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THE MULTIFACETED SKILL SET OF SUPERVISORS

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Abstract English

In recent years, PhD students have experienced a decrease in the quality of doctoral education. Less supervision, cancellation of courses, and lack of research resources are reported as factors having an impact on the quality of supervision. Supervision requires different skills since there are several aspects involved, including a shared responsibility at departmental level and the context for supervision within the academy, as well as the power relations, supervision relationships, and the way the assessment is conducted.

Keywords: competences, supervision.

Introduction

In recent years, PhD students have experienced a decrease in the quality of doctoral education. Less supervision, cancellation of courses, and lack of research resources are reported as factors having an impact on the quality of supervision (Doctoral Student Union, 2021). Lack of quality supervision is also reported in the "PhD Student Mirror 2016", a survey on how PhD students in Sweden perceive their studies and the study situation conducted by the Swedish Higher Education (Gröjer et al., 2016). A link between dropout rates and poor supervision is suggested in a report by Areskoug et al. (2016). In the report, PhD students mention that supervisors should have solid competencies so as to promote a decrease in attrition rates.

Supervision is one of the most researched factors that affects doctoral education and one that most influences the doctoral experience (Sverdlik et al., 2018). The Doctoral Student Union argues that the quality of research education relies "to a high degree" on the quality of supervision (Adolfsson, 2022). However, the responsibility for the quality of doctoral education rests on both the supervisor and the organisation (Sonesson & Lindberg-Sand, 2020).

A supervisor must develop a diverse range of skills. In this paper, I will focus on the following:

- monitoring progress in relation to learning outcomes
- supervisor relationships
- the writing process

Learning outcomes and grading criteria

As an attempt to improve teaching across countries in the EU, the Bologna process shifted the focus from teaching to student-centred learning. The process resulted in defining learning outcomes for all degrees and placing the responsibility for teaching on the entire institution instead of individual teachers (Biggs & Tang, 2011).

It is crucial for both supervisor and supervisee to be acquainted with the general syllabus of the PhD programme of study at their doctoral school as well as the intended learning outcomes for the general doctoral degree (Lindberg-Sand & Sonesson, 2020). The doctoral candidate must achieve a wide range of very demanding learning goals. In addition, there may be varied interpretations of how the learning outcomes can be used to create activities for the individual study plan (Lindberg-Sand & Sonesson, 2020).

One of the tasks of the supervisor is to ensure that doctoral candidates achieve the above-mentioned learning outcomes at the end of their doctoral studies. Lindberg-Sand and Sonesson (2020) suggest discussing them periodically as a part of the supervision. An approach to this task could be made in relation to the formative process, where different parties collaborate (Stigmar, 2019). In doctoral education, the formative assessment component is greater than the summative assessment (Lindberg-Sand & Sonesson, 2020, p. 264). The formative and continuous assessment is referred to as the “internal quality system of doctoral education” by Elmgren et al. (2016, p. 73). It takes place before the public defence of the thesis and is an assessment of the doctoral candidates’ competencies; therefore, it is useful to regularly monitor whether the doctoral candidate is on course to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

In order to discuss learning outcomes with the supervisee, the supervisor can provide examples of how the doctoral candidate may demonstrate knowledge or a particular skill. It must be clear for doctoral candidates how the learning outcomes manifest themselves in concrete outputs. For this purpose, a Gantt chart could be created for monitoring the progress of the doctoral candidate regarding learning outcomes throughout all the years of their research. It might also help to give a realistic overview of what is possible for students to accomplish each year.

To be more specific, the progression through the years could be indicated by defining sub-outcomes. The supervisor can provide supporting descriptions of the outcome and the context for the outcome. For example, the learning outcome “demonstrate the capacity for scholarly analysis and synthesis as well as to review and assess new and complex phenomena, issues and situations autonomously and critically” could be divided into sub-outcomes as follows:

- structuring the literature review
- creating a mental map for exploring the literature

- reading critically/asking questions of the literature
- making connections between different texts and distinguishing front-line literature
- developing your own argument
- integrating critical literature reviews into the dissertation
- writing the literature review chapter

To make sure that the candidate achieves the intended learning outcomes, the supervisor can encourage the student to reflect on how to attain them in each phase. As the doctoral candidate develops self-regulation, they, rather than the supervisor, could provide examples of how they have achieved some of the learning outcomes. This review could be implemented several times a year or as each learning outcome is fulfilled.

Monitoring progress in relation to learning outcomes may help to avoid the shortcomings in planning of which the doctoral candidates complain (Lindén, 2020). In addition, providing transparency may help to organise and plan work and avoid issues with procrastination (Lindén, 2020). Some doctoral candidates struggle unnecessarily, which results in delaying or abandoning their studies. A clear picture of how well the doctoral candidates meet learning outcomes may motivate them and decrease attrition rates.

Grading criteria must be explicit to maintain stable judgments and to achieve maximum reliability among teachers making these judgements (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Research on rejected doctorates concludes that the dissertation manuscript should be assessed against the learning outcomes for doctoral degrees (Stigmar, 2019). While there is an increasing use of outcomes-based teaching and learning, it seems contradictory that academic staff are resistant to establishing criteria for a PhD thesis as Stigmar's (2019) study suggests. Stigmar raises the issue of having a list of criteria without context. A way of addressing this issue would be adjusting the list of criteria according to the different contexts. The doctoral candidate could be assessed utilising evidence from different tasks to assess the learning outcomes. This could be used as formative feedback or summatively.

There is a debate as to whether criteria may hinder innovative processes or not. Even though learning outcomes are predetermined in outcomes-based teaching and learning, this fact should not normally hinder creativity processes; this may only happen when learning outcomes are at the low levels of understanding (Biggs & Tang, 2011). This is not the case when considering the complex learning outcomes for the degree of Doctor.

To encourage creativity, there must be a safe research environment where the doctoral candidate dares to take risks and suggest alternative solutions to a problem. The supervisory team should encourage by responding to the questions raised by the doctoral candidates instead of dismissing an insight too quickly.

However, there are time constraints in a PhD project, and engaging in creative activities that promote independent thinking may affect the quality of the PhD thesis (Brodin, 2020). There is a balance that the supervisor and supervisee must discuss so that the PhD project is not compromised.

Supervision relationships

Conflict can also be a reason for doctoral attrition. At Malmö University, the main reason that the 50 dropouts abandon doctoral programs is conflict with the supervisor (Stigmar, oral communication).

The main reason doctoral candidates contact doctoral support relates to the relationship with the supervisor (Wallin, oral communication). In order to prevent and remedy problems regarding supervision relationships, the supervisor needs skills such as active listening and the ability to switch roles from expert to coach. Empathy is also important in order to adapt to the needs of the doctoral candidate (Lindén, 2020). Moreover, mutual agreements between supervisor and supervisee are crucial for a successful supervision. As a means to mutual agreement, implicit expectations should be revealed (Lindén, 2020). A tool such as “successful supervision” (Lagerström & Flodström, n.d.) can help clarify expectations.

In some cases, supervisors provide emotional support (Christie & Jurado, 2013), but it is debatable whether or not this should happen. One approach to help the doctoral candidate when they wish to discuss personal issues with the supervisor is to listen and redirect the conversation to their studies and to the supervisor’s professional role. For example, the supervisor can ask, “How does this problem impact your thesis work?” In this way, the supervisor can help in their professional role, for example with planning and time management.

A supervisor needs to know how to handle the power relationship. Reflective practice is an approach for developing intercultural skills. Successful supervisors develop intercultural sensitivity in such a way that they can view phenomena from different perspectives, and they can manage the power relationship accordingly (Lindén, 2020).

Finally, ethical supervision requires that the supervisor can deal with ethical dilemmas where there is conflict with different rules or values. The supervisor shall develop personal judgment and not just follow the rules (Lindén, 2020). This can be done by being aware of their own bias, considering different points of view, and training with cases and colleagues.

The writing process

One of the greatest challenges is to promote doctoral students’ writing. The supervisor has to assume the responsibility of suggesting different activities for supporting writing (see, for example, Lee and Murray’s (2015) framework for supervising writing).

In addition, Brodin (2020) suggests strategies to cope with another important dimension of writing, the emotional. She recommends asking students what they feel about writing, and if the feeling is negative, to ask why they feel like this. Scholarly writing needs a great deal of editing, and this process might be new to a doctoral candidate. Brodin maintains that talking about how scholarly writing is done works well. A useful strategy used by a former supervisor, Dr. B. C. Padilla Rodriguez (personal communication, June 30, 2022), is the modelling of writing processes. The strategy consists of remotely drafting the same document in real time with another senior academic, with the speakers on (e.g. via video conferencing). Students can watch how experts write, and students can listen to how experienced writers comment on each other’s writing.

In this way, doctoral candidates can see that writing is not a linear process. Some students want to have the “proper” version from the start; they are scared of drafting. However, by watching writing experts, they can see that it is normal to have a draft and that writing is an iterative process. Moreover, there is the cultural component: in some countries, it is not polite to give critique. Students can get hurt when they see their chapters with large numbers of comments. By modelling writing processes, they can see and listen to how experienced writers make several comments to each other. Students can realise that critique is not personal.

However, as Brodin (2020) points out, awareness of the iterative process is not the only cause of writing procrastination. Lack of understanding of the supervisor’s feedback is also an issue. The supervisor must explain clearly why the text is not at an optimal level. Research on providing feedback on students’ writing indicates that marking comments have to be supplemented with examples from learning material (Chanock, 2000). Constructive feedback must be detailed.

Concluding remarks

Supervision has an impact on the doctoral experience. Quality supervision requires a wide range of skills from the supervisor since there are several aspects involved in the supervisory role. The supervisor has to monitor progress in relation to learning outcomes. A way to approach this task is by showing how the learning outcomes manifest themselves in concrete outputs as well as by encouraging the student to reflect on how to achieve them in each phase of the doctoral studies.

In addition, to address issues regarding supervision relationships, the supervisor needs skills such as active listening, empathy, intercultural skills and the ability to deal with ethical dilemmas.

Finally, the supervisor has to assume responsibility for suggesting different activities to support writing. Moreover, the supervisor must provide detailed, constructive feedback.

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