

Support for switching supervisor

What

Problems with supervisors are common among PhD students. In some cases it becomes necessary to switch supervisor, even if this may entail practical problems.

Why? – Gender perspective

There is evidence that female PhD students suffer more from poor supervision than men and that women more often feel powerless to solve serious problems in the supervisory relationship. Switching the supervisor might be the best solution in some cases, but support is needed in order to manage a smooth transition. Transparent information and clear routines for a switch might facilitate a smoother process for both student and supervisor and help to avoid a feeling of failure or ongoing conflict.

Evidence / background - Gender perspective

There is evidence that female PhD students are more often unsatisfied with their supervisory relationship and suffer more from poor supervision than men. According to a report from the UK on women's retention in chemistry, a larger proportion of female than male students had been "deeply affected by what might be termed 'standard supervision issues'" such as lack of pastoral care or lack of interpersonal and management skills. (Newsome, 2008, p. 7)

From contexts and experiences in the FESTA-project

Clarity about the supervisor's and the student's mutual expectations, roles and responsibilities as well as well-functioning working routines with regular follow ups help to prevent irritation and disappointment and to avoid conflicts. In some cases, switching the supervisor might be the best solution in order to guarantee that the student is able to progress in time. Since the roles of the doctoral student and the supervisor are not based on equality, students need institutional help to support communication and find an acceptable solution for problems. Moreover, support is needed in order to mediate in an eventual conflict, end a non-functional relationship in a proper way and find a suitable new supervisor as soon as possible.

At a workshop on "Equal opportunities aware PhD-supervision" with PhD students at the Faculty of Science and Technology at Uppsala University, participants emphasized the fact that non-traditional students might not know that switching supervisor is an option. Therefore, the institution should provide accessible and clear information about students' right to switch supervisors. Some students pointed out that switching supervisor might cause anxiety, stress and isolation, if the student is left alone and the process of finding a new supervisor takes a long time. Therefore, it is important that the institution, particularly at department level, helps the student to find a new supervisor as soon as possible.

Recommendations for good practice

The institution should provide clear information about rules and routines for switching supervisors addressed to both students and supervisors. Moreover, institutional support is necessary to avoid conflicts, prevent anxiety and isolation and to make the switching process as smooth as possible for both parties. According to the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance, a doctoral student has the right to change supervisor if he or she requests this. Moreover, the department or higher education institution is obliged to help. The Faculty of Science and Technology at Uppsala University gives the following advice on its website: "If a conflict occurs between a doctoral student and a supervisor, the doctoral student should request a meeting with the supervisor. If the meeting doesn't lead to anything constructive, the doctoral student should contact the head of school, dean or someone else responsible for third-cycle education. The union, students' union, doctoral student ombudsman and student health services can also provide advice. If there are serious problems it is important to act as soon as possible so that the student's studies do not suffer."

From literature and other sources

Newsome, J. L. (2008). The chemistry PhD: The impact on women's retention. *A report for the UK Resource Centre for Women in SET and the Royal Society of Chemistry*, 1-38.

In Swedish Higher Education, there is a legal right for PhD students to change supervisor, see <http://studera.nu/startpage/doctoral-studies/rights-and-support/changing-supervisor/>

Advice for students:

- How to tell your supervisor you want a divorce, <http://thesiswhisperer.com/2011/03/15/how-to-tell-your-supervisor-you-want-a-divorce/>
- Making the Switch: Strategies for Changing Supervisors, http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2000_11_03/noid.9164757171699763359