



HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO COMPLETE A DOCTORATE?

By Sven Hendrix



Have you ever wondered, “How many years does it take to earn a doctoral degree?” If you are considering a PhD, it is crucial to understand the time commitment involved. In this article, I will unpack the complexities of the PhD journey, offering a detailed breakdown of the various factors that influence the time it takes to receive this advanced degree.



The length of a PhD varies significantly between Europe and North America

The length of a PhD varies significantly between Europe and North America, influenced by several factors such as funding conditions, distinct regulations in different countries and institutions of study, and research topics.

In Europe, a full-time PhD typically takes three to four years to complete, with part-time studies extending up to six years.

In Europe, the duration is shorter than in the US because most PhD programs require applicants to possess a Master's degree. Thus, the focus is predominantly on the research project rather than coursework.

In sharp contrast, many PhD programs in the US and Canada accept applicants already with a Bachelor's degree. International students considering Ph.D. programs in the United States should be aware that this time frame could differ from the norm in their home countries, and factors such as visa restrictions and funding availability might further complicate the process.

The graduate program often includes a Master's degree component, including additional coursework and examinations before the research phase. As a result, **PhD programs in the US typically span six years, with some humanities PhDs requiring seven years to complete.**

The length of your program largely depends on the amount of time it takes to complete the necessary coursework, engage in original research, and write a dissertation. **Many PhD programs are designed to be completed in four to seven years**, but some students **may take longer to complete** their studies. This timeframe applies to both professional doctorates and research doctorates, the two main types of Phd degrees.



Masters's Degree vs Doctor of Philosophy

It's worth noting that some students in the US may opt for master's programs instead of jumping straight into a PhD after their undergraduate degree. These programs might provide a quicker route to advanced qualifications, especially professional degrees focusing more on professional experience and less on original research. The average time to complete a masters degree is generally less than for a PhD, but it can still be a significant commitment.

Comprehensive Exams and Capstone Projects



In the US, many Ph.D. programs, whether traditional or online education, require students to pass comprehensive exams. These exams assess a student's understanding of their particular field of study and their readiness to begin dissertation research.

After the dissertation, some programs may require capstone projects, allowing students to showcase their research projects more practically. A [Capstone Project](#) is a multifaceted final assignment students undertake, typically in their last year of an academic program, including independent research on a selected topic typically reviewed by an evaluating panel.

Choosing the Right Ph.D. Programs

Making the right choice of Ph.D. programs can significantly impact the length of time it takes to get a doctorate. Apart from tuition fees, potential

Ph.D. candidates should also factor in living costs in the area of the chosen institution. **The length of the program may have a substantial financial impact if it takes either four or eight years to complete.**

Different Types of Coursework in a Ph.D. Program

Content-wise, each program has specific requirements, and the coursework may differ depending on your chosen area of study, your institution, and your country. Some programs may focus primarily on your research and publications, while others are heavily loaded with coursework.

For instance, postgraduate students in social sciences or data sciences might realize that their coursework heavily emphasizes research methods with a strong emphasis on data analysis. This may extend your studies because you may need to learn more to complete the program.

The All-important Dissertation or Thesis



The dissertation or thesis, an original contribution to a specific field of knowledge, is arguably the most time-consuming part of a professional degree program. However, the time it takes to write your dissertation can vary significantly.

If you use your time wisely you may shorten the dissertation process significantly, you may already write (and publish!) with your supervisor one or two comprehensive reviews about your subject. These reviews are a great starting point

for your dissertation. It is a better idea to start early to learn [to write your research papers faster](#).

What Influences How Long It Takes to Complete a PhD and get a doctorate degree?

Several factors can affect the time to completion. These include the doctoral student's pace, the complexity of their research project, their advisor's availability, and funding.

For instance, many PhD students need to fulfill teaching or research assistantships to receive financial support. These commitments can extend the time it takes to earn a PhD. The specific requirements of your doctoral program also matter, with some demanding more coursework or extensive research than others.

Do All Doctoral Students Take the Same Time to Complete?

No, each doctoral student's time to complete a doctoral program varies. Some might earn their terminal degree more quickly if they already have a master's degree in a related field, thus reducing the coursework required to complete. Others might take longer if they are enrolled part-time while working a full-time job.

Does Earning a Doctorate Always Take So Long?

Although most doctoral programs take around four to seven years, completing a doctorate doesn't always take so long. Some professional doctorate programs, designed to be more oriented towards career and professional practice, often require less time than research-oriented PhDs. **Moreover, doctoral studies in some European countries typically take only three to four years.**

Why Does it Take so Long to Complete a Dissertation?

The dissertation phase can extend for multiple years because it involves a great deal of

independent research and writing. Doctoral students must conduct original research and articulate their findings and analysis in a comprehensive document that contributes new knowledge to their field. This rigorous process takes considerable time, dedication, and intellectual effort.

Can You Complete a Doctorate Faster?

Yes, there are ways to earn your doctorate faster. Some universities offer accelerated programs, particularly online. These require the same high level of work but condense the timeline. One of the best ways to complete a program more quickly is by choosing a dissertation topic you already know by heart. It substantially reduces the time it takes to complete your research and writing.

Online Schools and Accelerated Ph.D. Programs

For those who are working full-time, online schools could offer a viable path toward a PhD. These online programs allow a more flexible schedule; some may even provide accelerated ways to earn an academic degree. However, it's important to remember that quality and reputation of online courses vary widely.

What Factors Affect the Time to Complete a Doctorate?

The length of a PhD program can be influenced by many factors. These include the field of study, program structure, student's personal circumstances, and level of preparation. Personal factors such as motivation, work ethic, and time management skills also play a crucial role in the time to completion.

The Role of Faculty Members and Advisors

Your relationship with your dissertation advisor and other faculty members can significantly influence the length of time to complete your

PhD. A supportive and accessible advisor can help streamline the data analysis process, guide you through the literature review, and provide useful feedback on your final project. Getting regular feedback is one of [the most important ways to write faster](#) and finish your papers and thesis quicker.

Balancing Professional and Doctorate Commitments

Balancing professional commitments with a doctorate degree can be challenging. Many PhD students are working professionals striving to upgrade their qualifications. Consequently, they often take much longer to complete their PhD, making it essential to balance professional duties and academic requirements.

Full-Time or Part-Time Ph.D.

Pursuing an academic career can be [a challenging journey](#). Aspiring academics often need to decide between full-time and part-time Ph.D. programs. Full-time studies usually involve years of hard work, typically 3-4 years, but provide a focused environment. Conversely, part-time Ph.D. studies take much longer but allow more flexibility, catering to those with a professional career or family responsibilities.

Pursuing a Career in Academia and Becoming a Professor

A successfully completed PhD is usually a necessary prerequisite for an academic career. There are [multiple requirements to qualify for academic positions](#). After a PhD, a postdoctoral research period is typically required to prepare for the next step of your scientific career. [Choosing the best postdoc position](#) is essential. After the postdoc period, you may enter a tenure track program and/or become an [assistant or associate professor](#), depending on your qualifications and career goals. The [success rate](#) for becoming university professors is about 3% for all PhD students. However, there are many career options outside academia.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is the shortest time to complete a PhD?

A: While it varies by field and institution, some accelerated programs can be completed in three years or less, particularly if you already have a master's degree in a related field.

Q: What part of a PhD takes the longest time?

A: In life sciences and similar fields, the experiments take most of the time, while in humanities, the writing of the thesis (= dissertation) is usually the most time-consuming phase.

Q: Is it possible to work full-time while pursuing a PhD?

A: Yes, but it is challenging and may extend the length of the program. Some PhD students opt for part-time phd studies to better balance their professional and academic commitments.

Q: Do online PhD programs take less time?

A: Online doctorate programs offer more flexibility, which might allow some students to complete their studies faster. However, they require the same level of academic rigor and commitment as traditional programs.

Other perspectives

<https://academicpositions.com/career-advice/phd-in-europe-or-the-us>

<https://www.findaphd.com/guides/length-of-a-phd>

<https://www.franklin.edu/blog/what-is-a-doctorate-degree>

<https://www.coursera.org/articles/how-long-does-it-take-to-get-a-phd>

<https://www.phdstudies.com/articles/how-many-years-does-it-take-to-complete-a-phd>

<https://academiainsider.com/how-long-does-it-take-to-get-a-phd-complete-a-phd-quickly/>

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Recommended reading

The following articles may also interest you:

[How To Write Faster: 19 Efficient Ways To Finish My Publication](#)

[Does medical school ranking matter?](#)

[Assistant professor and associate professor – what is the difference?](#)

[Should I Become A Professor? Success Rate 3 %!](#)

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