

Managing expectations and creating networks: Keys for successfully finish a doctoral dissertation
Insights from the doctoral journey of Emma Sandström

In this short paper, I discuss some of the insights learned from the conversation with a recent graduate Emma Sandström and the supervising professor of her work, Henri Schildt. Sandström defended her thesis *Navigating uncertainty and finding purpose in social mission-driven organizations* in September 2023. Sandström's thesis is essay-based, which also happens to be the first thing I learned from this assignment. I was familiar with a monograph and an article thesis, and I remember an essay thesis being mentioned in the orientation of the new students. However, this was the first time I read one. I had quite a heated discussion with some of my researcher colleagues who have a background in social sciences as do I. An essay thesis was new to them as well and the format raised a lot of questions on how the thesis will be examined and if it is comparable to an article-based thesis. I tried to look up the criteria for the examination of the essays but didn't find any clear instructions. If possible, it would be interesting to hear more about when the essays are considered to be good enough and ready to be defended.

Sandström's (2023) thesis "investigates the work of social mission-driven organizations operating in contexts of uncertainty". I chose the thesis for this assignment because I recently interviewed almost 40 employees and representatives of the employers to find out how work communities face uncertainty and disruptive events but discovered that identifying disruption and uncertainty is not self-evident in the Finnish workplaces. Understanding what kind of dynamics effect the ability of the different actors within an organization to face a disruptive event and successfully move forwards from the point of disruption is essential in identifying the processes shaping the organization's resilience. Thus, I was interested to learn how Emma addressed the questions of uncertainty.

In their study Emma and Henri approached dynamic uncertainty through perspectives of sensemaking and meaningfulness. During the conversations, both Emma and Henri mentioned that due to force majeure events (a global pandemic) the plan on the data collection had to be revised in the middle of the process and Emma had to pause to examine what the existing data already had in it and what was usable. I didn't have a chance to delve deeper into how she identified uncertainty, but I hope to have a more detailed discussion with her in the future about methodological and theoretical insights she had during the process. I was especially interested in learning how Emma constructed the theoretical framework for her thesis, but apparently there hadn't been any clear strategy. Henri stated that Emma's thesis was more empirically oriented than theory-driven, and Emma herself pointed out that many of the perspectives and approaches

present in the thesis had been added quite late. Her advice was to read a lot and from different perspectives and not to lock oneself into any one framework at an early stage.

The way I see it, changes and modifications are a natural part of doing research as there is always something that couldn't have been expected or the researcher stumbles upon something much more interesting and impactful along the way than what was originally planned. What really caught my attention during the conversation with Emma was her own attitude and approach to writing the dissertation. We spent quite a lot of time on discussing the topic of finding one's own voice as a researcher. Emma started as research assistant in the project in which she collected the data for the doctoral dissertation and thus already had some of the data when she began the doctoral studies. Doing the dissertation had not been self-evident to Emma and she stressed that it was important for her not to let the dissertation become part of her identity work or let herself to be defined through doing the PhD. Neither did she separate writing the dissertation from the work she did as a research assistant but took writing the articles as part of her job. In her own opinion this helped her to finish the dissertation and not allow the process to consume her along the way.

The second thing Emma mentioned as a key to successfully finishing the thesis was the support of the community. The relationship with the supervising professor and thesis advisor had been meaningful, but she also mentioned that the support of peers had been valuable in the different phases of the process. Emma encouraged the new doctoral students to find those people with whom they feel supported and inspired. It doesn't have to be many, but it is important to have some who are going through the same phase and share the same experiences. Emma also described the process of growing into a researcher and finding one's own voice. Emma reflected on the process of writing the dissertation and not having a clear identity as a researcher during the process as she felt more like a part of a team. I expect that having such a team around in the beginning provides a safe space where to work on one's identity as a researcher. This also relates to what Henri considered as one of the things he had learned as a supervisor from Emma's journey: to have more interaction already in the beginning of the writing process and maybe even begin the co-writing in the early stages to support the students when they're still trying to find their path.

One thing I've been wondering after having the conversations is the sufficiency of the data sets and my own strategy on collecting data. I'm sure this is something I will discuss more with my own supervising professor but maybe a short discussion on the class wouldn't hurt anyone. Henri mentioned that Emma had a different data set for each essay and some of them are a bit light examined separately. How common it is to have different data sets for the essays in the doctoral dissertation, when it is reasonable to do so and in what situations it is not recommended? As I understood Emma had quite a substantive data all in all, but there were some difficulties when all three were studied separately.

In the end, the process of writing the dissertation sounded pretty much what I expected, but I valued Emma's insights on maintaining a healthy relationship with the studies and constructing one's own network of advisors and peers.

References

Sandström, E. 2023. Navigating uncertainty and finding purpose in social mission-driven organizations. Doctoral thesis. Aalto University School of Business, management studies. Espoo. ISBN 978-952-64-1385-3 (electronic). Available: <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-64-1385-3>.