

## Foster good collaboration

### What

Collaboration is one of the most important aspects of a research career; however it requires a highly responsible attitude and diligence. Good collaboration is based in the philosophy of positive behavioral interventions and supports. Within academia, various terms are used to refer to “good collaboration”. A productive and well-established formal relationship between a supervisor and his/ her PhD students is important in initiating successful research collaboration.

### Why? – Gender perspective

Gender differences are reflected in a range of features of academic life including PhD supervision and relationships between a supervisor and his/ her PhD students.

### Recommendations for good practice

#### *Encourage active participation*

In one of the FESTA partners, some PhD students experienced difficulties participating actively in the life of the research team. To solve this problem, some PhD supervisors decided to formalize weekly meetings, in which all members of the group get together and discuss the activities that are taking place. The ultimate purpose of these meetings is to develop a team spirit that fosters “team-building” and makes all members feel they are sharing in the work of their colleagues. This has been useful for encouraging the active participation of PhD students. During these meetings PhD students can give seminars in which they present their research, results or related work.

#### *Facilitate meetings*

To foster collaboration between Supervisor and Student, it is very important to establish regular meetings between PhD students and supervisors.

The frequency of meetings will depend on several factors such as the topic of research and the stage in the PHD path that the student has currently achieved:

- Early stage: the choice of the subject requires a significant amount of time from the supervisor to help the student to formulate the research question of his/her thesis project
- Intermediate stage: once the project has been defined, supervision becomes less intense, so as to ensure greater autonomy and independence in research activities
- Final stage: during the writing of the thesis, there is again a greater need of the supervisor's time to be devoted to the PhD student

A large number of supervisors suggest that the supervisor and the PhD student ought to have regular weekly meetings, in which to:

- Explore the progress or difficulties the student has had during the week
- Monitor activities
- Provide feedback (and tips) to better approach the work that the student needs to carry out

Many PhD students emphasize the need to plan their meetings with their supervisors in advance. This is because the interviews showed that the PhD who has as her/his supervisor a head of research unit (or a person having many responsibilities) has difficulties communicating with him/her and obtaining important information due to the lack of time that the supervisor can dedicate to him/her.

These meetings can be of different types:

- Individual meetings
- Group meetings with other students
- Group meetings with co-advisor

Supervisors deem individual meetings most profitable for two reasons:

- Difficulty of doctoral students to communicate, especially in public
- The "one-to-one" relationship motivates the student to achieve the intermediate steps during the week and this method favors the development of empathy, emotional and professional support, by helping the PhD student to focus

To encourage informal meetings, some supervisors use "pizza-meetings" - usually during lunch break - to facilitate informal discussion between members of research group concerning the work of a PhD student. Frequently these meetings are not scheduled. This type of meeting is considered very successful by the supervisor since PhD students feel freer to talk and feel less under-pressure compared to having a formal meeting in the supervisor's office.

*Facilitate meetings (example from the Faculty of Science, University of Southern Denmark):*

At the Faculty of Science, in one FESTA partner, meeting facilitation is an integrated practice. In connection with PhD-supervision, it is especially useful to pay careful attention to the facilitation of meetings in research groups. Facilitation includes paying attention to atmosphere, form and format of the meeting, so that the topic(s) and agenda of the meeting correspond to the dynamic and intended outcomes. Also it has proven helpful for group leaders to carefully plan regular presentation workshops to allow for a high degree of participation, openness and fruitful exchange in an otherwise very competitive culture. This can be done through a variety of measures ranging from careful planning and preparation, group or pair-discussions, facilitated rounds, formats for feedback, explicit conclusions at the end of every session with a clear sense of who does what when, and follow-up and follow-through after the session.

Useful facilitating tools can be found in the handbook for gender sensitive facilitation (to be published by FESTA WP6.1).

*Facilitate teamwork/ Collaboration in research group*

In another FESTA partner, some research groups have adopted strategies to facilitate collaboration between members of the same research group. In one partner, for example, some PhD students have to

work, in the early stages, with other people in the research group and only after some months, the PhDs can work with their supervisor. This mode of action has two positive implications:

- It helps acquire the knowledge about the environment and the context within which PhD students will have to work
- It helps increase the collaboration with the members of the research group

Another important element that emerged in this practice, concerns the inclusion of the PhD student in the community in which s/he is entering.

Some supervisors, especially those who work in laboratories, have adopted the strategy of entrusting the whole group with a task and having each team member carry out a part of the task. This way of working means that people are encouraged to work together. One can consider this practice as an "articulation of work" (Corbin and Strauss, 1993) where everyone does a part of the task and only orchestrating all parts of the activity will allow completing the work. It is essential to create shared objectives that will facilitate people cooperating with each other and that will develop a feeling of being included in the community of practice. Through collaboration, PhD students can develop the situated and tacit knowledge that will help them become legitimate members of that community of practice.

To facilitate collaboration in the research group, the majority of supervisors in one FESTA partner, involve PhD students in research group events, such as weekly meetings. Supervisors try to include PhD students in daily activities and avoid considering them as novices, but as peer researchers working in the unit. The know-how PhDs need to acquire in order to do the job can be developed through relationships, through direct contact and interdependence with the members of the group, who then become important sources of knowledge and from whom the students learn, in a situated and collaborative way.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13, 3-21.

#### *Peer learning and peer support*

The peer support is very important for PhDs, especially for those who start a doctorate.

To increase the collaboration between PhDs, some supervisors asked the PhD students at the second and third year to take care of the doctoral students of the first year. During the first period, the PhD students of second and third years help the new PhD settle in, meet people and know the different activities of work. This attitude has also served the purpose of creating a team spirit, encouraging communication and to make them feel part of a group. In this way the new PhDs are thus encouraged to interact because they do a peer training, asking the senior PhD students to help them in their work.

Another strategy used by supervisors for increasing the peer support and peer learning regards the allocation of office space to PhD students. The PhD student's desks are organised in an open space, an environment that allows mutual interaction because there are no physical barriers to peer relationships.

This setting fosters relationships and facilitates the development of a climate of friendship and confidence between all.

However supervisors comment that if on the one hand this spatial arrangement is positive because it encourages the collaboration between students, on the other hand this area should be located away from the offices of the students' supervisors. Otherwise students may perceive this setting as a means of increasing the supervisory control.

### **From literature and other sources**

Supervisory relationships are central determinants that contribute to the success of the doctoral journey (Ives & Rowley, 2005; Sambrook, Stewart, & Roberts, 2008; Styles & Radloff, 2001; Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007).

Ives and Rowley (2005) found that a constructive supervisory relationship was associated with students' progress and satisfaction with their doctoral studies and, hence, with their involvement in their thesis projects.

To ensure greater success in the doctoral graduate process, supervisors and institutions must have an understanding of the issues which arise through this task. Problems and issues can occur in many areas of the doctoral journey. Four issues are commonly discussed in the literature; these are attrition, supervisor relationship, supervisor quality, and social isolation.

Ives, Glenice<sup>1</sup>; Rowley, Glenn<sup>2</sup>, *Studies in Higher Education*, Volume 30, Number 5, October 2005, pp. 535-555(21)

Jones, M. (2013), *Issues in Doctoral Studies - Forty Years of Journal Discussion: Where have we been and where are we going?* *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 8 (6), 83-104.

Sambrook, Sally; Stewart, Jim; Roberts, Clair.

*Journal of Further and Higher Education*, v32 n1 p71-84 Feb 2008.

Styles, I., & Radloff, A. (2001). *The synergistic thesis: Student and supervisor perspectives.* *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 25(1), 97-106.

Zhao, C. M., Golde, C. M., & McCormick, A. C. (2007). *More than a signature: How advisor choice and advisor behaviour affect doctoral student satisfaction.* *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 31,263-281.

### **Other useful resources**

Murphy, N. W. (2004). *Orientations to research higher degree supervision: The interrelatedness of beliefs about supervision, research, teaching and learning.* (Doctoral dissertation, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia).

Nutov, L., & Hazzan, O. (2011). Feeling the doctorate: Is doctoral research that studies the emotional labour of doctoral students possible? *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 6, 19-31.