

Mental Health and Academic Trajectory: The Impact of Stress, ‘Imposter’ Phenomenon and Supervision on the Attrition Intention of Greek Doctoral Candidates

Evaggelia Zotou

Hellenic Open University

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the lived experiences of doctoral candidates in Greece, focusing on the intersection of mental health, academic progress, and attrition intention. Utilizing the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, the research explores how high-pressure academic requirements—such as writing volume and deadlines—contribute to burnout and systematic thoughts of quitting. Through semi-structured interviews with 20 candidates, the study highlights the prevalence of the Imposter Phenomenon, where subjective feelings of inadequacy undermine professional identity. Results underscore supervision quality as a catalytic factor; while supportive mentorship enhances resilience and provides professional validation, poor collaboration intensifies isolation and stress. Furthermore, the study identifies self-compassion and digital social support networks as vital personal coping mechanisms. The findings suggest a need for Greek universities to institutionalize specialized psychological support and supervisor training to bridge existing research gaps and foster a more sustainable academic environment.

KEYWORDS: Greek Doctoral Candidates, Imposter Phenomenon, Supervision Quality, Attrition Intention, Qualitative Research.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

The investigation of mental health among doctoral students through qualitative research approaches (Appendix 1), reveals the path toward the degree as a continuous balance between inspiration and exhaustion. Doctoral candidates experience research as a process that profoundly affects their psychosocial well-being, where personal satisfaction from scientific discovery often conflicts with mental fatigue (Cornér, Pyhältö, & Peltonen, 2017).

A central theme in the narratives of doctoral candidates is the supervisory relationship, which determines their lived experience in the academic environment. Effective guidance and the presence of a supportive mentor emerge as the most critical factors for maintaining well-being, as they provide a sense of security and professional validation (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2020). Conversely, difficulties in collaborating with the supervisor, especially among populations such as international doctoral students, can intensify feelings of isolation and render the doctoral journey an experience of intense stress (Evans & Stevenson, 2011).

The Imposter Phenomenon (IP) also appears prominently in qualitative reports, highlighting the internal conflict between objective achievements and the subjective sense of inadequacy. Doctoral candidates describe how the fear of being "exposed" affects their professional identity, creating obstacles to their development (Chakraverty, 2020). The search for protective factors through the lens of Positive Psychology reveals that psychological resilience is strengthened by inner strength, which allows researchers to cope with dissertation challenges (Lundman et al., 2019). Additionally, adopting practices that enhance positive emotions and self-regulation can function preventively against psychological collapse (Jackman & Sisson, 2022).

Particular interest lies in the impact of social and gender contexts on researcher well-being. Studies on female doctoral students emphasize the need for a holistic view of mental health that includes a balance between academic identity and personal roles (Schmidt & Umans, 2014). Meanwhile, the use of digital media and social networks, such as the hashtag #PhDlife, emerges as a modern way of seeking social support and managing stress, helping candidates find balance (Varga, Shuster, & Sowa, 2021). In different cultural contexts, qualitative research confirms that challenges are universal but are influenced by the local socio-economic conditions candidates face (Mahsood, Mahboob, & Aleem, 2025). Finally, the critical question arises whether current measurement tools capture the full picture of the doctoral experience, with researchers noting that qualitative understanding is essential to fill the gaps in quantitative scales (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018).

Despite the existence of the above qualitative data highlighting the depth of the doctoral experience, a significant research gap is observed in the Greek academic context. Existing domestic studies fail to examine, in a combined and qualitative manner, the relationship between supervision quality and Imposter Phenomenon as predictors of study attrition. Furthermore, while the importance of internal resources is highlighted internationally, the contribution of self-compassion as a regulatory factor in

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protecting Greek doctoral candidates from stress and burnout has not been sufficiently investigated. The present research aims to fill this gap by providing evidence-based data to enhance the well-being of researchers in Greece.

PURPOSE, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative research is the in-depth investigation of the lived experience of doctoral candidates regarding their mental health and academic journey within the Greek university. Through the analysis of personal narratives, the study seeks to understand how researchers perceive the impact of stress and Imposter Phenomenon on their daily lives, as well as the decisive role played by supervision quality and social support in their intention or thought of abandoning their studies.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To achieve the above exploratory purpose, the following central research questions are formulated to guide data collection and qualitative analysis:

1. How do doctoral candidates describe the experience of academic burnout, and which aspects of the dissertation do they consider most stressful?
2. In what way does Imposter Syndrome affect the confidence and professional identity of researchers when presenting their work or accepting criticism?
3. How is the relationship with the supervising professor meaningful to them, and to what extent does the quality of this interaction affect the student's commitment to completing the research?
4. What personal and social coping mechanisms do candidates employ to manage the balance between research and personal life?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH

The significance of this research lies in its primary contribution at both a scientific and practical level, as it attempts to fill a substantial literature gap regarding the mental health of researchers in Greece. Scientifically, the study offers an in-depth theoretical understanding of how Imposter Syndrome and academic burnout are constructed through the personal narratives of doctoral candidates, highlighting the particularities of the domestic academic environment. Practically, the findings can serve as a foundation for Greek universities to develop targeted mentoring policies and specialized psychological support structures.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was chosen to investigate the mental health and attrition intention of doctoral candidates. Qualitative research is considered most appropriate as it allows for the emergence of subjective complexities and the in-depth interpretation of participants' experiences within their natural context (Isari & Pourkos, 2015). In contrast to quantitative methods aiming for generalization through numerical data, the qualitative approach focuses on understanding the meaning researchers themselves attribute to their experiences, offering a "thick description" of the phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

RESEARCH TOOL

Individual semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection tool, as they allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The design of the tool (Appendix 2) is based on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and is systematically structured into six central axes. Initially, the experiential journey and expectations are explored, while the second section focuses on work demands, specifically burnout and attrition intention (Schaufeli et al., 2009). The third section delves into Imposter Syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978). The fourth section focuses on work resources, such as supervision quality and academic belonging (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). The fifth section seeks personal coping mechanisms and the impact of the institutional framework, while the guide concludes with suggestions for future improvement.

RESEARCH SAMPLE

Participant selection was conducted through purposive sampling. The sample consists of 20 doctoral candidates from Greek universities, a number deemed sufficient to achieve theoretical saturation (Cohen et al., 2017).

RESEARCH ETHICS

The research follows strict ethical principles (Bryman, 2016). Informed consent was secured and anonymity/confidentiality was guaranteed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Participants maintained the right to withdraw at any stage (BERA, 2018). Audio material was stored in encrypted files and destroyed after transcription, ensuring full compliance with data protection guidelines (Silverman, 2016).

DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic Analysis was used for material processing, following the six-stage process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2012). Responses were grouped into thematic categories based on the JD-R model.

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RESEARCH RESULTS

The thematic analysis highlights the multifaceted complexity of the doctoral experience, emphasizing the critical nexus between mental health, environmental factors, and academic progress (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018; Levecque et al., 2017).

1. Expectations and Reality Gap: In the first section, it is observed that the reality of the dissertation journey often deviates significantly from initial scholarly visions. The lack of formal structure and the unanticipated bureaucratic burden create a sense of disappointment.

"I believed I would be a researcher producing knowledge, but I ended up a bureaucrat chasing signatures and struggling with chaotic processes without any guidebook." (Participant 3).

"You expect a mentor to guide your thinking; you get a bureaucrat who only cares if the font size in your progress report is correct." (Participant 7).

This discrepancy is identified in the literature as a "mismatch of expectations" which can lead to a breakdown of the psychological contract between the researcher and the institution (Pyhältö et al., 2012; Rousseau, 1989), ultimately forming the background for cumulative psychological pressure.

2. Work Demands, Burnout and Attrition: The second section, focused on work demands, indicates that emotional and physical exhaustion is primarily triggered by pressing deadlines and the overwhelming volume of academic writing. Participants describe mental fatigue not merely as tiredness, but as a decisive "exhaustion dimension" of burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001).

"There are nights when I stare at the screen and feel my brain has completely dried up. This fatigue isn't physical; it's a mental paralysis that makes you say 'drop it, this martyrdom isn't worth it'." (Participant 5).

"There were weeks where I didn't leave my room. I'd look at my unfinished draft and just cry. That was the first time I seriously Googled 'how to withdraw from a PhD'." (Participant 8).

"It's not just work; it's the guilt. If I'm sleeping, I feel I should be writing. If I'm eating, I'm wasting time. That's what burns you out—the lack of an 'off' switch." (Participant 4).

According to the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, when demands (deadlines, workload) consistently outweigh resources, "exhaustion" occurs, which is the primary predictor of attrition intention (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Schaufeli et al., 2009). This state acts as a primary driver for attrition intention, as the cognitive cost of continuing outweighs the perceived benefits of the degree (Schaufeli et al., 2009; Rigler et al., 2017).

3. The Imposter Phenomenon: The third section reveals that Imposter Syndrome is a pervasive barrier. The subjective belief that success is attributable to luck or external factors rather than merit undermines self-efficacy (Clance & Imes, 1978).

"Every time my supervisor makes a comment, I feel like I've finally been 'found out.' That they will realize I don't belong here and that I've just been fooling everyone all this time." (Participant 1).

"Every time I get a paper accepted, I think: 'They must have been short on submissions.' I'm terrified that in the next conference, someone will ask a question that proves I don't know what I'm talking about." (Participant 11).

"I see my peers posting about their achievements and I feel like a mistake. Like the admissions committee accidentally let me in." (Participant 9).

In the competitive "publish or perish" academic culture, this internal insecurity makes candidates hyper-vulnerable to criticism from supervisors, leading to "intellectual inauthenticity" and increased anxiety (Bothello & Roulet, 2019; Chakraverty, 2020).

4. Work Resources: Supervision and Belonging: Regarding work resources, the analysis underscores the transformative power of qualitative supervision. Beyond mere technical guidance, moral support and consistent communication function as "relational resources" that enhance resilience (Mainhard et al., 2009; Woolston, 2019).

"When my supervisor told me 'I am here for you, we will find the way together,' I felt a weight lift. It's not just the guidance; it's knowing you aren't alone in a dark room." (Participant 2).

"The PhD office is a lonely island. But we started an informal group chat. Knowing that others are also struggling with their methodology makes me feel sane again." (Participant 6).

"My supervisor is my anchor. When I feel like a failure, she reminds me that research is 90% failure and 10% persistence. Without that 10-minute coffee talk, I would have quit a year ago." (Participant 20).

Furthermore, a strong sense of academic belonging and peer integration serves as a protective buffer against the "loneliness of the long-distance researcher," significantly reducing isolation-induced stress (Hunter & Devine, 2016; Hasgall et al., 2019).

5. Coping Mechanisms and Institutional Context: The fifth section explores personal coping mechanisms, showing that candidates who adopt self-compassion and proactive problem-solving strategies manage setbacks more effectively (Neff, 2003; Sverdlik et al., 2018). However, individual resilience cannot compensate for systemic failures.

"I try not to be hard on myself, but when the university itself doesn't provide the basics—not even a clear administrative path—personal endurance eventually runs out." (Participant 4).

"I've started practicing mindfulness just to stay calm, but meditation doesn't fix a broken administration that loses your paperwork for three months." (Participant 10).

"In Greece, you are expected to be a 'hero' researcher. There's no counseling, no training, no help. You either survive by luck or you drown." (Participant 14).

There is a documented need for structural reform within Greek Higher Education Institutions, particularly regarding the formalization of administrative support and the provision of specialized psychological services for early-career researchers (Vassilopoulos, 2012).

6. Future Propositions and Conclusion: Finally, the participants’ suggestions emphasize the need for institutionalizing peer support groups and providing systematic pedagogical training for supervisors (Stracke & Kumar, 2010).

"I wish there was an office that understands what a PhD student goes through. To be able to talk to peers without the fear of being judged for our struggles." (Participant 6)

"Supervisors should be audited. Just because someone is a great scientist doesn't mean they know how to manage a human being's anxiety." (Participant 7)

"We need a formal 'Welcome' week for PhDs—not for paperwork, but for mental health. We need to be told it's okay to struggle." (Participant 2)

The analysis concludes that doctoral attrition is rarely the result of intellectual failure; rather, it is the systemic result of an imbalance between high demands (stressors) and insufficient resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Strengthening the candidate’s self-confidence while fostering a supportive academic community are the fundamental keys to completing the doctoral journey successfully.

DISCUSSION

The present research highlights that the doctoral journey constitutes an exceptionally demanding process where mental health is tested by the interaction of internal insecurities and external pressures. The findings confirm that doctoral candidates experience research as a continuous balance between inspiration and exhaustion, a fact that aligns with the observations of Cornér, Pyhältö and Peltonen (2017) regarding how mental fatigue systematically conflicts with personal satisfaction derived from scientific discovery. This finding reinforces the application of the Job Demands-Resources model in the academic environment as high work demands deplete the psychological resources of researchers making attrition a potential recourse.

A central finding of the study is the decisive role of supervision which emerges as the strongest job resource for preventing dropout. As supported by Al Makhamreh and Stockley (2020), effective guidance and the existence of a supportive mentor offer the necessary sense of professional validation and security. Conversely difficulties in collaborating with the supervisor, as pointed out by Evans and Stevenson (2011), can intensify the feeling of isolation and transform the doctoral path into an experience of intense stress. The analysis shows that moral support acts as a buffer against the Imposter Syndrome which, according to Chakraverty (2020), creates serious obstacles to the development of the professional identity of researchers through the constant fear of exposure.

The self-compassion strategies and inner strength that emerged from the participants' narratives confirm the importance of personal resilience as a critical health resource. According to Lundman and colleagues (2019), inner strength allows doctoral candidates to cope with the challenges of the dissertation while maintaining their psychological balance. Furthermore, the adoption of practices that enhance positive emotions and self-regulation, as proposed by Jackman and Sisson (2022), can function preventively against psychological collapse. The use of modern means of social support, such as the digital networks studied by Varga Shuster and Sowa (2021), also emerges as an effective way of managing stress and seeking a sense of belonging.

Despite the global nature of these challenges, as documented by Mahsood Mahboob and Aleem (2025), the present study highlights the significant research gap existing in the Greek academic framework. The lack of combined studies examining the quality of supervision and the Imposter Syndrome in Greece renders the present work necessary for bridging the knowledge regarding protective factors. Qualitative understanding of the experience, as argued by Schmidt and Hansson (2018), is essential to fill the gaps of quantitative scales and lead to holistic proposals for improving the well-being of researchers in Greece.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The present study concludes that the mental health of doctoral candidates in Greece constitutes a critical issue requiring immediate institutional intervention, as the intention to drop out is fueled by a combination of high work demands and internalized insecurities. The analysis revealed that the Imposter Syndrome and mental exhaustion are not merely individual problems, but reflect the structural pressures of the academic environment, a fact that confirms the theoretical approach of Cornér Pyhältö and Peltonen (2017), regarding the complexity of the doctoral experience. Supervision emerged as the catalytic factor that can either shield the researcher's well-being or accelerate the burnout process depending on the quality of the support provided.

In terms of practical applications, the findings indicate the need for institutionalizing support programs focusing on the cultivation of inner strength and self-compassion, as proposed by Lundman and colleagues (2019), as primary health resources. Greek university institutions ought to invest in the training of supervising professors on issues of communication and mentoring to create a safe environment of professional validation, according to the model of Al Makhamreh and Stockley (2020). Additionally, the creation of official social support networks and the use of digital media for exchanging experiences, as described by Varga Shuster and Sowa (2021), can reduce the sense of isolation that often leads to resignation.

Despite the limitations of the research concerning the sample size and the specific time frame, this work covers a significant research gap in the Greek academic landscape offering a deeper qualitative understanding of the doctoral journey according to the research needs highlighted by Schmidt and Umans (2014). Future research should further examine the moderating role of self-compassion through longitudinal studies to capture the evolution of psychological resilience from the beginning to the completion of the dissertation. Overall, the promotion of an anthropocentric model of doctoral studies is a necessary condition for ensuring innovation and academic excellence in Greece.

APPENDIX 1: LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY TABLE

Author (Year)	Purpose of the Study	Sample	Methodology / Tools	Main Findings	Limitations
Al Makhamreh & Stockley (2020)	Relationship between mentorship and well-being	19 doctoral students (Canada)	Qualitative (Phenomenology) / Interviews	Toxic supervision causes burnout, while authentic supervision prevents it	Small sample size; single university context
Chakraverty (2020)	Imposter Phenomenon in STEM postdocs	252 postdocs (USA)	Mixed Methods / Clance IP Scale	Imposter Phenomenon leads to tendencies of abandoning an academic career	Focused only on STEM fields
Stubb, Pyhältö & Lonka (2011)	Balance of inspiration and exhaustion	669 doctoral students (Finland)	Qualitative Content Analysis / Questionnaires	Academic community is a source of both inspiration and burnout	Limited depth due to open-ended questionnaire responses
Evans & Stevenson (2011)	Experiences of international students	17 international nursing students (UK)	Qualitative / Interviews	Linguistic and cultural isolation fuels the Imposter Phenomenon	Very specialized sample
Jackman & Sisson (2022)	Well-being through Positive Psychology	9 recent PhDs (England)	Qualitative / Life Grid & Interviews	Self-efficacy acts as a “shield” against burnout	Retrospective design
Lundman et al. (2019)	Inner strength as a health resource	15 doctoral students (Sweden)	Qualitative Analysis	Inner resilience reduces psychological pressure	Heterogeneous sample
Mahsood et al. (2025)	Socio-ecological framework of well-being	11 doctoral students (Pakistan)	Qualitative Phenomenology / Interviews	Burnout is linked to deficiencies in institutional and state policies	Cultural and contextual limitations
Schmidt & Umans (2014)	Well-being of female doctoral students	10 female doctoral students (Sweden)	Qualitative (Lived Experiences)	Role conflict reinforces the Imposter Phenomenon	Small, single-gender sample
Schmidt & Hansson (2018)	Critique of well-being measurement	Theoretical study	JD–R Model (Job Demands–Resources)	Burnout results from a lack of resources	Absence of new empirical data
Varga et al. (2021)	#PhDlife and sources of support	Doctoral students in Public Administration	Qualitative / Content Analysis	Peer support is more effective against the Imposter Phenomenon	Limited to one discipline

APPENDIX 2. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Theme 1: Introduction and Expectations

1. **The journey experience:** How would you describe your journey in the PhD so far, and to what extent do your initial expectations correspond to the current academic reality?

Theme 2: Job Demands and Burnout

2. **Sources of stress:** Which aspects of the doctoral process (e.g., research, writing, publications, deadlines) do you consider the most demanding, and how do these affect your levels of personal fatigue?
3. **Experience of exhaustion:** Can you describe a situation where you felt that your energy reserves were depleted, possibly leading you to think about interrupting your studies?

Theme 3: The Imposter Syndrome

4. **Self-perception of abilities:** Are there moments when you feel that your successes are due more to luck, or do you feel the pressure that you are not as capable as others expect you to be?
5. **Criticism and comparison:** In what way does comparing yourself to other researchers or the feedback (criticism) you receive for your work affect your self-confidence?

Theme 4: Job Resources and Support

6. **Relationship with the Supervisor:** How would you characterize the communication with your supervisor, and to what extent do you feel that they provide you with the necessary practical or moral support?
7. **Academic Community:** How important is the sense of belonging to a wider research community to you, and how does collaborating with colleagues act as a boost to your well-being?

Theme 5: Academic Climate and Coping (Buffering)

8. **Balance and Management:** What personal mechanisms do you employ to try and maintain a balance between academic demands and your personal life to protect your mental health?

9. **Institutional Framework:** How do you judge the university structures (administrative assistance, recognition of effort) in terms of their contribution to reducing your work-related stress?

Theme 6: Recommendations and Future

10. **Suggestions for Improvement:** What changes within the framework of doctoral studies do you believe would contribute significantly to improving the professional well-being of researchers?

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