

Ensure good communication

What

Providing supportive feedback, establishing and maintaining trust and understanding as well as applying intercultural communication skills are crucial for effective supervision.

Why? – Gender perspective

Good communication as a precondition for a supportive relationship has a high impact on women's overall PhD experience and wellbeing.

From contexts and experiences in the FESTA-project

Focus interviews with PhD students at FBK show that women:

- Might have less time with their supervisor compared with their male colleagues
- Might receive less encouragement than their male colleagues, when it would be important that they were given more encouragement (especially when working in areas considered "malestream")
- Are more likely than men to require perfection from themselves and, therefore, tend more easily to delay or fail to complete the required work

Recommendations for good practice

Establish and maintain trust/support/understanding

Good communication as a fundamental basis for a professional, helpful and respectful supervisory relationship might be supported – particularly in the first phase of the PhD education – by:

- The ambition to establish a honest and trustful atmosphere of mutual respect
- Clarifying and negotiating expectations and responsibilities
- Establishing procedures and processes of joint working
- Regular informal interactions
- Identifying the student's interests and skills

Personal chemistry and emotions, support and trust between a PhD-student and a supervisor, play crucial role in PhD education. Different personalities seem to have different behaviour. Hence, the relationship between a supervisor and a PhD-student are full of idiosyncrasies and peculiarities. Beneficial relations between supervisors and students usually emanate from the authority position of the supervisor. They sometimes could be exacerbated in cases of “non-traditional” PhD-students such as elder persons, female students or those who use English as a second language. The supervision process needs to be implemented with high sensitivity and to be built on relationships of trust and respect.

There are many and varied informal and formal ways of obtaining support, understanding and help.

Some examples of formal sources for a PhD student might be:

- the supervisor

- an academic mentor
- the Head of Department
- the administrative staff supporting the PhD-students
- the faculty PhD-student representative
- foreign students may get specialized support from the International Officers

Their duties and responsibilities include:

- Arranging induction sessions for PhD-students
- Taking care of pastoral and administrative responsibilities
- Mediating in cases of dispute between a PhD-student and a supervisor

Some examples of informal sources might be:

- the supervisor
- an academic mentor
- colleagues and friends

Internationalisation and globalisation of academia mean that the PhD-students and their supervisors often come with different educational, religious, cultural, and linguistic background. This can be the main reason for the lack of trust between them. In order to build a helpful, professional and respectful relationship between a PhD-student and his/her supervisor there are some key factors such as:

- open and productive communication
- mutual respect
- clarified expectations
- PhD-students and supervisors together should establish procedures and processes of collaborative working which might require:
 - o more regular informal interactions
 - o clearly identified the student's needs

Skilled supervisors offer some valuable recommendations:

- establish reasonable and agreed expectations
- inspire and motivate your students
- ensure that the partnership is appropriate for that specific project
- initiate and keep regular contact as well as provide essential feedback
- help if academic and/or personal problems occur

Constructive feedback

The character of feedback has to change over time depending on how the student's work is progressing. Particularly in the first phase of the PhD-education, frequent scheduled meetings enhance an atmosphere of trust and support and provide opportunities for feedback. Feedback can range from very specific comments on particular issues to occasional friendly reassurance and support. It can be both oral and written. However, the feedback should always be given to help, not to hurt or create resistance and

restrains. The purpose of giving feedback in the supervision process is to improve the student's performance, but not to discourage it. When the feedback is predominately negative, studies have shown that it can discourage students' effort and achievements.

General advice: Supportive feedback should:

- Be given timely and frequently since a delay in responding can create insecurity and hinder progress
- Be as specific as possible (instead of general)
- Be expressed in an encouraging and supporting matter
- Emphasize even good things, not only things that have to be improved
- Use the concept of a "feedback sandwich" to guide your feedback: Compliment, Correct, Compliment
- Formulate critical comments in a constructive way through giving concrete examples and being as specific as possible
- Feed forward: provide an opportunity to reflect on how to proceed and develop further on
- In many disciplinary fields within STEM, supervisors and students meet on a daily basis. Even if feedback might be given ad-hoc, scheduled meetings are important for more holistic feedback
- Providing written feedback some days before the meeting might be a tool to help the student to think about your feedback in advance
- At the end of a meeting, you might ask your student to summarize your feedback and what actions need to be taken in his / her own words, in order to make sure that the student has understood you correctly
- Since feedback needs to be adapted over time, it might be useful to reflect on the nature of the feedback you want to provide: Amongst other things, it might summarize and mirror a progression and point out what still has to be done, provide a general judgement or clarify strengths that the student can build upon. It might encourage and motivate, correct concrete failures, identify things that still have to be improved, give explanations leading to a deeper understanding, challenge the student's understanding and stimulate critical thinking and creativity or enhance self - reflection on the process itself.

Intercultural communication

Carroll and Ryan (2005) provide helpful advice concerning intercultural supervisory relationships and intercultural communication skills.

Try to allocate supervisors with overseas experience, cultural sensitivity or intercultural communication skills, empathy, or who have background knowledge of the student's home country or culture.

- Clarify roles of both student and supervisor early
- Discuss expectations on both sides to avoid future misunderstandings
- Set boundaries and limits to what you are prepared to do
- Schedule regular appointments which both parties are responsible for keeping
- Record decisions made during meetings

- Provide more assistance early and gradually assist the student to develop more independent learning approaches
- Try to assess where your student is academically; assess their knowledge of the discipline.

Ryan, J. (2005). Postgraduate supervision. *Teaching international students: improving learning for all*, 101-107.