

## Balancing, planning, prioritizing

### What

PhD studies include a range of different tasks and duties. To plan teaching and research, balance between different duties such as research, teaching and administration, make priorities when needed and find a healthy work-life balance is crucial for finishing the PhD in time.

### Why? – Gender perspective

There is evidence that many women PhD students experience stress and pressure during their studies. Providing support to help students to balance, plan and prioritize will enhance students' wellbeing and help them to work effectively and finish their studies in time.

### From contexts and experiences in the FESTA-project

Interviews with supervisors at Uppsala University showed that many supervisors believe that academic cultures and norms do not align well with other private interests and a family life. Supervisors stressed that senior staff might act as role models for younger academics by supporting students in making priorities and realizing a suitable work-life balance.

Participants at a workshop on "Equal opportunities aware PhD-supervision" for PhD students at the Faculty of Science and Technology at Uppsala University pointed out that supervisors should help students to plan and make priorities. Thus, the supervisor might advise students to take postgraduate courses such as introduction to postgraduate studies, research ethics, academic writing and teacher training at an early stage. Attending these courses during the first phase of the PhD education not only facilitates a better foundation for students' research, but also enhances students' integration into the academic community and prevents the stress which arises when students are attending courses during the final PhD stages.

### Recommendations for good practice

Research and other obligations (teaching, administration):

- As a supervisor, you might:
  - o Be sensitive to gendered expectations concerning invisible work, teaching duties etc.
  - o Talk with your students about how to organize courses, research and other duties in an effective way and help students to make the right priorities
  - o Support an equitable distribution of teaching duties between women and men and protect women from a too heavy teaching workload

Preparing for regular follow-up / reviews:

- As explained in "Establish the PhD student – supervisor relationship" it is essential to negotiate and clarify expectations, roles and responsibilities and establish clear working routines. Regular follow-ups / reviews are necessary in order to ensure that these mutual agreements work well for both sides. Thus, regular follow-ups facilitate changes in working routines when necessary,

and prevent potential misunderstandings and conflicts. Moreover, a regular review on how work is proceeding reduces students' stress and pressure by making explicit what has been achieved and what is still to be done. Thus, a British report on women in chemistry highlights that women were "more likely than men to have felt that the PhD has become an ordeal" and recommends that "individual students' experiences are regularly monitored" (Newsome, 2008, p 9).

Initial agreements as well as reviews might be documented and made accessible for both supervisor and student, in order to make agreements and priorities transparent and facilitate regular follow-ups.

In Swedish Higher Education, the supervisor and the PhD student must draw up a so called "individual study plan" according to the Higher Education Ordinance. The individual study plan must be done jointly and include the obligations of the higher education institution and the doctoral student as well as a time plan for the student's studies. Furthermore, the individual study plan must be regularly followed up and revised by the institution when necessary, after consultation with the doctoral student and supervisor.

Work-life balance (example from University of Southern Denmark, Faculty of Science):

- Women in Academia at work juggle a job, writing, research, and teaching and, at home, they juggle partners, children, home life, and personal interests. Sometimes for a young researcher even thinking about timing a pregnancy can be overwhelming.

An imbalance between work and life can be stressful. Supervisors can play an important role in helping the student achieve a balance between work and life, which ensures a satisfactory distribution of time by making it legitimate to reflect on the balance between work and life priorities.

At the University of Southern Denmark, a PhD supervisor experienced that it is a challenge for female students to balance priorities - work is fitted around private life and women are required to live up to expectations both at home and at work.

The following are different recommendations for what to consider when (helping your student in) making priorities:

- o Encourage the student to reflect on how to make priorities to obtain a good work-life balance (for instance by going through the reflection exercises listed below).
- o Discuss the importance of establishing a balance between work and life with your student. Make it a legitimate topic for discussion by being open about your own priorities.

- Discuss Work-Life balance with your PhD student with respect to:
  - Realistic working hours - high ambitions
  - Expectations as a young researcher – see the structures
  - Work – part of the community – to work long hours
  - Highlighting what is expected and where there might be conflicts: expectations, dilemmas, conflicting values, signs of stress

**Reflection exercise: work-life priorities**

**Step 1**

The career cake model is an exercise providing you with an overview of your life. It can reveal the difference between the life you wish and the life you live. The model gives you a hint about the parts of your life you need to take a closer look at.

Fill in the cake with your values. Look at the cake. It is an image of your life. There are two ways to change a work-life imbalance; either you change your priorities or you change the time allocated to each area.



**Step 2**

Reflect and write down your thoughts on:

1. What does “Work-Life Balance” mean to you?
2. What is the impact of work-life balance and imbalance on you?
3. What are your values about work, family/friends and yourself and where it fits life as a whole?
4. How much should each area represent in your life, i.e., how much of your waking time and energy do you want to devote to each area?
5. How can you make sure that you honor your commitments?

**Step 3**

Defining the playing field:

1. Within the framework and the “life resources” you assigned each single area of life in the previous exercise: 1. Reflect and write down your thoughts on:
  - What specific main activities must be central to each area?
  - What should be your (life-strategic) pointers that you should prioritize?
2. Consider the fit between your current work role and your life outside work. You may give each main activity points on a scale from 0-10 according to how well you live your priorities.
  - Are you satisfied with your work-life balance?
  - What are the issues that you prefer (“wants”) versus those that are absolutely non-negotiable?
3. Reflect on your main challenges
  - What are your main challenges or resistance in your institution, at work, at home and in yourself?
4. Making priorities - main challenges:
  - Are you ready to face your challenges?
  - What stands in your way of doing it?
  - How will you deal with it?

**From literature and other sources**

There is evidence that female PhD students experience stress and pressure during their studies to a higher extent than men. Thus, Swedish PhD student surveys clearly show that women are on sick-leave more often and during longer time-periods than men. Gendered expectations on women, particularly in male dominated areas, might put higher demands on women than on men and increase women's demands on themselves as well as increase their actual workload. Focus interviews with female PhD students at Uppsala University showed that women more often than men are made responsible for “invisible work tasks” such as writing meeting minutes or organizing social events at the department. Similarly, a postgraduate student survey at the university of Lund / Sweden highlighted that women tend to get involved in common duties such as teaching or administrative and organizational tasks to a higher degree than men. Even if these tasks often are experienced as positive and stimulating, they do not count on an academic cv and are not always recognized and valued. Furthermore, the involvement in these collective duties might also lead to women falling behind with their own research.

Moreover, research into academic culture shows that long working days and a common belief in research as “vocation” are strong and well-established norms. A British study on women in chemistry showed that women to a higher extent than men are “uncomfortable with the culture of their research group” which makes them prefer a career outside the academy, since an academic career is experienced as all-consuming (Newsome, 2008, p 18).



A recent study on female students' wellbeing reports that "one of the hardest undertakings in the whole process of being a female PhD student was to maintain a healthy balance in life" (Schmid & Umans, 2014).

It is difficult to manage different tasks and different roles - as student, teacher, colleague, employee, mother, wife or partner, daughter, sister, friend, member of group etc. - which might lead to stress and feelings of guilt and shame (Schmid & Umans, 2014)

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