monolithic endeavor. Rather, it emerges as the intricate product of individual perceptions, self-appraisals, cognitive strategies, and emotional responses—each varying markedly from one student to another. Cultural contexts, institutional milieus, and the distinct contours of gendered experiences further enrich and complicate this multidimensional landscape. Recognizing and embracing these individual differences is thus indispensable, not merely for cultivating more supportive and inclusive academic environments, but also for deepening our understanding of what the pursuit of doctoral studies truly entails.

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