

## Establish PhD student – supervisor relationship

### What

Ensuring that a clear psychological contract is established between PhD-student and Supervisor. The psychological contract is the unwritten expectations between an organization and an employee that are not expressly outlined in the contract of employment.

### Why? – Gender perspective

Converging expectations and setting up a psychological contract to clarify the working relationship makes it easier for a PhD-student to understand and negotiate the new situation s/he has entered. This can ease the transition from graduate to post graduate life and work in Academia. Establishing a clear psychological contract, by making implicit rules and knowledge explicit, can level the playing field for everyone – also newcomers or people not already familiar with Academia.

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

As part of the FESTA project on gender sensitive PhD-supervision, a number of study circles were held at one of the participating universities. One such PhD supervisor study-circle session was well underway when one of the younger participants suddenly exclaimed that he had so many reflections on the best way to get the programme started and to establish the relationship with both male and female PhD-students – he had been experimenting with a number of different styles and methods but had yet to find his preferred modus. This brought about an engaged and fruitful discussion concerning first meetings, establishing the 'right' working tone and sounding out the nature and preferences of the PhD-student.

### Recommendations for good practice

*Converging expectations - Supervisor's checklist for first working meeting with PhD-student after student has started*

The following checklist may be used as a general guideline for the first working meeting after the PhD-student has started. It can be supplemented or modified according to Supervisor's personal preference, style or practice. This checklist has the strength of being personal and establishing an interactional practice based on openness.

- Reflection concerning the PhD programme:
  - Why have you chosen to enrol as PhD-student and what are your expected outcome(s) of the programme?
  - Do you have ideas about what you want to do afterwards? (If not, it is completely ok, but if you do, it gives us a chance to emphasize those elements that will strengthen you in relevant ways.)
  - Do you wish to continue on to an academic career /a career in Academia after you obtain your degree?

- Expectations student-supervisor:
  - What do you expect of me as supervisor on your PhD project?
  - What do you expect concerning my accessibility?
  - Do you expect me to respond to e-mails in weekends or vacations?
  - I expect from you that you
    - Are engaged in your PhD-studies both in relation to your research and your teaching
    - Really want to do your PhD – that it is not a second choice
    - Keep your dates, obligations and agreements – both with me and with others in the group
    - Work full time – and if you are not physically present (e.g. if you work from home), then it is possible to make contact with you by phone or mail
    - Help others in the group and communicate your knowledge to the other students including BSc- and MSc-students.
    - Interact with me in an honest and open manner and tell me clearly if you come across situations that are problematic
    - Tell me directly if I need to show particular consideration - for shorter or longer periods
    - Keep me regularly updated about the progress of your project and involve me if you encounter problems. Think first, see what you can solve yourself, and then ask. Use me to bounce off ideas and qualify possible solutions
    - Do not expect me to be able to mind read – tell me what you are thinking and then we can take action
  - I do not expect you to read or respond to emails in the weekends or on vacation. If I happen to write to you during weekends/vacations, then you are not obliged to respond straight away
- Supervision:
  - How do you prefer day-to-day supervision?
  - Would you prefer a regular meeting once a week? Or a more ad- hoc meeting schedule?
  - Please be aware that I may not always have the opportunity/time to supervise you right when it would be best for you. Give me a little flexibility. If the suggested time does not suit me, I will let you know and we can arrange a different time to discuss your question
  - This of course also goes the other way: I do not expect you to be able to talk to me right when it suits me best. Instead I expect that we can find a different time to talk

### *Establish communication and working routines*

This is a suggestion for how to establish a psychological contract, communication and working routines between supervisor and PhD-student by giving or sending an e- mail including the following text.

Please consider the following questions prior to our next working meeting:

- How do you prefer the day-to-day supervision?
- Please describe your preferred working routine?

- What are your preferences concerning meetings with me – how often, tone and style, ad-hoc or regular, other?
- What are your preferences concerning communication with me – oral, written, tone and style, ad hoc or formal, other?
- Do you have any particular concerns or wishes for how we may establish the best possible working routine and communication in our work together?

At the meeting, we will use this as input to finding out how we are going to work together – with regard to responsibilities, organization of work, working routines, meetings, communication - that suits both of us.

### *Clarify roles*

This recommendation is meant as a guide for supervisors for what to keep in mind when establishing the psychological contract and working relationship. These actions are best practiced as early as possible but can be revisited throughout the course of the PhD-project.

- Clarify roles of both student and supervisor early.
- Discuss expectations on both sides to avoid future misunderstandings and to allow for the possibility to make necessary adjustments.
- 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.
  - Be aware of the risk of “gendered expectations” for women supervisors and clarify expectations / roles when needed
- The PhD student and the supervisor present their respective expectations regarding the “ideal” project and agree on an outline implementation plan.

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

PhD students, who have more interaction with their supervisor, stand a better chance of finishing the doctoral program in the specified time (Lovitts, 2001).

“... in order for a student to have an overall positive experience of their PhD, it is imperative that he or she has a positive experience of supervision. Supervisors should have access to training to allow them to develop people management skills which incorporate equality and diversity considerations, as befits their role. A local pastoral care structure should be implemented by institutions, so that PhD students have someone to turn to, and to take the pressure off supervisors and post-doctoral fellows” (Lober- Newsome, 2008).

There is evidence that there is a difference between men's and women's PhD-experience: "Women are less likely to have a positive doctoral study experience than men" (ibid, p.9.)

PhD students describe the early years of the doctorate as very hard and different from the academic environment they had imagined (De Welde and Laursen, 2008).

Everyone has to prove he/she is doing well not only to their colleagues, but also to the rest of the faculty and teachers, emphasizing how the work they do is of high quality. For women, the need to prove they are doing well is described as even greater, since they are immersed in a sexist environment and women have to struggle daily to be treated as [equal to] their male colleagues (Seymour, (2002).

De Welde, K., & Laursen, S. L. (2008). "The 'Ideal Type' advisor: how advisors help STEM graduate students find their 'Scientific Feet'". *The Open Education Journal*, 1(49-61).

Lovitts, B. E. (2001). *Leaving the ivory tower: The causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Lober-Newsome, J. (2008). *The chemistry PhD: the impact on women's retention*. The Royal Society of Chemistry and the UK Resource Centre for Women in SET. p.9.

Seymour, E. (2002). "Tracking the processes of change in US undergraduate education in science, mathematics, engineering, and technology". *Science Education*, 86(1), 79-105).

### **Other useful resources**

For more tips on converging expectations by "Student-Advisor Expectation Scales", see material on [https://earth.stanford.edu/programs/eiper/sites/default/files/adv\\_expectations-VPGE.pdf](https://earth.stanford.edu/programs/eiper/sites/default/files/adv_expectations-VPGE.pdf)

Also check out "Support a good start".