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"Am I Good Enough?" Progress Uncertainty and the Structural Roots of Self-Doubt and Wellbeing among Turkish Doctoral Students

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study examines how doctoral students in Turkish universities experience progress uncertainty, self-doubt, and wellbeing. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 20 doctoral students across diverse disciplines and program stages. The findings reveal progress uncertainty as a distinct psychological stressor rooted in ambiguous expectations and invisible benchmarks. Progress uncertainty creates a reinforcing cycle with self-doubt, eroding well-being through chronic strain, work-life imbalance, and endurance-based coping. The Turkish context intensifies these dynamics through resource constraints, hierarchical supervision, and cultural expectations, particularly when institutions treat students as full-time despite employment realities. By demonstrating how progress uncertainty and self-doubt emerge from institutional structures rather than individual deficits, the study challenges individualistic approaches and points to structural interventions addressing institutional sources of uncertainty.

Keywords: Doctoral student wellbeing, progress uncertainty, self-doubt, Turkish higher education

INTRODUCTION

Doctoral education is intellectually demanding and emotionally complex (Sverdlik et al., 2018), exposing students to chronic uncertainty, self-doubt, and psychological distress (Alisic et al., 2024; Martínez-García et al., 2024). A substantial proportion of doctoral students experience significant psychological distress, with rates of depression and anxiety far exceeding those of the general population (Evans et al., 2018; Guo & Liu, 2026; King & Dahal, 2022; Levecque et al., 2017). These patterns have intensified scholarly concern regarding doctoral student wellbeing (Hazell et al., 2020; Posselt, 2018). Within this broader context, a critical yet less visible challenge involves doctoral students' difficulty in determining whether they are making adequate academic progress. While prior research has examined doctoral students' general sense of progress and satisfaction (Cornwall et al., 2019; Devos et al., 2017), the persistent inability to evaluate one's progress—conceptualized here as *progress uncertainty*—has received limited attention as a distinct psychological stressor. Although related to impostor syndrome and academic stress, progress uncertainty is conceptually distinct. Impostor syndrome concerns self-perceived fraudulence despite objective competence (Clance & Imes, 1978; Wang & Li, 2023), while academic stress refers broadly to workload-related pressure (Nagy et al., 2019). Progress uncertainty, by contrast, specifically concerns the inability to assess whether sustained effort constitutes adequate scholarly advancement (Devos et al., 2017; Lovitts, 2005). Unlike undergraduate education, doctoral training is characterized by ambiguous expectations, subjective evaluation criteria, and inconsistent feedback (Jach et al., 2025), leaving students without clear benchmarks for assessing progress and thereby undermining self-efficacy and wellbeing (Overall et al., 2011).

Despite its relevance, progress uncertainty remains insufficiently theorized in the doctoral education literature. Existing studies have focused primarily on related outcomes such as academic stress (Cornwall et al., 2019), burnout (Nagy et al., 2019), impostor syndrome (Sverdlik et al., 2020), and attrition (Maher et al., 2020), often without isolating progress uncertainty as a distinct psychological experience (Devos et al., 2017). Although quantitative research has measured adjacent constructs such as impostor feelings or perceived competence (Wang & Li, 2023), these approaches provide limited insight into how progress uncertainty is experienced over time. While qualitative work has explored supervisory relationships (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2020), neither approach has directly examined how structural ambiguity generates and sustains progress

uncertainty as an ongoing psychological experience. This gap is consequential, as progress uncertainty may represent a modifiable risk factor amenable to structural intervention. It may also give rise to a reciprocal cycle with self-doubt, whereby ambiguous institutional signals are internalized as personal inadequacy (Bravata et al., 2020; Nori & Vanttaja, 2023), gradually undermining motivation and persistence (Alisic et al., 2024). Understanding this cycle is therefore essential for identifying effective intervention points in doctoral education.

Turkish doctoral education provides a particularly relevant context for examining progress uncertainty due to its distinctive structural and cultural features. Despite Bologna-aligned formalized structures, progress evaluation remains poorly institutionalized, with progression criteria subjectively defined and inconsistently applied (Özmen & Güç, 2013). Hierarchical supervisory relationships constrain access to clear feedback (Balı & Dönmez, 2018; Ghaseminangi et al., 2026), while limited funding and a highly competitive academic labor market intensify the stakes of uncertain progress (Karaduman-Oskay et al., 2026). However, this experience has received little systematic scholarly attention, representing a critical gap in doctoral wellbeing research. The present study addresses this gap by examining Turkish doctoral students' lived experiences of progress uncertainty, self-doubt, and wellbeing through phenomenological inquiry. This research aims to conceptualize progress uncertainty as a distinct psychological stressor and reveal its cyclical relationship with self-doubt in eroding wellbeing. Understanding these processes can inform interventions targeting enhanced feedback mechanisms, well-defined expectations, and improved supervisory support. The following research questions guide this inquiry:

1. How do doctoral students experience and make meaning of progress uncertainty in their doctoral journeys?
2. How do doctoral students understand the relationship between progress uncertainty and self-doubt?
3. How do progress uncertainty and self-doubt shape doctoral students' psychological wellbeing?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework

This study integrates three complementary frameworks, uncertainty tolerance theory (Dugas et al., 2004), self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997), and goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2002), to examine how progress uncertainty generates self-doubt and undermines doctoral student wellbeing. Uncertainty tolerance theory posits that intolerance of ambiguity underlies negative reactions to uncertain situations, leading to anxiety and avoidance (Carleton, 2016; Dugas et al., 2004). Intolerance of uncertainty represents a significant risk factor for psychological distress and perceived stress among university students (Andrews et

al., 2023; Daşcı et al., 2023). In doctoral contexts, progress uncertainty, characterized by unclear expectations and delayed feedback, creates persistent ambiguity wherein students chronically question whether their work meets acceptable standards (Devos et al., 2017; Jach et al., 2025). Self-efficacy theory explains how this ambiguity erodes confidence by depriving students of mastery experiences, the most influential source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Doctoral education's intangible markers and infrequent feedback create "efficacy-relevant information" deficits (Devos et al., 2017). Supportive supervision enhances research self-efficacy, which is positively associated with persistence and wellbeing (Livinţi et al., 2021; Overall et al., 2011), while inability to gauge progress manifests as impostor feelings and distress (Sverdlik et al., 2020).

Goal-setting theory reveals how ambiguous objectives undermine motivation (Locke & Latham, 2002). Specifically, challenging goals with feedback mechanisms enhance performance more effectively than vague directives. Doctoral milestones are often poorly defined; students receive instructions to produce "original contributions" without clear sufficiency criteria (Lovitts, 2005), creating "goal ambiguity" and chronic uncertainty (Bandura & Locke, 1996). These frameworks converge to illuminate a cascading process: ambiguous goals and feedback deficits prevent mastery recognition, eroding self-efficacy and heightening self-doubt, intensifying intolerance and diminishing wellbeing. The framework accounts for individual differences, higher tolerance, and stronger efficacy and demonstrates greater resilience (Hancock & Mattick, 2020) while identifying intervention points, including clarification of progression criteria, regular feedback, and tolerance cultivation. In the qualitative analysis, these frameworks served as sensitizing lenses rather than rigid templates, guiding interpretation of participants' accounts without predetermining thematic outcomes. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model guiding this study.

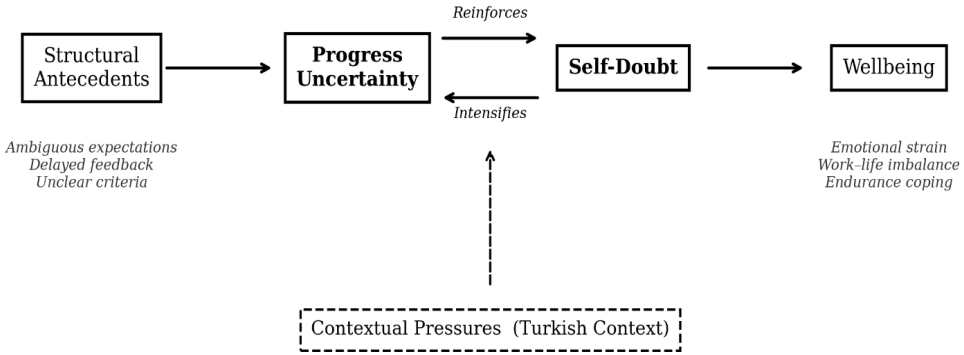

Figure 1. Conceptual model of progress uncertainty, self-doubt, and doctoral wellbeing

Progress Uncertainty and Self-Doubt in Doctoral Education

Doctoral students transition from knowledge consumers to producers of original research, navigating ambiguous expectations without clear benchmarks or feedback (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2020; Kiley, 2009). While some uncertainty fosters intellectual growth, chronic progress uncertainty becomes a significant source of psychological distress and threatens degree completion (Devos et al., 2017; Young et al., 2024). Many programs lack clearly defined requirements, with substantial variability across institutions and departments, meaning that noncompletion often stems from failing to meet poorly communicated program expectations rather than inadequate coursework performance (Lovitts, 2005; Young et al., 2024). This disconnect creates precarious psychological states in which doctoral students chronically question their progress and competence (Cossa & Barker, 2021; McAlpine & Norton, 2006).

Progress uncertainty undermines self-efficacy and triggers self-doubt — persistent questioning of intellectual capabilities, worthiness, and legitimacy as emerging scholars (Cossa & Barker, 2021; Devos et al., 2017; Sverdlik et al., 2020). This self-doubt relates to the impostor phenomenon, whereby individuals feel like intellectual frauds despite objective competence (Clance & Imes, 1978), with recent reviews documenting substantial prevalence among doctoral students, marked by fragile self-esteem, low competence perceptions, and high anxiety (Slimi et al., 2024; Wang & Li, 2023). Progress uncertainty and self-doubt operate cyclically: uncertainty erodes confidence, while self-doubt intensifies uncertainty perception (Bravata et al., 2020; Pákozdy et al., 2024), proving particularly pernicious within academic cultures that emphasize continuous evaluation and competitive excellence (Nori & Vanttaja, 2023; Wang & Li, 2023).

Progress uncertainty and self-doubt carry profound wellbeing implications, with students experiencing impostor phenomena reporting significantly higher anxiety, depression, and psychological distress (Evans et al., 2018; Slimi et al., 2024). While Evans et al. (2018) documented distress prevalence among doctoral students, Levecque et al. (2017) identified work organization as the primary predictor, suggesting that doctoral distress reflects structural conditions rather than individual vulnerability alone. The impostor phenomenon negatively correlates with self-esteem but is positively associated with maladaptive perfectionism and fear of failure (Sverdlik et al., 2020; Wang & Li, 2023). Self-doubt generates academic underperformance through paradoxical patterns, overpreparation driven by perfectionism or procrastination driven by fear of failure (Clance & OToole, 1987), carrying structural consequences, as students with high self-doubt face increased attrition risk (Alisic et al., 2024; Han et al., 2026; Maher et al., 2020). Existing research on doctoral student distress has primarily framed impostor-related experiences as individual traits without adequately examining the structural conditions that generate and sustain progress uncertainty (Devos et al., 2017; Sverdlik et al., 2018). Unclear evaluation systems,

inconsistent feedback, and poorly structured supervisory relationships represent key structural sources that remain underexplored in the literature.

Understanding the Turkish Doctoral Context

Turkish doctoral students face several intersecting structural challenges that amplify progress uncertainty. Many must self-fund their studies or maintain unrelated employment, as government-funded scholarships remain competitive and limited, while the academic job market offers few permanent positions and increasing reliance on adjunct faculty (Karaduman-Oskay et al., 2026). Progress evaluation remains weakly institutionalized, with progression criteria subjectively defined and inconsistently applied across disciplines and supervisors (Özmen & Güç, 2013). Despite formal progression structures, emerging evidence reveals significant implementation gaps between officially prescribed frameworks and students' actual doctoral experiences (Gokalp, 2023). Whereas Balı and Dönmez (2018) focused on structural challenges in education sciences specifically, Özmen and Güç (2013) examined coping strategies, yet neither study systematically addressed the psychological consequences of progress uncertainty. Such implementation gaps manifest across multiple structural and relational dimensions, creating conditions wherein formal frameworks fail to provide the guidance necessary for managing progress uncertainty.

The psychological toll of these structural conditions is substantial. Mental health research reveals concerning patterns among Turkish graduate students, with studies finding that younger students, master's students, and single individuals faced heightened depression and anxiety risk (Kılıç & Karahan, 2023), aligning with international research demonstrating substantially higher rates among graduate students compared to the general population (Evans et al., 2018). Cultural context further compounds these difficulties, as Türkiye's vertical collectivism and family consciousness emphasize family obligations and social expectations that can conflict with doctoral work's prolonged, uncertain nature (Ayçiçeği-Dinn & Caldwell-Harris, 2013). Gender dynamics particularly affect female doctoral students navigating caregiving expectations and traditional role impositions (Karaduman-Oskay et al., 2026). Converging structural and cultural pressures thus render progress uncertainty and self-doubt pervasive experiences rather than isolated challenges.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed hermeneutic phenomenology to examine how doctoral students in Turkish higher education experience progress uncertainty, self-doubt, and their implications for wellbeing. Van Manen's (2023) approach prioritizes detailed engagement with lived experience and interpretive meaning-making,

making it particularly suited to capturing experiences of ambiguity and self-questioning. This framework treats progress uncertainty and self-doubt as subjective experiences shaped by participants' sense-making rather than objective conditions to be measured.

Participants

Twenty doctoral students were recruited through purposeful sampling combined with snowball techniques. Initial participants were identified through university doctoral programs, graduate schools, and doctoral student associations across Turkish universities. Early participants then referred peers experiencing progress uncertainty and self-doubt, facilitating access to students willing to share sensitive experiences. Table 1 presents participant characteristics using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Discipline	Year	Age
Education & Social Sciences				
Aylin	Female	Education	3	31
Cansu	Female	Psychology	5	38
Elif	Female	Sociology	6	42
Furkan	Male	Economics	3	29
İrem	Female	Communication	3	30
Naz	Female	Political Science	3	31
Ozan	Male	Business	4	35
Humanities				
Hakan	Male	History	6	45
Lale	Female	Literature	5	36
Pelin	Female	Philosophy	6	40
Vildan	Female	Linguistics	5	39
Natural Sciences				
Deniz	Male	Physics	4	33
Gizem	Female	Biology	4	32
Mert	Male	Chemistry	4	34
Rıza	Male	Mathematics	5	37
Selin	Female	Statistics	4	33
Yağmur	Male	Environmental Science	2	28
Engineering & Applied Sciences				
Berk	Male	Engineering	2	28
Kaan	Male	Computer Science	2	27
Tolga	Male	Medicine	3	30

Maximum variation sampling guided selection to ensure diverse representation across academic disciplines, program stage, and gender. The final sample comprised 20 doctoral students (10 female, 10 male) ranging from the second to sixth year, representing 20 disciplines across 11 universities. Inclusion criteria required current enrollment in a Turkish doctoral program, completion of at least one year, and active engagement in research or writing phases.

Table 1 demonstrates the sample's diversity across disciplines, program stages, and age ranges. Participants included an equal number of female and male doctoral students from across the social sciences, humanities, natural sciences, and engineering and applied sciences. Ages ranged from 27 to 45 years ($M = 33.9$), and participants were enrolled between the second and sixth years of doctoral study *(M* = 4.0), allowing the analysis to capture experiences of progress uncertainty across different stages of the doctoral trajectory.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semistructured phenomenological interviews conducted between October and November 2025. The interview protocol was developed based on the research questions, conceptual framework, and literature on doctoral student experiences, following van Manen's (2023) guidance for phenomenological interviewing. The protocol explored four main areas: background and expectations, experiences of progress uncertainty, experiences of self-doubt, and wellbeing and coping strategies. The protocol was reviewed by three experts in qualitative research methodology and higher education, leading to the rephrasing of one main question, the addition of two follow-up questions on emotional responses, and the removal of one leading question. Pilot interviews with two doctoral students resulted in reorganized question sequencing for gradual progression from background to sensitive topics and refinement of wording for cultural appropriateness. The interviews lasted 50-75 minutes ($M = 65$ minutes) and were conducted in Turkish via secure video conferencing platforms. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim by the researcher, with transcripts checked for accuracy. Data saturation was monitored concurrently with data collection through ongoing analysis. By the 16th interview, no major new themes emerged, and four additional interviews confirmed saturation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis informed by van Manen's (2023) hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which emphasizes interpretive meaning-making and lived experience, and Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines. This combination was adopted because van Manen's (2023) framework guided the interpretive orientation of the analysis, while Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines provided procedural rigor and transparency in theme development. Analysis

proceeded through six recursive phases using MAXQDA software. First, all transcripts were read multiple times to develop initial impressions and preliminary notes. Second, transcripts were coded line-by-line, capturing both semantic content and latent meaning, with coding focused on experiences of uncertainty, self-doubt, wellbeing challenges, and coping strategies. The coding process was primarily inductive while informed by the conceptual framework as sensitizing concepts. Third, codes were grouped into candidate themes with initial thematic maps visualizing relationships. At this stage, themes were defined as patterns capturing shared meaning across participants' accounts rather than merely recurring words or phrases, consistent with van Manen's (2023) emphasis on experiential meaning. Fourth, themes were reviewed against coded extracts and the entire dataset for internal coherence and clear distinctions. Fifth, final themes were refined and defined in relation to research questions and the conceptual framework, with each theme reviewed to ensure that it captured a distinct and coherent aspect of participants' lived experiences. Theme names and definitions were finalized through discussion between the researcher and the independent coder. Sixth, themes were interpreted through literature, with representative extracts selected. To enhance rigor, an expert in qualitative methods and higher education independently coded 50% of transcripts. Coding decisions were discussed in regular meetings, and discrepancies were resolved through dialog and consensus rather than statistical calculation, consistent with the interpretive nature of the study. This collaborative process resulted in three main themes: (1) experiencing progress uncertainty, (2) manifestations and consequences of self-doubt, and (3) navigating wellbeing challenges.

Ethical considerations and trustworthiness

All participants provided written informed consent after receiving information about the study's purpose, procedures, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw. Given the sensitive nature of discussing self-doubt and wellbeing challenges, participants were assured that they could decline any question or pause the interview. Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms, removal of identifying details, and secure storage of recordings and transcripts. During interviews, the researcher remained attentive to participants' emotional states and provided information about university counseling services at each interview's conclusion. Interviews were conducted in Turkish, with quotations translated to English with attention to preserving meaning and cultural nuances. To enhance trustworthiness, the study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was supported through prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, member checking with participants, and verbatim quotations. Transferability was addressed through a thick description of context, participants, and processes. Dependability was ensured through research memos, audit trails, and systematic procedures.

Confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling, independent coding, and grounding interpretations in participants' words.

Researcher's Positionality and Role

The researcher approached this study with reflexive awareness of how positionality shaped the research process and interpretation. Familiarity with Turkish postgraduate education contexts enabled a nuanced interpretation of participants' experiences and sensitivity to cultural specificities. However, this familiarity also carries the risk of taking certain features for granted or overlooking normalized struggles. Throughout data collection and analysis, reflexive journaling documented assumptions, emotional reactions, and evolving interpretations. The researcher remained particularly attentive to moments when personal experiences resonated with or diverged from participants' accounts, using these as opportunities for reflection rather than assuming universal applicability. During interviews, the researcher adopted a listening and nondirective stance, allowing participants to articulate experiences in their own terms. Reflexive insights were revisited during analysis and discussed through peer debriefing, helping to identify and bracket potential biases and ensuring interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Experiencing Progress Uncertainty

Unclear Expectations

Participants described persistent difficulty understanding what was expected of them throughout their doctoral studies. Rather than encountering stable benchmarks, they faced *unclear evaluation standards* that made it difficult to judge acceptable quality or sufficient progress. This ambiguity was compounded by *shifting expectations* across time and supervisory interactions, creating what Berk described as *"You never truly know what the standard is. It seems to change depending on the moment or who you're talking to."* The instability of expectations became particularly acute when coupled with *delayed or absent feedback*, leaving participants uncertain whether their efforts aligned with current standards. Aylin described how this dynamic unfolded in her experience:

> *At the beginning, I thought I was finally doing what was expected of me. I submitted my work feeling relatively confident, but weeks later, the feedback, when it eventually came, made it clear that the expectations had changed again. What was considered sufficient before suddenly was not enough anymore. There is never a clear moment when you can say that you have reached the expected level. It feels like aiming at something that constantly shifts, and*

by the time you think you understand what is needed, the target has already moved somewhere else.

Aylin's account illustrates how *shifting expectations*, combined with *delayed or absent feedback*, produced chronic uncertainty about whether sustained effort aligned with evolving standards. The problem extended beyond timing to include *discipline-specific ambiguity* regarding methodological rigor, theoretical contribution, and writing conventions. Pelin noted, *"You are expected to know what is needed, but no one actually tells you what that is—they assume you should figure it out by yourself."* Such ambiguity reinforced a persistent *formal-informal expectation gap* that sustained progress uncertainty throughout doctoral study.

Difficulty Judging Progress

Participants described ongoing difficulty assessing whether they were making adequate progress during their doctoral studies. In the absence of clear benchmarks, progress was experienced as ambiguous and largely invisible, leading to *constant self-questioning* about pace and direction. This uncertainty was often accompanied by a *fear of being behind*, even when no explicit indicators suggested poor performance. Kaan explained, *"You keep wondering if everyone else is moving faster than you, if they understand things you do not, and whether you should already be further along than you actually are."* A key source of this difficulty was the *lack of visible progress indicators*, as much doctoral work involved extended periods of reading, thinking, and revising that rarely produced immediately tangible outcomes.

Many participants expressed a strong *need for external validation* to judge their advancement, as feedback from supervisors, peers, or formal milestones became critical reference points. Kaan noted, *"Without someone telling you that you are on track, you have no way of knowing if what you are doing is actually enough."* These experiences were closely tied to a broader *temporal uncertainty of progress*, as participants struggled to determine how fast they should be advancing or how long particular stages were expected to take.

Contextual Pressures

Participants described progress uncertainty as closely tied to sustaining doctoral study alongside adult responsibilities. Many were employed full-time, while others experienced periods of unemployment or unstable work, making it difficult to establish a consistent rhythm for doctoral work. In this context, uncertainty stemmed less from academic requirements and more from everyday constraints related to time and energy. Several participants emphasized *income precarity*, with one noting, *"You cannot plan your academic work properly when your income situation is always uncertain—sometimes you have work and earn money, but then you are too exhausted to focus on the doctorate."* Long working hours and irregular schedules limited opportunities for sustained academic focus, while

exhaustion reduced productivity even when time was available. Mert explained, *"Most of the time you are mentally too tired to work properly, even if you finally have some time, you try to fit the PhD into whatever is left after work and daily responsibilities."* These conditions reinforced *precarious professional positioning*, as participants struggled to sustain regular research routines alongside work demands.

At the institutional level, participants also pointed to *institutional procedural constraints* that failed to accommodate hybrid student profiles balancing employment and doctoral study. Tolga explained, *"The system assumes you are a full-time student with no other obligations, but that is not the reality for most of us—deadlines and requirements do not account for the fact that we are working."* Together, these contextual pressures positioned doctoral progress as uneven and fragile, shaped primarily by life circumstances rather than academic capability.

Theme 2: Manifestations of Self-Doubt

Academic Competence

Participants' experiences of doctoral uncertainty were closely intertwined with doubts about their academic competence. Many described persistent feelings of being academically inadequate, particularly when evaluating their work against implicit expectations of doctoral performance. These doubts often emerged internally rather than through direct criticism, leading participants to question the legitimacy of their academic efforts. Naz expressed, *"Sometimes I feel like what I produce is not truly at a doctoral level—like I am pretending to do research when others can see through it."* Such uncertainty was closely linked to *doubts about scholarly contribution*, as participants questioned whether their research ideas were sufficiently original or whether their work genuinely added value to their field. This concern was reinforced by a *failure to internalize success*, as achievements were frequently minimized or attributed to temporary factors. Rıza noted, *"Even when something goes well, I assume it does not truly count—maybe the reviewer was generous, or maybe I just got lucky this time."* Ozan described how these doubts accumulated over time and shaped his sense of academic identity:

> *You keep working and moving forward, but internally you focus more on what is missing than on what you have achieved. When you look at your work, you rarely see progress, only gaps. Over time, this creates the feeling that you are not competent enough to be doing a PhD, even though you are still continuing. You start wondering if you belong here at all, or if everyone else somehow knows something fundamental that you missed.*

Ozan's account illustrates how ongoing self-criticism shaped perceptions of academic competence, largely independent of external evaluation. Participants also described a broader sense of *nonbelonging in academia*, particularly when

balancing doctoral study with work and family responsibilities. Together, these experiences positioned academic competence as fragile and continually negotiated, forming a central manifestation of self-doubt during doctoral study.

Academic Engagement

Participants' self-doubt was not limited to perceptions of competence but also shaped how they engaged with doctoral work. Many described oscillating patterns of engagement marked by *perfectionistic overworking* and *procrastination driven by self-doubt*. At times, participants worked excessively to compensate for perceived inadequacy, while at other moments, uncertainty led to avoidance and delay. Lale summarized, *"Sometimes I work too much because I feel behind, and sometimes I avoid working because I do not know where to start; it is like being stuck between two extremes that both feel wrong."* Self-doubt also influenced visibility and decision-making. Participants reported *avoidance of academic visibility*, such as hesitating to share drafts, ask questions, or present work, due to fear of negative evaluation. This hesitation was closely tied to *difficulty making academic decisions*, as uncertainty about quality and direction made even minor choices feel risky. Vildan described how these patterns shaped her engagement:

> *When I am unsure about my work, everything slows down. I rewrite the same parts again and again, or I postpone decisions because I am afraid of making the wrong choice. Over time, this creates a feeling of being stuck, even when I am constantly busy. You spend hours on small details that probably do not matter, but you cannot move forward because nothing feels good enough to commit to.*

Vildan's account illustrates how self-doubt translates into constrained and uneven forms of academic engagement, characterized by cycles of overwork, avoidance, and indecision. For some participants, prolonged difficulties in engagement led to thoughts of withdrawal. *Considering withdrawal or quitting* emerged not as a sudden decision but as a recurring response to sustained uncertainty and exhaustion. Naz noted, *"At certain points, I seriously ask myself whether continuing is worth it, not because I want to quit, but because I cannot see a way through."* Together, these patterns demonstrate how self-doubt actively shapes doctoral engagement rather than remaining an internal or purely cognitive experience.

Theme 3: Living with Doctoral Uncertainty

Emotional Strain

Participants described living with doctoral uncertainty as involving substantial emotional costs that accumulated over time. Many reported experiencing *chronic emotional strain* as they navigated prolonged ambiguity surrounding progress, expectations, and outcomes. This strain was not confined to periods of intense

workload but was described as a persistent background condition shaping everyday life. Gizem captured *"Most of the time, I feel mentally tired, as if I am constantly carrying something heavy in my mind, even when nothing specific has gone wrong."* Such strain frequently manifested as *emotional exhaustion*, particularly among participants balancing doctoral education with employment and family responsibilities. Sustained effort without clear signals of progress contributed to a growing sense of depletion, while overlapping demands intensified *feeling overwhelmed*. İrem explained, *"Everything feels heavy at the same time, and when work, family, and doctoral responsibilities overlap, it becomes almost impossible to focus properly."* Tolga described how uncertainty shaped his emotional experience over time:

> *What makes it exhausting is not only the workload, but the constant uncertainty about whether what you are doing is actually enough. You keep investing time and emotional energy without knowing if this effort will lead anywhere or when the process will end. Because there is no clear sense of progress or completion, the pressure does not disappear; it accumulates. Over time, this uncertainty becomes emotionally draining, as you carry the feeling of unfinished work with you even outside academic settings. You wake up tired, and you go to sleep tired, not because you worked all day, but because the uncertainty never stops.*

Tolga's account illustrates how emotional strain emerges from prolonged uncertainty about progress and outcomes rather than from workload alone, resulting in a cumulative and persistent emotional burden. Together, these experiences highlight how emotional strain constituted a central dimension of living with doctoral uncertainty, shaping participants' wellbeing alongside their academic trajectories.

Work–Life Imbalance

Participants described doctoral uncertainty as closely connected to persistent difficulties maintaining boundaries between doctoral education and personal life. Rather than offering flexibility, the open-ended nature of doctoral work often extended academic demands into evenings, weekends, and social time. This erosion of boundaries was frequently associated with *difficulty separating work and personal life*. Elif captured, *"Even when I am with my family, my mind is still on my doctoral work, I am physically present but mentally absent."* Such boundary erosion often generated *guilt when not working*, as participants reported feeling uncomfortable during moments of rest, particularly when progress felt slow or uncertain. This guilt was reinforced by *constant mental preoccupation with doctoral work*, making disengagement difficult even during nonworking hours. Berk explained, *"Rest never feels deserved because there is always something*

unfinished, you feel like you should be reading, writing, or at least thinking about your work." Cansu described how these dynamics reshaped her daily routines and relationships:

> *I have stopped making plans in advance because I never know whether I will feel free or guilty. I cancel social activities at the last minute, and over time, people stop inviting you. The doctorate slowly reorganizes your life, not because you are always working, but because you are never fully available. Even when you try to disconnect, the guilt follows you, and you end up half-present everywhere, not fully engaged with work, not fully present with people.*

Cansu's account illustrates how work-life imbalance manifested through social withdrawal and disrupted routines rather than through emotional strain alone. Participants also noted that these patterns contributed to *neglect of personal relationships* and *reduced time for rest*, as doctoral demands gradually crowded out social, relational, and restorative activities. Together, these experiences demonstrate how work-life imbalance constitutes a distinct and relational dimension of living with doctoral uncertainty.

Endurance and Coping

Participants described coping with doctoral uncertainty primarily through endurance rather than resolution. Instead of actively reducing uncertainty, many reported adapting to it by normalizing difficulty and lowering expectations about clarity or control. This process often involved *normalizing struggle*, as uncertainty was reframed as an inevitable part of doctoral education rather than a temporary problem to be solved. Elif captured, *"After a while you stop expecting things to become clear and just accept that this is how it is, you realize that waiting for certainty means never moving forward."* A common strategy involved *handling difficulties on one's own*, as participants rarely described seeking systematic support and instead emphasized self-reliance as a necessary response to prolonged ambiguity. This tendency was reinforced by *downplaying emotional difficulties*, particularly when uncertainty normalized over time. Lale explained, *"You tell yourself that others are probably dealing with worse situations, so you should not complain—it feels selfish to ask for help when everyone is struggling."* Hakan described how this endurance-oriented coping shaped his experience:

> *At some point, you realize that waiting for clarity or reassurance does not work. You stop trying to resolve the uncertainty and focus on surviving it. You keep going, not because things are clearer, but because stopping feels even more difficult. Over time, enduring the uncertainty becomes part of your routine. You learn to live with the discomfort, to make decisions without knowing if*

they are right and to keep moving even when you cannot see where you are heading.

Hakan's account illustrates how participants coped by *enduring uncertainty rather than resolving it*, transforming uncertainty into a manageable, although persistent, condition. Participants also described *comparing themselves to worse-off peers* as a way of maintaining perspective and emotional balance. While this comparison provided temporary relief, it did not eliminate uncertainty but instead supported continued endurance. Together, these strategies demonstrate how coping functioned less as problem-solving and more as sustained adaptation to ongoing uncertainty.

DISCUSSION

Progress uncertainty represents a distinct psychological stressor rooted in structural ambiguities within doctoral education. Extending Lovitts' (2005) account of ambiguity in doctoral progress, the findings show that uncertainty operates as active disorientation, obscuring whether sustained effort yields meaningful progress. This pattern aligns with Goal-Setting Theory's proposition that vague objectives undermine motivation (Locke & Latham, 2002) and with Self-Efficacy Theory's emphasis on efficacy-relevant information for self-assessment (Bandura, 1997; Devos et al., 2017). When students cannot determine whether achievements meet standards, they lack mastery experiences that build research self-efficacy (Overall et al., 2011), preventing the feedback loop that should sustain confidence. In the Turkish context, these dynamics are intensified by subjectively defined progression criteria, hierarchical relationships that constrain feedback access, and delayed supervisory responses (Balı & Dönmez, 2018; Karaduman-Oskay et al., 2026; Özmen & Güç, 2013). Similar patterns of uncertainty-related distress have been documented internationally (Jach et al., 2025; Sillence, 2023). Socioeconomic precarity further compounds these challenges, as employment demands and limited funding fragment doctoral progress, transforming academic uncertainty into an existential concern (Evans et al., 2018; Levecque et al., 2017; Nagy et al., 2019). In this sense, doctoral education frameworks that implicitly assume full-time student status risk overlooking how resource-constrained contexts systematically amplify the psychological consequences of uncertainty.

Self-doubt manifested as a pervasive psychological state that systematically eroded academic identity and engagement. The findings support Self-Efficacy Theory's emphasis on mastery experiences as foundational to confidence (Bandura, 1997) while showing how progress uncertainty disrupts the validation necessary for building self-efficacy. This extends research linking the impostor phenomenon to unclear feedback (Bravata et al., 2020; Sverdlik et al., 2020) by demonstrating how doubt becomes self-perpetuating in the absence of

validation. Patterns of perfectionistic overworking and procrastination aligned with Steel's (2007) account of uncertainty-driven procrastination, illustrating how self-doubt constrains engagement through avoidance, reduced academic visibility, and delayed decision-making. Withdrawal emerged as a recurring process rather than an isolated response, indicating gradual psychological erosion rather than a sudden decision to exit (Alisic et al., 2024; Maher et al., 2020). In the Turkish context, these dynamics were intensified by employment demands, family responsibilities, limited mentoring, hierarchical supervision, and precarious funding (Balı & Dönmez, 2018; Kılıç & Karahan, 2023). These findings extend international research on doctoral impostor feelings (Nori & Vanttaja, 2023; Wang & Li, 2023) by situating impostor-related vulnerability within structural and cultural conditions that amplify psychological risk.

Living with doctoral uncertainty involved substantial wellbeing costs that accumulated through chronic strain. Consistent with research documenting elevated psychological distress among doctoral students (Evans et al., 2018; Levecque et al., 2017), the findings show that uncertainty itself—independent of workload—generates depletion through constant self-monitoring without resolution. This pattern supports uncertainty tolerance theory's emphasis on intolerance as anxiogenic (Carleton, 2016; Dugas et al., 2004) while illustrating how prolonged ambiguity produces a sustained emotional burden. Beyond intrapsychic effects, participants' boundary management challenges echoed international research on doctoral work–life balance (Schmidt & Umans, 2014; Stubb et al., 2011). In the Turkish context, these challenges were intensified by institutional assumptions of full-time availability and hierarchical constraints on support seeking (Karaduman-Oskay et al., 2026). Coping was characterized less by resolution than by endurance, with participants normalizing struggle and managing difficulties individually (Hazell et al., 2020; Martínez-García et al., 2024). Downward social comparison offered temporary relief while perpetuating distress, underscoring the need for structural interventions at the institutional level.

Although rooted in the Turkish context, the dynamics identified in this study resonate with broader international patterns in doctoral education. Similar experiences of progress uncertainty, inadequate feedback, and supervisory strain have been documented across diverse national contexts, including Finland (Nori & Vanttaja, 2023), Belgium (Levecque et al., 2017), the United Kingdom (Sillence, 2023), and Iran (Ghaseminangi et al., 2026). Longitudinal evidence further confirms that uncertainty in doctoral learning is a widespread and evolving experience rather than a context-specific phenomenon (Jach et al., 2025). At the same time, resource-constrained contexts such as Turkey may amplify these dynamics in distinctive ways, as financial precarity, hierarchical supervision, and limited institutional support create compounding vulnerabilities that merit particular attention in global doctoral education research and policy. These

parallels underscore the value of cross-national dialog on structural reform in doctoral education.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study makes significant conceptual and practical contributions to understanding progress uncertainty, self-doubt, and wellbeing in doctoral education. Conceptually, the research demonstrates how Goal-Setting Theory (Locke & Latham, 2002), Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1997), and Uncertainty Tolerance Theory (Dugas et al., 2004) converge within doctoral contexts to create cascading psychological consequences. Progress uncertainty prevents efficacy-building experiences essential for research self-efficacy (Overall et al., 2011), while goal ambiguity undermines motivation, and intolerance of uncertainty generates anxiety (Carleton, 2016). The Turkish context reveals how resource constraints, hierarchical supervision, and cultural expectations intensify these dynamics, particularly when institutions assume full-time student status despite employment realities documented in Turkish doctoral education (e.g., Balı & Dönmez, 2018; Özmen & Güç, 2013). For practice and policy, these findings suggest that addressing doctoral wellbeing requires structural interventions. Universities should establish explicit progression criteria with regular reviews and implement structured feedback mechanisms. Concrete institutional models include structured milestone review meetings at six-month intervals, written progress agreements codeveloped by supervisors and students, and peer writing groups that provide formative feedback beyond supervisory relationships. Institutions should recognize hybrid student profiles through flexible policies and enhanced funding addressing income precarity documented among Turkish doctoral students (Karaduman-Oskay et al., 2026). Departmental cultures should normalize help-seeking through peer networks, mental health resources, and transparent discussions about doctoral challenges.

Future research should employ longitudinal phenomenological designs tracking how progress uncertainty, self-doubt, and wellbeing evolve across doctoral stages from early candidature through completion or attrition. Comparative studies examining uncertainty across disciplines, institutional types, and national contexts would reveal how structural and cultural factors shape experiences differently, while institutional ethnographies investigating how departmental practices and evaluation systems generate or mitigate uncertainty could identify specific intervention points. Critical phenomenological approaches examining intersections between progress uncertainty and marginalization—including gender, socioeconomic status, and caregiving responsibilities—would illuminate how structural inequities compound psychological vulnerability. Cross-national qualitative research comparing resource-rich and resource-constrained contexts could inform policies supporting diverse doctoral populations. In addition, participatory action research involving doctoral students as

coinvestigators could generate contextualized knowledge addressing institution-specific challenges and testing interventions emerging from student-identified needs.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study's focus on Turkish universities may not capture experiences in other national contexts where doctoral structures differ. The sample of 20 participants represents specific disciplinary and institutional contexts that may not reflect all doctoral experiences. Cross-sectional interviews provide snapshots rather than tracking how experiences evolve over time. The researcher's familiarity with Turkish higher education may have influenced data collection and analysis despite reflexive practices. Interviews conducted in Turkish required translation, potentially affecting nuance. Data saturation was reached by the sixteenth interview, although additional participants might have revealed further variations. These limitations suggest caution in generalizing findings while highlighting directions for future research.

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study examined how doctoral students in Turkish universities experience progress uncertainty and self-doubt and how these dynamics shape wellbeing. The findings indicate that progress uncertainty functions as a distinct psychological stressor rooted in ambiguous expectations, invisible benchmarks, and contextual pressures, forming a reinforcing cycle with self-doubt that progressively erodes wellbeing. Drawing on goal-setting, self-efficacy, and uncertainty tolerance frameworks, the study shows how structural ambiguities within doctoral education undermine psychological wellbeing. Within the Turkish context, resource constraints, hierarchical supervision, and cultural expectations further intensify these dynamics, particularly where institutions assume full-time student status despite widespread employment realities. Rather than reflecting individual deficits, progress uncertainty and self-doubt arise from institutional arrangements that fail to provide clear expectations, consistent feedback, and recognition of hybrid doctoral trajectories. By foregrounding these structural sources of uncertainty, the study challenges individualistic approaches to doctoral wellbeing and underscores the need for institutional interventions that foster more transparent and supportive doctoral education systems.

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