



## EXPERIENCES OF UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS STUDYING FOR A DOCTORAL DEGREE IN THE MEXICAN CONTEXT

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### ABSTRACT

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Aim/Purpose	To understand the experiences of full-time university professors at a Mexican university who are pursuing a doctoral degree, this study seeks to describe the experiences of doctoral students who are also university professors. The study focuses on the intentions, experiences, and prospects regarding the decision to study for a doctorate as a university professor.
Background	This research has a dual background. On the one hand, there is the institutional interest in establishing an academic and professional profile of university professors studying for a doctorate in decision-making. On the other hand, the researchers who conducted this study maintain an interest in deepening knowledge of the doctoral process and researcher training. In the field of educational research, this article seeks to strengthen the almost nil research carried out specifically in Mexico on university professors who study for a doctorate, particularly in private institutions.
Methodology	The research design is based on the interpretive paradigm, with a qualitative approach and a phenomenological perspective. A semi-structured interview was used to explore the individual experiences of 17 university professors who are studying for a doctorate.
Contribution	This study is unique in that it explores the personal and professional views of university professors studying for a doctoral degree, providing further insight into academic and professional profiles.
Findings	Studying for a doctorate while already belonging to a research ecosystem makes the challenges and difficulties of this process easier to cope with, favoring more positive results.

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Recommendation for Practitioners	To foster more assertive decision-making among university management, the recommendations are addressed to human talent managers, research managers, academic directors, university professors, and doctoral students.
Recommendations for Researchers	To strengthen this line of research, it would be necessary to deepen the academic and professional profiles of university professors who are doctoral students and the materialization of an academic trajectory, to have more theoretical and practical elements for the training of researchers in the different fields of science.
Impact on Society	Understanding the dynamics of doctoral training processes in the case of university professors in a Mexican context facilitates the formation of research ecosystems, labor insertion, and the consolidation of a professional career.
Future Research	Future research should explore other university contexts and the consolidation of the academic career path for university professors.
Keywords	doctoral studies, institutional conditions, Mexican context, student experiences, university professors

## INTRODUCTION

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Being a university professor implies responding to the three substantive functions of university life, namely teaching, research, and cultural extension (Ortega y Gasset, 1930). Perhaps harmonizing these elements seems like an easy task at first sight, but in reality, it requires specific and permanent training in the discipline in which the professor works, as well as the development of specialized competencies to promote teaching and learning processes aimed at training professionals in different fields, in addition to generating knowledge through scientific research processes.

In Mexico, the university's substantive functions are reflected in Article 24 of the General Law of Higher Education (Presidencia de la República, 2021), which sets out the following purposes for this educational level: the promotion of scientific, technological, humanistic, and innovative vocation(s), as well as the consolidation of teaching-learning processes aimed at training professionals and researchers, which requires the comprehensive preparation of university professors. However, this preparation does not necessarily take the form of a doctorate since it is not required to teach undergraduate and master's degree classes.

In addition to the above, it is worth noting that, in Mexico, there are two types of university professors, those who teach one-off classes and those who have full-time positions. Both profiles must have completed at least the same degree as the educational level in which they work. The former's primary activity is teaching, while the latter, in addition to teaching, must perform any of the following activities: (a) research or innovative application of knowledge, (b) participation in the design or updating of study plans and programs, and the corresponding teaching materials, (c) advisory tutoring, and (d) academic management (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2017, Article 6).

These activities mark a clear difference between the two professor profiles. Teachers who give one-off classes generally focus more on the development of the profession in their specific field of work and contribute with practice-based knowledge to teaching-learning processes. Full-time professors are teachers who aim to make an academic career within the university, thus harmonizing the activities provided for in the general law and in a given university where they integrate teaching, research, cultural extension, and management into their daily practice. For the latter, studying for a doctorate is often considered a necessity.

This research focuses on a particular university that has been in existence for 55 years and has three campuses in Mexico: Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Aguascalientes. The purpose of this article is to

describe the experiences of full-time university professors, assigned to an educational institution in Mexico, who are studying for a doctoral degree.

This research is pertinent since most research on the doctoral process focuses on the competencies that researchers must have (Strokova, 2018), the effectiveness of doctoral programs (Sverdlik et al., 2018), and the experiences of doctoral students within a particular program (Pedraza, 2018), leaving aside the personal and professional views of those immersed in this process. Thus, studies like the one presented here shed greater light on the academic and professional profiles of university professors studying for a doctorate, which not only contributes knowledge to this area of educational research but can also promote more assertive institutional decision-making towards the consolidation of professors' life and career plans and research processes in the university context. It should be noted that this area of educational research reports almost no studies on this topic in Latin American countries and specifically in Mexico.

### ***RESEARCH AND DOCTORAL STUDIES***

Integrating research into the tasks developed at universities has quickly accelerated in the last two centuries thanks to the scientific, technological, and educational advances sustained by the modern era's scientific thought. The founding of the University of Berlin at the beginning of the nineteenth century heralded the arrival of scientific research to university education. Its founder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, established research, teaching, and study as the guiding principles of the university (Carrera et al., 2017). This university spirit made its way to other European universities and universities throughout the United States. The institutionalization of scientific research as one of the university's priorities brought with it the consolidation of postgraduate studies, especially doctoral programs, constituting, from then on, the fundamental basis for promoting research processes and training researchers (Carrera et al., 2017).

In Latin America, the first indications of scientific research entering the university and the appearance of doctorates are found in Argentina with the University Reform Movement of 1918 (Carrera et al., 2017). In the case of Mexico, the doctorate first emerged in the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), which remits back to the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico founded on September 21, 1551, by royal decree of the Prince of Asturias, Philip II. There, professors who had completed a five-year teaching period were given the title of 'doctor' (Carrera et al., 2017). However, the legal basis for the formal creation of postgraduate studies was not established until 1929. The first doctoral degree, subject to the prior attainment of a bachelor's and master's degree, was granted in 1945 in the Faculty of Sciences (Biology, Physics, and Mathematics). A couple of years later, a similar program was also opened in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters (Hernández & Nieto, 2010). In that same year, with the creation of the Organic Law of the UNAM, research began to be considered one of the substantive tasks of this university (Carrera et al., 2017).

The impulse to research began spreading among the different public and private universities of the Mexican Republic, consolidating little by little doctoral studies programs (Carrera et al., 2017), which, according to the General Law of Higher Education (Presidencia de la República, 2021), are constituted as an educational level attained after the completion of bachelor's and master's degrees. They have "the objective of providing a solid training to develop the professional activity of research in sciences, humanities or arts with the purpose of generating new scientific, technological and humanistic knowledge, innovative applications or original technological developments" (p. 7).

Now, there is no doubt that doctoral studies are oriented toward training researchers; however, according to Moreno (2011, p. 62), "although doctoral programs have extremely valuable training experiences, not everything they offer with the intention of training researchers contributes substantially to this end, since there are institutional conditions that favor, limit or reorient, starting from a dynamic that is not always conscious, doctoral programs' ability to solidly train researchers and, therefore, consolidate research in universities".

The idea mentioned above has to do with the institutional conditions of the universities to which the professors studying for a doctorate belong since it will create an environment conducive to the consolidation of what has been learned in the doctoral program, as long as these institutions are research-oriented. According to Inciarte et al. (2012), universities that do so strive to be centers of excellence and innovation where, without neglecting teaching, scientific production is promoted with a view toward satisfying contextual needs, promoting dialogue among diverse spheres of knowledge, and achieving visibility in world rankings.

In this type of university, the curriculum, policies, and management are all aligned and aim to define specific interests within the institutional culture for which research is a transversal axis and a social practice that permeates the entire training plan (Mora, 2014). According to B. R. Gómez (2003), this is reflected in three concrete actions:

1. Research is conducted taking into account scientific processes that promote the generation of knowledge.
2. Research is consumed in light of continuous updates with new discoveries and advances in a given field of specialty.
3. Research is used in teaching through the incorporation into the classroom of new knowledge generated both by professors' research and that generated by the scientific community in general.

This is the appropriate research-oriented context in which seeds sown in a doctoral program can bear fruit. It becomes a natural environment for the development of researchers and the consolidation of research processes, establishing a virtuous circle of knowledge generation and scientific production linked to the daily work of university life.

### ***THE EXPERIENCE OF STUDYING FOR A DOCTORATE***

As explained, studying for a doctorate implies a personal and professional maturation process, and is guided by an interest in pursuing a career as a researcher in the university context. Of note, because Mexico is not a highly industrialized country, there is no knowledge economy linked to industry and, therefore, research carried out in universities impacts the environment, the financial, industrial, and health sectors in its search to solve social and cultural problems (Aguirre & López, 2019). This context is quite distant from highly industrialized societies, such as Australia, where 25% of Ph.D. graduates work in public and private sector development (Aguirre & Lopez, 2019).

In the Mexican context, it is also worth mentioning that setting the goal of achieving a doctorate, and thus starting a research career, is not an easy task. It implies going through an adaptive process, requiring one to continuously balance academic competencies and personal, family, and professional conditions with the demands of the doctoral program (Pedraza, 2018). Further, doctoral studies seek to strengthen theoretical, epistemological, and methodological training in a specific disciplinary field with the aim of training researchers to comprehensively understand the problems of a complex and dynamic reality (Skakni, 2018).

Despite the above, especially in Latin America and specifically in Mexico, many factors can complicate a researcher's training path in the context of a doctorate, including the rigidity of the program, the infrastructure and funding available for research, and the doctoral student's interest in making a meaningful contribution (Aguirre & López, 2019). This leads many doctoral students to complete their studies to improve employment opportunities or increase their income, while only a minority aim for personal and scientific excellence, aspiring to generate knowledge and contribute to the development of humanity (Skakni, 2018).

The fact is that, although an interest in generating knowledge is fundamental for becoming a researcher and for practicing as a doctor in a specific area of knowledge, it is also true that achieving this requires certain intellectual, effective, and working conditions (M. Gómez & Alzate, 2018), along

with a series of disciplinary, methodological and general competencies that must be formed during doctoral studies and reinforced throughout researchers' professional careers.

Núñez and González (2019) note that a doctor who seeks to become a researcher must demonstrate an understanding of a field of study, mastery of research methods and techniques, as well as scientific writing and information management skills, the ability to work on a team, and ethical commitment. In addition, they should have qualities that support autonomous learning, adaptation to new situations, creativity, and leadership. Garcés and Santoya (2013) also add time and task management skills, as well as the ability to relate within academic and scientific communities (Douglas, 2020).

It is worth mentioning that one of the greatest challenges that doctoral students face involves time management since they must combine the demands of academic sessions and tutorials with writing a doctoral thesis, and then harmonize all of this with work and family responsibilities (Douglas, 2020). Thus, with the help of their thesis advisor, doctoral students must clearly see doctoral training as a priority in a continuous and self-regulated manner; in so doing, they can more constructively and creatively take advantage of their situation and capabilities (Garcés & Santoya, 2013).

Doctoral training also faces the challenge of establishing academic conditions for doctoral students to join national and international research networks in their chosen fields. This membership is essential for the development of research projects and consequent scientific production (Garcés & Santoya, 2013), thus ensuring that doctoral students begin not only to generate knowledge but also to socialize it and promote universal access to knowledge.

In addition to the above, a survey on the Ph.D. experience – conducted in 2019 by the journal *Nature*, in conjunction with the London-based research company Shift Learning – that reached more than 6,300 students from five continents reported on the expectations and the intellectual challenges of studying for a doctorate. It points to the emergence of stress, anxiety, and depression from having to respond to the demands of the program, and those related to achieving a work-life-study balance, coupled with the uncertainty of the labor market post-completion (Villafuerte, 2019).

Regarding the expectations and intellectual challenges involved in studying for a doctorate, this same study comments that the initial expectation decreased notoriously during the formative process. Specifically, although 75% of the people surveyed stated that they feel satisfied with their decision to pursue a doctoral degree, 45% also commented that their expectations decreased drastically during the process, which sometimes made their path more arduous (Villafuerte, 2019).

On the other hand, a 2018 study in *Nature Biotechnology*, referenced by Villafuerte (2019) notes that Ph.D. students are six times more likely to experience depression and anxiety than the general population. This is caused, among other things, by the number of hours per week they must dedicate to the training program without neglecting their personal, professional, and family life. In addition, an uncertain job market does not help (Villafuerte, 2019) since, at least in Mexico, obtaining a doctoral degree does not ensure a good professional or economic position, nor even the possibility of becoming a researcher.

To delve deeper into what studying for a doctorate implies for a university professor, this study's methodology is presented below, as are the specific institutional context and the participants in the research process.

## METHODOLOGY

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The design of this research is based on the interpretative paradigm, with a qualitative approach and a phenomenological perspective. The interpretative paradigm has been chosen considering that all qualitative research seeks the use of methods that always focus on the meanings and interpretation of social phenomena and social processes in the particular contexts in which they occur (Sumner, 2006). In the case of the study presented here on the experiences and dilemmas of university profes-

sors studying for a doctorate, what is of interest is to understand the description of subjective experiences of the participants. This coincides with what Tracy (2019) states about qualitative research consisting of immersing oneself in a scene and trying to make sense of that context and with what Patton (2015) asserts about the phenomenological perspective, which allows researchers to explore the interpretation of people's experience and discover the differences in the way they relate to their internal world.

Qualitative research usually involves small samples of people nested in a context, with a tendency toward purposeful selection. Creswell (2002) indicates that qualitative researchers collect information in the natural environment through multiple data sources, such as interviews, observations, and documents. This study relies on interviews because they provide in-depth information about how each participant uniquely experiences the meaning of their journey as doctoral students. As a qualitative collection technique, interviews essentially consist of asking structured questions and aim to understand the world from the perspective of the interviewee by unpacking the meanings of their experiences (Waller et al., 2015).

### *INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT*

This research was carried out at a private university in Mexico that was founded 55 years ago and has three campuses throughout the country, in the cities of Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Aguascalientes. The data discussed in this and subsequent sections integrate information from all three locations.

The university was founded in 1967 with an educational model centered on the person and Christian humanism. It currently has eleven schools and faculties that offer undergraduate and graduate programs in a variety of knowledge areas, including health sciences, philosophy, business, engineering, pedagogy, law, government, economics, fine arts, communication, and hospitality. During the 2021-2022 school year, it had more than 11,000 undergraduate students, about 4,200 graduate students, 640 full-time professors, and more than 2,000 lecturers.

Although most of the university's development has been accompanied by a professional structure, thanks to a process of institutional maturity and as a consequence of historical, social, and cultural changes in higher education in Mexico and worldwide, about seven years ago, the university decided to formally and strategically move towards a research-oriented model (Inciarte et al., 2012). There, research is considered a means to compete in world rankings and become an influential institution without losing sight of teaching and professional training.

To strengthen its profile as a research university, it has implemented at least two phases. The first began approximately 20 years ago, when research subjects were gradually incorporated into the undergraduate and graduate curricula, in addition to training research professors through postgraduate studies and specialized courses.

The second phase, more oriented toward becoming an influential university, began in 2015 when the rector's council took on the task of promoting research in a transversal manner through various strategies, including financial incentives for indexed scientific production, annual research grant calls, and funding for doctoral studies, a professor categorization system with emphasis on research, a management structure with vice-rectorships for research on each campus and research secretariats in each school or faculty. These policies have opened the door to significant progress in the field of research, with more than 2,000 publications indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, 135 professors who are members of Mexico's National Researcher System (SNI, for its initials in Spanish), and, as of June 2022, 49 professors who have successfully completed the categorization process with an emphasis on research. In addition, the university has 71 full-time professors who are currently studying in a Ph.D. program. The data in this article come from their responses to a survey conducted by the authors.

Of these doctoral student professors, 54.9% are men and 45.1% are women; 33.8% are between 26 and 35 years old, 38.0% are between 36 and 45, 25.3% are between 46 and 55 and only 2.8% are between 56 and 65. As for marital status, 63.3% are married and 36.6% are single. In terms of the doctorate they are studying, only 17% are in full-time programs, while 83% are enrolled in a part-time doctoral degree program. A total of 32.3% are in a program at the same university where they work, while 67.6% are at an external institution of which 58.3% are foreign institutions and 41.6% are in Mexico. Finally, 59.2% of the doctoral students surveyed do not have indexed articles, while 40.8% do, and 95% have participated as a speaker at a conference in their field.

### ***PARTICIPANTS***

Of the 71 doctoral student professors at the university, 17 participated in this research. They were chosen according to certain selection criteria to obtain a more comprehensive view of the participants' experiences. The selection criteria included proportionate representation of professors from the three campuses, from different academic areas, similar numbers of men and women, distributed of different ages, diverse marital status, variety in terms of time dedicated to their doctorate program, and the type of university where they are studying. Table 1 describes the profile of the participating professors.

**Table 1. Participant profiles**

<b>ID</b>	<b>Campus</b>	<b>Academic area</b>	<b>Genre</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Marital status</b>	<b>Dedication time</b>	<b>University of study</b>
D1	Guadalajara	Engineering	F	43	Single	Partial	National
D2	Guadalajara	Humanities	F	41	Married	Partial	Foreign
D3	Guadalajara	Humanities	M	44	Married	Partial	National
D4	Guadalajara	Business	F	40	Single	Partial	Foreign
D5	Guadalajara	Pedagogy	F	40	Married	Partial	National
D6	Guadalajara	Communication	M	50	Married	Partial	Foreign
D7	Aguascalientes	Communication	M	39	Married	Partial	Foreign
D8	Guadalajara	Business	M	33	Married	Partial	National
D9	Guadalajara	Business	F	33	Single	Partial	National
D10	Ciudad de México	Engineering	F	39	Married	Full time	National
D11	Ciudad de México	Government and Economics	M	41	Married	Partial	National
D12	Ciudad de México	Pedagogy	M	30	Single	Partial	National
D13	Ciudad de México	Humanities	F	35	Married	Partial	National
D14	Aguascalientes	Humanities	M	40	Married	Full time	National
D15	Ciudad de México	Business	F	30	Married	Partial	Foreign
D16	Ciudad de México	Business	M	53	Married	Partial	National
D17	Aguascalientes	Engineering	M	31	Married	Full time	Foreign

Thus, eight women and nine men participated in this research, with an average age of 39. A total of 76.47% are married and 23.52% are single. A total of 82.35% are enrolled in a part-time program, while 17.64% are full-time. A total of 64.70% study in universities in Mexico and 35.29% in universities outside the country.

### *COMPILATION OF INFORMATION*

As mentioned, to explore the individual experiences of university professors who are studying for a doctorate, we resorted to semi-structured interviews, which are characterized by following a sequence of suggested questions, with the flexibility to delve deeper into specific topics that arise in the conversation (Kvale, 2011). The interviews were based on the following prompts: What is the fundamental objective of your doctoral program? Why did you choose the doctoral program and the university in which you are enrolled? How have you combined your personal, family, and professional life with studying for a doctorate? What difficulties have you faced? How have you applied what you have learned during your doctoral program? What concrete actions have you planned to take once your doctorate has been completed?

The interviews were conducted in two formats, according to the needs of the participants: four in-person at the doctoral students' place of work and 13 virtually (via the Zoom platform). In this sense, it is worth noting that authors such as Sah et al. (2020) and Oliffe et al. (2021) affirm that virtual interviews are of great utility for the exploration of topics in the field of higher education and basic social sciences since participants find this format more useful and flexible, as well as perceive that they are less prone to distraction.

In both formats, the interviews had an average duration of 60 minutes and were recorded with the consent of the participants. In the case of the face-to-face interviews, they were audio-recorded using a mobile device, while in the case of the virtual interviews, the Zoom function was used for this purpose. In both cases, these files are under the digital safekeeping of the researchers and no one else has access to them. Subsequently, the transcriptions of each of the interviews were done manually until they were integrated into a single file.

### *ANALYSIS OF THE INFORMATION*

Although the qualitative method chosen for this work is phenomenology under the interpretative paradigm, the proposal that emerged from grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which suggests the method of constant comparisons, was considered for the analysis of the information. This decision was made because the nature of the research questions guides and orients the inquiry process and, therefore, the combination of methods, to adapt to the conceptions and needs of researchers working from a specific discipline of knowledge (Urcia, 2021).

Following the constant comparative method, the authors did a first reading of the transcripts. After labeling the data, similar labels were grouped into categories and, through constant comparison, categories and subcategories were further refined (Richards & Hemphill, 2018).

The information analysis strategy found in the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) makes it possible, through the coding technique (open, axial, and selective), to construct analytical and conceptual categories, in addition to developing theory from the empirical data (Olson et al., 2016). This is because it allows for the generation of conceptual categories that emerge from the empirical evidence or formulated informative categories, which are theoretical abstractions that synthesize the meanings that the research subjects share. This method also seeks to build theory rather than to prove or discover it through the formulation of informative, theoretical questions of a practical and structural nature by comparing incidents in terms of their properties and dimensions, as well as similarities and differences.



This method recommends three steps for its development (Kuckartz, 2019). In the first, which is mostly descriptive in nature, open coding is carried out to identify categories, i.e., concepts that represent phenomena, which are referred to as units of meaning. In the second analytical moment, categories are related to subcategories using axial coding. In the third, the descriptions are completed, the categories are refined and integrated, and the central category is identified through selective coding. The central category has analytical power resulting from a transversal view, allowing the researchers to formulate an explanatory whole.

During the analysis process, no specialized software was used, but it was done manually where each unit of meaning was printed on a card individually and identified with a consecutive number and an identifier of the doctoral student professor interviewed, thus D1 represents the first participant, D2 the second, up to D17 the last one.

### ***VALIDITY AND CREDIBILITY***

Lincoln et al. (2011) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) propose care in conceptualization, data handling, and presentation of results as forms of methodological rigor. To guarantee the validity and reliability of the results, the procedures described below were carried out.

- 1) Once the interviews were transcribed, the participants were given the opportunity to review them and then approve or modify the information. Lincoln and Guba (1985) see this technique as highly important for establishing credibility.
- 2) In addition to the above, the categorization process described above was first carried out independently by each of the researchers and, subsequently, they were subjected to comparison. In the end, the results reported in the study were the product of consensus and, therefore, meet the criterion of researcher triangulation, where the interpretation of more than one researcher is used. This increases the quality and validity of the information by having different perspectives on the same object of study, eliminating the bias of a single researcher (Aguilar & Barroso, 2015). Patton (2015) suggests that the comparison technique involving more than two people analyzing data and results promotes credibility.

### ***RESULTS***

As a piece of qualitative research, the results herein are based on inductive analysis. Thus, the meta-categories, categories, and subcategories emerged from the empirical work and not from the theoretical framework. The induction, in qualitative terms, arises because it starts from the reading of the document, in this case, the interviews, trying to identify central axes or main thematic categories of an object of analysis (Arbeláez & Onrubia, 2014). Three meta-categories emerged from this analysis, within which categories and subcategories emerged, as seen in Table 2.

**Table 2. Meta-categories, categories, and subcategories as a result of interview analysis**

Meta-categories	Categories	Subcategories
Intention	Purpose of the doctorate	Personal and professional development
		Academic career
		Knowledge production
		Job promotion
	Choice of doctoral program	Institution and program prestige
		Field of expertise
Program structure		

Meta-categories	Categories	Subcategories
Experiences	Challenges	Research dynamics
		Open-mindedness
		Time management
		Work-life balance
	Achievements	Delimitation of the research topic
		Academic network
		Self-discipline
		Self-knowledge
	Institutional conditions	Schedule flexibility
		Team support
		Sponsorship
	Applicability of doctoral studies	Teaching
University management		
Foresight for the future	Aspirations	Research teams and research areas
		Research publication
		Outreach
		Teaching
		Consultancy
		Management
	Advice	Personal calling
		Mental health care
		Peer-to-peer support networks

The results display the meta-categories that emerged from the analysis, including intention, experience, and prospective possibilities.

### Intention

This meta-category integrates the units of meaning that express the desires and aims that led the university professors interviewed to study for a doctorate, identifying at least two categories: aims and choice of doctorate.

Regarding the aim, the participants commented that studying for a doctorate can support their personal and professional development; they consider it an opportunity for growth and to establish a life plan.

*The main objective was personal and professional development, from the point of view of seeking professional and academic growth. (D8)*

*[I]t is part of my life plan, of an aim shared by those who study to improve in a certain area of knowledge; it helps you learn and develop certain skills. (D4)*

On the other hand, they believe that studying for a doctorate is a requirement for an academic career, both in research and teaching.

*I personally see it as a logical consequence of having decided to have an academic career, which is not only focused on being in the classroom and transmitting knowledge but generating it, which coincides with a knowledge-generating university. (D6)*

*For me, it is part of academic professionalization, that is to say, to seek to be a much more rigorous academic. (D3)*

*It is the first step to learn how to do research and become a researcher. To learn methodology for research and also to develop the tools that give access to new knowledge on a specific topic. (D11).*

*[T]o become a formal researcher, you need to study for a doctorate. (D6)*

*But also, to become a more specialized teacher with more authority in handling content. For me, it is to be a better teacher. I think that, for students, a professor with a doctorate, even if they say the same thing, which, of course, they don't, they hear him more and he has more clout with them. (D11).*

This is possible because studying for a doctorate and becoming a researcher promotes the generation of knowledge, which fosters making a personal contribution to society and the development of science.

*I believe that its objective is to develop research skills applied to the generation of new knowledge, but that it is destined for the solution of a real problem. (D13)*

*Well, I believe that it's discovering new things and, even more than that, generating knowledge that helps society with that knowledge. (D16)*

This can also be complemented by the desire to study for a doctorate to get a better position within the institution and, therefore, higher remuneration.

*To have the opportunity to compete for positions of greater importance, in positions of greater responsibility, and also, from an academic point of view, to teach postgraduate sessions, which will result in a better salary. (D8)*

Moving on to the choice of the doctoral program, the academic prestige of the institution chosen appears as one of the main selection criteria.

*It is the best university in Mexico, it has great prestige, ample contacts, books, and resources; its researchers have an excellent academic level. (D12)*

*But also, specialization in the topic studied in my doctoral thesis ... they have experts specifically in the area of medical imaging, in the area of artificial intelligence. (D17)*

They also pointed to the program structure, which allows for flexibility in making the doctoral program compatible with family and work responsibilities.

*I had an opportunity to study in the United States, but that implied moving my family and leaving my job so, given that, I looked for a doctorate that would allow for short stays, but that would not require me to work full time. (D6)*

*I was looking for an institution where I could study a doctorate and combine it with my profession, that is to say, I was not looking for a full-time doctorate. Instead, I wanted one where I would not have to move from my city of residence, thus making my family and work situation compatible. (D3)*

In the first meta-category related to intention, it is clear that studying for a doctorate involves personal and professional life plan development, such that academic prestige, program conditions, and the doctoral candidate's present life circumstances are equally important in choosing where to study. But how do these early motivations relate to the individual experience of studying for a doctorate? The following meta-category will attempt to answer this question.

## Experience

This meta-category explores the different realities that participants in this research have faced during their doctoral studies. Presenting their individual experiences gave way to a wealth of experiences expressed in four categories, including challenges, achievements, institutional conditions, and applicability of a doctoral degree.

The first category describes the challenges that the doctoral students have faced, both from an internal and external point of view, to continue their studies. The first subcategory is related to understanding the dynamics of research in terms of requirements in at least two areas, namely group membership and scientific production.

*[U]nderstanding the dynamics of research, not only in Mexico but in the world, how research groups work, and how synergies are managed. (D10)*

*[I]t has been hard to understand, but it is also enjoyable – publishing articles and presenting papers at a conference, personally it has been very enriching. (D9)*

They also talked of openness in facing new theoretical content, to better understand the object of study.

*Reading texts from thinkers I did not know has opened me to new ways of structuring, and to new ways of understanding. It has challenged me, but it has also motivated me to open myself to other positions and to have a more critical vision. (D5)*

The development of time management skills and organizing the different activities involved in studying for a doctorate are also worth mentioning.

*The challenge has been, above all, to adjust my schedule and my work hours, to be more efficient in everything I do so as not to waste time. (D15)*

*[T]o be aware of the things I need to do each week because I do not have four lives and I have to do things for my doctorate, my classes, my work, and my personal life, so I do not take on more than I can do. (D1)*

In addition, they have to accept that one has certain limitations, making it necessary to adjust one's schedule availability and prioritize tasks as a student.

*I am a person with limitations in that the day has 24 hours. (D5)*

*I have taken care of myself. It involves knowing myself and setting limits for myself, knowing how to say no to what I know I will not be able to do. (D2)*

It is also important to highlight the decisions that these doctoral students have had to make to reconcile their studies with their family and work life, which has led them to establish schedules and exercise discipline to comply with them.

*I dedicate Saturdays to the doctorate, all morning until two in the afternoon because on Saturdays I have to cook, something that my children demand of me. (D11)*

*What I have tried to do, and it has worked, is to dedicate exclusive hours, to block off my calendar. Besides, advancing tasks related to the doctorate is the first thing I do in the morning. (D13)*

The respondents also speak about what is facilitated with dialogue and the consequent establishment of agreements.

*[T]alk to my family and tell them that I am going to have a few days of isolation, to respect them, and not take them as bad vibes. I told them that this is temporary and that soon it will end. I mentioned to them that I needed this time. (D15)*

*I reached an agreement with my manager. I am lucky to work in an academic environment where it is very logical to combine studying and work, so I have a lot of flexibility in managing my time. (D8)*

A second category refers to what professors believe they have achieved in the course of their doctoral training, among which include delimiting their research topic and handling specialized sources.

*[N]ow, after a year of study, I have my topic much more delimited, which has helped me to advance at a firmer pace. (D7)*

*Little by little, I have been working more closely with my advisor and now I have so much more exposure to sources. (D12)*

In addition, they have interacted with experts who have expanded their expectations of thesis work.

*In this second semester, my expectation expanded a little bit more because I had the opportunity to link up with research groups from another country and get feedback, which helped me to enrich not only my research topic but also the academic work I do. (D10)*

*Along with the opportunity to achieve greater self-discipline and self-knowledge ... I am now aware that this involves a lot of self-discipline; nobody is going to tell me, 'this week you have to read five papers and show me that you have read them'. It involves a lot of self-commitment, which has been my greatest takeaway. (D4)*

*You discover things that others see in you, you discover skills and competencies that, until you put yourself to the test, you don't realize you have them. It makes you grow as a person and as a professional, it gives you the confidence to think for yourself. (D5)*

*In some ways, the above has been possible thanks to the institutional conditions that the university has provided, such as flexible schedules and support from my team. Basically, the university allowed me to reduce teaching hours to help me with time [management]. (D9)*

*A big part of what has allowed me to continue advancing is the work of my team; at the end of the day, they have supported me a lot in self-management. (D3)*

*In addition to sponsoring the purchase of resources necessary for doctoral research, the university has invested a lot in obtaining original sources, which are quite expensive books because they are specialized. (D12)*

Finally, these doctoral students recognize that the environment in which they work favors the continuation of their studies, together with their achievements and overcoming challenges. They realize its positive impact, particularly in terms of teaching and management.

*The first subjects opened everything up for me, which is already reflected in the classes I have taught over the last year and a half because I use more academic, updated sources. (D3)*

*Administratively, it has helped me in the analysis and interpretation of data. (D17)*

With the experiences described above, it remains to comment on the future development that these doctoral students envision for themselves once they have completed their programs.

### **Prospective possibilities**

This last meta-category groups together the desires and advice that the university professors interviewed express in terms of the completion of their doctoral studies.

Regarding desires, the units of meaning reveal clarity on their vocation to pursue a research career, which can be seen in the consolidation of research groups and lines of research.

*My goal is to have a research group in my field here at the university to promote applied research in the community. (D10)*

*When I finish my doctorate, I would like to continue with this line of research and become an expert and reference on the subject. (D16)*

It can also be seen in the desire to write specialized books and articles.

*I would like to publish specialized books; I would like to publish an annotated translation of the texts I am working on. (D12)*

*I am interested in writing and contributing either with scientific articles or eventually with books. (D6)*

They did not leave out the commitment that every researcher has to disseminate their findings in favor of universal access to knowledge.

*I am very interested in writing for a newspaper, more for dissemination, because the topic itself, of course, has a scientific component, but I think we should seek to raise public awareness. (D11)*

*To publish and to see how my research can impact the university community by giving seminars, organizing colloquiums or conferences, and not leaving out topics that have more to do with dissemination. (D13)*

Of course, some of the respondents expressed the desire to be better teachers.

*I think my main work will continue to be teaching and university counseling, but the doctorate will strengthen both a lot. (D16)*

*I would like to be a researcher and publish, but what I am most excited about is teaching, and communicating to students a little bit of what I have seen in my time as a doctoral student. (D15)*

Some also seek greater connection with the industry through consulting work.

*Once I have finished my doctorate, I would like to engage not only in teaching and management here at the university, but I would also like work as a financial consultant in a company. (D8)*

There are also those who want to pursue an academic career that aligns with the management structures of research processes, such as the National Researcher System and institutional categorization.

*I would like to join the National Researcher System and be categorized as a research professor. (D14)*

*I believe that, after finishing my doctorate, the next natural step at the university will be to apply to the National Researcher System. (D17)*

To conclude, the last category involves advice that these doctoral students shared based on their experience. The first quote highlights the fact that doing a doctorate should be the product of a personal decision based on interest in and affinity for a given research topic.

*A doctorate is not for everyone, as the sport of boxing is not for everyone; if it is something you like, you will have a good time. This does not mean that you will not have problems or that it will take no work; if you are doing it for status or a better salary, you are not prepared for it. (D6)*

*It will be much easier to take care of your mental health because, from the outset, it is something you enjoy, even if you suffer a bit. The difficulties depend on personal habits; for me, mental health is more important than time management, for which I must organize, and manage my day, life, and week so that my mind is available to concentrate on the doctorate. Because indeed your personal life continues, your personal needs continue and you have to meet them. (D11)*

Support networks built among peers that allow for dialogue and sharing of experiences favor the above.

*Forming a community of doctoral-student friends with whom to synergize and talk about positive and negative experiences, and meeting with them periodically has helped me a lot to move forward. (D1)*

To close this meta-category and the presentation of results, it is clear that studying for a doctorate necessarily leads to a process of reflection on the experience, which favors the establishment of short and medium-term goals, in addition to the tendency to share experiences.

## DISCUSSION

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Assuming that this study seeks to describe the experiences of full-time university professors studying for a doctorate, it is worth considering that belonging to a specific university context imprints its own characteristics, which have to do with the institutional mission and with the migration that the university of reference has experienced, in terms of the priority of research processes, which has involved the training of researchers. But also, the institutional response to the General Law of Higher Education (Presidency of the Republic, 2021), which seeks to promote the promotion of scientific vocation and the consolidation of teaching and learning processes oriented to the training of professionals and researchers.

This institutional change has required a modification in the thinking and performance of full-time professors, who have increasingly had to devote themselves to research, which is consistent with what is described in Secretaría de Educación Pública (2017), which mentions that full-time professors, in addition to teaching, should be oriented to research and the innovative application of knowledge.

Now, it is worth noting that when this research is oriented to explore the personal and professional vision of university professors who study for a doctorate, the findings show the experiences in these two areas and how they interact with each other. The first is the manifestation of a desire, search, and choice of a doctoral program, to later externalize challenges as shown by the frustrating situations and difficult moments shared by the participants, as is the case of time management. This agrees with what is expressed by Garcés and Santoya (2013), the continuous interaction between academic competencies, personal, family, and professional conditions with the demands of the doctoral program, as stated by Pedraza (2018), and the need for open-mindedness for research processes (Skakni, 2018).

Regarding the achievements that doctoral students manifest as self-discipline and self-knowledge, they have combined with institutional conditions that favor a research ecosystem, which promotes the formation of researchers, as commented by Moreno (2011), in addition to channeling the challenges as mentioned by Núñez and González (2019) towards autonomous learning and adaptation towards new situations that are basic to achieve the necessary standards to be a researcher.

Regarding the expectations about doctoral studies, in this research, there are no data that show their increase or decrease during the process. However, it is clear that, from the beginning, the doctorate is considered a part of the personal life project and an opportunity for work and academic growth, even when there is an inclination to see the doctorate as a source of professional and salary escalation. In the end, the perspective of the Ph.D. students shows a loss in the value of the doctorate as a way to gain status, emphasizing the aspiration to become a researcher and make an academic career as foreseen in the General Law of Higher Education (Presidency of the Republic, 2021).

However, a career as a researcher is necessarily linked to teaching, which is not only enriched by the competencies acquired during doctoral studies but also confirms Restrepo's (2003) proposal on the use of research in teaching. Together with the above, it is striking that these future PhDs harbor a clear intention to publish both research and dissemination articles, which evidences their penchant for supporting universal access to knowledge (Garcés & Santoya, 2013).

Even though the literature highlights the importance of the thesis advisor for more constructive doctoral training (Garcés & Santoya, 2013), of note in this research, said advisor does not appear. Instead, respondents highlighted membership in networks and research groups in terms of affinity of research lines, but also as a means for socializing their lived experiences. In this context, informal support networks in which doctoral students share their feelings about their studies were also mentioned.

In closing, it is worth commenting that the study of a doctorate is in itself a process of development, which enhances personal and professional qualities, uniting them to the institutional vision, and thus favoring the harmonious growth of the university community.

### ***LIMITATIONS***

This study is framed in a very particular context and is informed by the perspective of one specific university. This is so because this research emerged to characterize the experiences of full-time faculty doctoral students within an institutional context. However, this context pertains to a privileged socioeconomic and cultural environment with exceptional institutional conditions within the sphere of Mexican private education. In light of the above, as a contextualized piece of research, it leaves aside the diverse sociodemographic and ideological positions present in Mexico.

In addition, as the authors of this article are part of the research context, of course, there is the intrinsic subjectivity of all qualitative research; however, this has allowed us to have greater intellectual sensitivity for the interpretation of the information as well as to achieve greater empathy with the interviewees, favoring the sharing of deeper information about their experiences.

### ***IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE***

From the point of view of talent management at universities that promote doctoral studies among their professors, we suggest establishing strategic and budgetary planning that includes policies for the development of a life and career plan for future PhDs, including control and follow-up processes that favor return on investment from both a personal and institutional point of view. In addition, we suggest formalizing spaces for interaction and the socialization of experiences during the training process in an effort to ensure doctoral students' integral well-being.

In a more academic environment, the creation of a research ecosystem promotes a fertile foundation that can excite new generations, contributing to the establishment of new talent to eventually replace current professors and the development of research competencies.

Management, especially directors of academic areas, must combine an understanding of research work and flexibility, as well as demand results from both those in the process of doctoral and professional training.

In the case of university professors, reviewing the intentions, experiences, and prospective possibilities of doctoral students in similar conditions can help them reflect on their present and future decisions, giving greater gravity to the decision to study for a doctorate.

### ***RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH***

In general, research on doctoral studies focuses on the progression and improvement of research skills, as well as the effectiveness of doctoral programs. However, it often leaves aside doctoral students' personal and professional views. Thus, future research must continue exploring university contexts with research training and the experiences of doctoral candidates. This research will promote institutional decision-making in the areas of human talent management and academics, in addition to providing information to university professors interested in pursuing an academic career.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

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The experiences of full-time university professors studying for a doctorate point to lights and shadows in three moments – before, during, and after – expressed across three dimensions, namely intentions, experiences, and prospects.

For intentions, goals associated with personal and professional development stand out, in addition to the generation of knowledge. This also includes how the specific doctoral program was chosen, considering its academic prestige in a given field and curricular structure. Experiences, for their part, are categorized into challenges, achievements, institutional conditions, and applicability. The first includes understanding the dynamics of research, the need for open-mindedness, time management, and reconciling the doctoral program with family and work life. Achievements include a better understanding of the research topic, interaction with experts, as well as self-discipline, and self-knowledge. At a more institutional level, things that facilitate the doctoral experience refer to flexible schedules, team support, and sponsored resources. Another experience includes the applicability of the doctorate to teaching and management. Finally, in the prospective possibilities section, the participants shared their aims for their academic life and advice for other professors who wish to follow in their footsteps.



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