

Clear information about rights and routines

What

Very often PhD students who start a doctorate are not aware of detailed information about what they are going to do during their doctoral program. They do not know all the activities that are associated with the position, or the duties to which they must adhere. It is therefore necessary to provide PhD students with detailed information of the concrete activities that will be carried out.

Why? – Gender perspective

There is evidence in literature that female students who perform a PhD program have a higher number of "extra" activities than their male colleagues, in addition to working on their own research. These additional activities include administrative tasks, organizing events and "baby-sitting" for visiting guests.

Evidence / background - Gender perspective

It was noticed that most of the female PhD students are invested with greater workloads compared to their male counterparts. This is because they are often assigned tasks that are not connected directly with the doctoral student role. It is a commonly held view that women are perceived as better suited to carry out work other than sheer research such as teaching and administrative tasks.

The literature shows that the different distribution of tasks has an impact on the scientific achievements of women. On the other hand, these tasks do not count on an academic cv and are not always recognized and valued. Their involvement in these collective duties is also sometimes the reason why women fall behind with their research, which can have a negative influence on their career opportunities and their well-being. There might be a need to encourage men to get more involved in these duties (such as administrative tasks, teaching, etc.) while women might be encouraged to focus more on their own research.

It was also noted that women who work in academic and/or research settings appear to be disadvantaged compared to men. This because the academic and research work is usually expected to be all-invasive, spilling over from the professional sphere into other aspects of the academics' lives, making the distinction between "work" and "leisure" somewhat blurred.

An in-depth analysis of people in the early stages of their research career that took place at the University of Trento (see garciaproject.eu) showed that the research workload is intense and requires a total commitment to research.

This requirement to be available for research at all times unveils a male-oriented organization, designed to work in a masculine way (Gill, 2009), i.e. based on a work organization that does not provide for work-family balance options.

From contexts and experiences in the FESTA-project

The interviews with PhD students show the need for greater clarification of the "implicit and informal" rules of the game that mark the doctoral program, as well as the need for a service that provides practical helps to PhD students during their doctorate.

"I wish there were more clarity in saying things. I wish there were someone who would tell me how to get the right perspective on what is the activity of a PhD student, what is he/she required to do, what are his/her tasks. Specify this information well, because I felt that many things are taken for granted when, in fact, they should not be - because a doctoral student does not come usually from a previous experience of PhD "(Male PhD student).

"I felt the need for greater support, especially in the beginning when I first arrived and did not know anyone. I did not know where to turn, I had no idea how to do things and how these were carried out both at work structuring level and how to behave, etiquette, how to ask for things, of what I had to do specifically ... it is a stressful sense of being inadequate [...]. If I had had a service to ask these things to, it probably would have been easier to overcome this moment" (Female PhD student).

Recommendations for good practice

Mentoring service: Interviews with PhD students conducted showed that they would appreciate more information about the activities they are expected to carry out during their PhD course.

They would like structured mentoring service to be introduced.

This mentoring service, in addition to providing basic information for new doctorate students, should:

- provide support and give information to solve the various issues that can hinder the success of the doctorate;
- give information about activities PhD students are expected to carry out during their program;
- inform PhD students about their rights and duties;
- provide guidance on how to relate to colleagues and supervisors;
- organize formal programs that provide structured opportunities for professional skill development – for teaching, research and administrative tasks;
- provide support by publicizing students' research interests, publications, and presentations within the program or across the institution;
- give tangible support when issues arising from motherhood and PhD course requirements need to be balanced;
- work in collaboration with development offices, or public relations offices to further publicize student achievements and scholarly activity.

All these activities should be structured by adopting a gender perspective and giving information, particularly to women, on how to deal with problems that may arise when students find themselves working in an environment dominated by men (as is the case of science and technology) and also dealing with issues of work-life balance.

From literature and other sources

In many instances, literature points out that administrative support is necessary throughout student programs, and may be particularly important in recruiting and retaining students in the initial stage. Formal orientation is of particular value at the first stage of the doctoral program (Lovitts, 2004).

Administrative support is crucial for student success during their doctorate program. Administrative personnel can arrange social and professional events that are particularly relevant for students. As students make the transition to independence, they may feel disconnected from the department or program. Providing a reason to remain connected to the community and be physically present in the space where they can interact with peers and faculty can help counter feelings of transition and isolation. Support from administrative personnel is important because they can give up-to-date, accurate and accessible information about what activities PhD students are required to do during their program, what routines they should follow and duties they have to observe (Pifer et al., 2016)

Administrators are key in establishing and fulfilling the mission, purposes, and processes of doctoral education. They are particularly well positioned to serve leadership roles in strengthening doctoral programs within their academic and research areas. Administrators might also be deliberate about discussing the challenges of doctoral education with faculty members to educate and inform graduate faculties and to foster a shared commitment to support students (McAlpine and Amundsen, 2012). It may be particularly helpful to educate supervisors on how to best support diverse students from different backgrounds and genders.

Such practices may help faculty members to best serve students through the variety of roles they serve in doctoral education, including the ones of advisor, supervisor, instructor, and colleague. Given the importance of personal and professional competence, administrators can establish opportunities for dialogue with PhD supervisors about admission processes, student retention, and challenges to doctoral education that faculty members observe first hand. Administrators can also demonstrate a welcoming environment to students from all backgrounds (Lovitts, 2004).

Gill, T. G., and Hoppe, U. (2009). The business professional doctorate as an informing channel: A survey and analysis. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 4, 27-57.

Lovitts, B. E. (2004). Research on the structure and process of graduate education: Retaining students. In Wulff D. H. and Austin A. E. (Eds.), *Paths to the professoriate: Strategies for enriching the preparation of future faculty*, 115-136. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

McAlpine, L., and Amundsen, C. (2012). Challenging the taken-for-granted: How research analysis might inform pedagogical practices and institutional policies related to doctoral education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 37(6), 683-694.

Pifer, M. J., and Baker, V. L. (2016). Stage-based challenges and strategies for support in doctoral education: A practical guide for students, faculty members, and program administrators. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 11, 15-34.

Other useful resources

In defense of academic freedom, the Italian Higher Education reported that all higher education institutions have the right to establish their own regulations independently, within the limits set by national legislation.

<http://www.miur.it/guida/guide.htm>

Regolamento di Ateneo in materia di Dottorato di Ricerca dell'Università di Trento

<http://web.unitn.it/files/download/2395/regolamentodottorati5.pdf>