

Supervision in Doctoral Education

Conference of the Center for Doctoral Studies | June 24-25, 2010

CONFERENCE REPORT

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Zusammenfassung | Die Konferenz thematisierte Betreuung im Doktorat und ihre Rolle in unterschiedlichen Phasen des Dissertationsprozesses. Vor dem Hintergrund aktueller hochschulpolitischer Entwicklungen wurden einerseits unterschiedliche Betreuungsmodelle und ihre Vor- und Nachteile diskutiert und andererseits Rahmenbedingungen für ein ideales Betreuungsverhältnis definiert. Eine Kombination aus strukturierten Programmen und persönlicher Betreuung wurde als ideales Modell vorgestellt.

Die Aufgaben eines Betreuers/einer Betreuerin bzw. eines Teams von BetreuerInnen unterscheiden sich je nach Dissertationsphase: Stehen am Anfang vor allem die Unterstützung bei der Definition der Forschungsfragen sowie bei der Akquisition finanzieller Mittel im Vordergrund, verschiebt sich das Aufgabenspektrum in der Forschungsphase zusehends in Richtung Mentoring. Unterstützung bei der Material- bzw. Datenauswertung sind dabei ebenso relevant wie Karriereplanung und Networking innerhalb der fach einschlägigen (Scientific) Community. Die individuellen Berufsperspektiven und -chancen von DissertantInnen sollten dabei besondere Berücksichtigung finden. In der Abschlussphase wiederum sind es Profilbildung und Fragen des „Placements“, die im Vordergrund stehen. Das Ziel sollte in jedem Fall die Fertigstellung der Dissertation sein, allerdings muss diese nicht zwangsläufig eine wissenschaftliche Laufbahn begründen.

In allen drei Phasen des Dissertationsprozesses ist gute Betreuung auf ein Forschungs- und Arbeitsumfeld angewiesen, in dem DissertantInnen strukturelle Rahmenbedingungen (Forschungsförderung, Arbeitsplätze, etc.) und die Möglichkeit zum Austausch sowohl mit einer Peer-Gruppe als auch mit der Faculty vorfinden. Um diese Rahmenbedingungen bereitstellen zu können und gleichzeitig zur Profilbildung der jeweiligen Fachbereiche beizutragen, müssen Universitäten gezielt interessante KandidatInnen rekrutieren. Vor dem Hintergrund massenuniversitärer Strukturen gestaltet sich diese Aufgabe als die wohl größte Herausforderung.

Summary | The conference broached the issue of supervision in doctoral education and its role in the different phases of the dissertation process. In the light of current university policies different supervision models and pros and cons were discussed. At the same time framework conditions for ideal supervision were reflected on. A combination of a structured program combines with a personal advisor/supervisor was introduced as an ideal model.

The tasks of the supervisor or respectively of the supervisor team vary depending on the phase of the dissertation. In the beginning support concerning the central research question and the acquisition of funds are central tasks of the supervisor. During the research phase mentoring becomes a more central aspect of the role of the supervisor. Support with the evaluation of data and material is just as important as career planning and networking within the scientific community. The individual job perspectives and chances of the doctoral candidates are thereby of special importance. In the conclusion phase the establishment of an academic profile and the question of placement are central. The completion of the thesis should be the main goal of supervision, whereby the thesis doesn't inevitably have to serve as the start of a scientific career.

In all three phases of the doctorate good supervision has to be based on a good research- and working environment in which doctoral candidates can find a structured framework (for example research funds and work environment) and the possibility to exchange themselves with their peer group as well as with the faculty.

To secure this kind of framework the university has to actively recruit interesting candidates. In the light of very large universities this may prove as the biggest challenge.

Welcome note | Vice Rector *Heinz Engl* opens the conference and welcomes guests and speakers. In his introductory statement he mentions some specifics of the third cycle of education in Austria, like the open admission system, the lack of financial support for doctoral candidates and (in some disciplines) the unsatisfying supervisor-candidate ratio. Since October 2009, the University of Vienna is stressing the importance of doctoral education through various measures such as the introduction of a doctoral thesis agreement, the appointment of a doctoral advisory board and the compulsory public presentation at the faculty. The aim of the conference is to highlight the importance of supervision as core element of doctoral education and to give supervising scientists a platform for discussion to reflect their roles and responsibilities and to define standards and guidelines for supervision.

Keynote | *Andreas Frijdal* (European University Institute): **...a PhD or a doctorate?**

Doctoral education in Europe has gone through significant growth during the last decades. This growth has been accompanied by very different structural developments. In some countries (e.g. the UK and in parts of the Netherlands, in France and in Germany) doctoral or graduate schools have developed in a structured way, and these have improved the quality and efficiency of doctoral education. In other countries, the increase in numbers has unfortunately not been paralleled by improvements in the structure of doctoral education.

Significant improvement could be made by making doctoral education more student-oriented and by partially breaking with the old tradition where the supervisor-candidate relation defines doctoral education (“*Doktorvater*” and “*Doktormutter*” such as found in Germany and Austria). This relation is generally recognized to be a sub-optimal solution for large-scale doctoral education.¹

Major problems observed can be summarized as follows: (1) Doctoral studies are not always connected to studies on the master level; (2) greater importance has to be given to methodological trainings; (3) doctoral studies should take more than three years; (4) doctoral candidates should be allowed to define their topics in the framework of a doctoral school; (5) governance structures within universities and lack of political structures will not contribute when it comes to creating the kind of doctoral programs that have enough critical mass to result in very high-quality research training, as seen in some of the top schools in the United States.

The model of a doctoral school:

1. Schools have *students* and *cohorts*
2. Schools have *rules* (codes of conduct)
3. Schools have *admission criteria*
4. Schools have *curricula*
5. Schools *assess* and *evaluate*
6. Schools *compete*

The optimal environment in a doctoral school:

1. *Cohort socialization*
2. *Social hubs* where people can meet
3. *Working spaces*
4. *Transparency*
5. *Appeal procedures*
6. *Career awareness*
7. *Peer effect*

¹ See also Frijdal, Andreas C. 2008: The European University Institute, in: Maresi Nerad/Mimi Heggelund (eds.): *Toward a Global PhD? Forces & Forms in Doctoral Education Worldwide*. Seattle, p. 88-100.

The supervisor versus the doctoral school:

1. *Supervision models*: combination of doctoral school and 1:1 supervision
2. *Supervision assessment*: when, how (survey, questions, compulsory or voluntary), under stress, feedback
3. *Supervision load*: 5-7 persons maximum
4. *Supervision training*: training, model (workshops, conferences, etc.), peripheral concerns (mental health), “training future faculty”
5. *Supervision and role in jury*: the supervisor should not be part of the jury
6. *Supervision and career*

Panel 1 | **Getting Started: The supervisor’s role in the entry phase of doctoral studies**

After a brief terminological introduction on the notion of the terms “supervising” and “advising”, *Andre Gingrich* (Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology | University of Vienna) distinguishes five crucial dimensions for the entry phase of doctoral studies:

1. *Recruitment*
2. Defining the *research question*
3. *Addressing finances*
4. Elaborating a *public presentation plan*
5. Providing a proper *research environment*

ad. 1) *Recruitment*: The University has to look out for appropriate candidates rather than the other way round. Recruiting should be an active and selective process that takes into consideration the department’s needs and requirements (profile development).

ad. 2) *Research question*: The quality of dissertation projects is crucial for the University’s profile. It is important to consider that topics and interests are not equal to research questions. Solving questions and riddles is the core of academic research. An overview of the state of research is crucial for solving the research question.

ad. 3) *Addressing finances*: Addressing financial issues should be part of the recruitment talk and of the doctoral thesis agreement between supervisor/advisor and doctoral candidate.

ad. 4) *Public presentation plan*: Developing a feasible time plan for presentations should be a major task of the entry phase.

ad. 5) *Research environment*: Working together (supervisor/advisor and staff) helps to implement research clusters.

Claudia Theune-Vogt (Department of Prehistoric and Medieval Archaeology | University of Vienna) considers the 1:1 (supervisor/advisor-candidate) relation as the most important form of supervision. She uses the metaphor of the *family* to explain that the relationship should be about trust, commitment and responsibility. Mentoring and networking (in- and outside) academia should start in an early phase of supervision. Cohorts and meetings in peer groups are considered as important for doctoral candidates to define their research questions and their work packages.

Panel 2 | Pushing through: Supervision in the research phase of doctoral studies

Ruth Wodak (Distinguished Professor and Chair in Discourse Studies | Lancaster University) defines doctoral studies as the phase when researchers lay the track for their future careers. At the University of Lancaster teaching doctoral candidates is a privilege that has to be kept in balance with the general teaching workload. Consultation hours are held every two weeks and supervisors/advisors are expected to answer e-mails within 5 days. These are face-to face, one hour tutoring sessions, i.e. supervision. This implies - if you should have 14 PhD students, for example, that you spend 14 hours over two weeks with them (1 hour per person) and have to prepare as well, read their drafts, etc.

Ruth Wodak mentions four dimensions of supervision in Lancaster and in the UK, more generally:

1. *Salient dimensions: balancing between extremes*
 - Structures, constraints, flexibility
 - Control and freedom of research
2. *Research and study environment / infrastructure*
 - Tuition costs
 - Grants
 - Getting started
 - a. Intro-week: library, health service, welcome reception
 - b. Meeting the supervisors/advisors: access to MA modules, defining research
 - c. Meeting every two weeks: defining requirements for each meeting, written minutes which are accessible to the head of the department
 - d. Research groups and workshops with peer effect
 - Study skills courses
 - Dormitories, sports, meeting venues
 - PCs and rooms
3. *Pushing through: finishing in 3-4 years*
 - Relationship between supervisor/advisor and supervisee
 - a. Establishing trust: inter- and cross-cultural aspects, starting to write immediately
 - b. Meetings: taking enough time, giving feedback in 3-5 days
 - c. Research training program, methodology
 - Monitoring and Controlling
 - a. Year 1: preparing first panel (research questions, 5000 words, biblio, timeline, etc.)
 - b. Year 2: preparing upgrade (15000 words, revised research questions, revised timeline, etc.)
 - c. Year 3: preparing post-upgrade panel (preparing endspurt, papers, tutoring, conference papers)
4. *Pros and cons of the British system*
 - Pros*
 - *Regulated Supervision*: clearly defined objectives and monitoring systems; interdisciplinary research environment; free access to counseling
 - *Motivation for Supervisors*: PhD students as “social capital”; balance between teaching and supervision; all staff members can be supervisors
 - *Clearly defined responsibilities*
 - Cons*
 - *Time pressure*
 - *Money problems*
 - *Lack of linguistic skills*
 - *Possibility to fail the upgrade or the viva*
 - *Miscommunication* with supervisors/advisors

- *Intercalation* (has to be clarified - this happens on request of students because they are ill etc. They can stop and this time does not count to the three years. However, funding stops and they lose their library cards, etc. for this specific time).

Christian Köberl (Department of Lithospheric Research | University of Vienna) understands the selection of a supervisor/advisor as the most significant decision during doctoral studies that should be based on a set of criteria (e.g. scientific reputation). One of the tasks of a good supervisor/advisor should be to guide (international) students through bureaucracy (e.g. providing help with visa). He also considers the following criteria as important for the research phase:

1. *Intensity of contact* with the supervisor
2. *Data acquisition*: critical assessment of methods
3. Reporting results versus interpreting results
4. Coming to conclusions versus reporting results
5. *Proper documentation*

Panel 3 | **Handing over: The supervisor's tasks in the finishing phase and in the context of future career development**

Maarten Janssen (Vienna Graduate School of Economics | University of Vienna) talks about recruitment strategies of the *Vienna Graduate School of Economics*, where also the faculty is selected. He stresses the importance of an individual relationship between supervisor/advisor and doctoral candidate. Students should be selected in restricted master programs and then should be allowed to do PhD research. The role of placement should be considered as more importantly.

1. Placement should not be thought about only in the last half year
2. Doctoral candidates should have their *application package* at hand (CV, motivation letter, papers in shape, recommendation letters). What sticks out?
3. Have students create their own website
4. Prepare candidates
 - 1 and 5 minutes talk about research (what is the point?)
 - 30 minutes talk about important developments
 - Job market paper
 - Do marketing of your research as well

Renée Schröder (Department of Biochemistry and Cell Biology | University of Vienna) defines supervision as combination of a supervisor-candidate and a candidate-peer group relation. She sees doctoral candidates as “lab kids”. They have to fit in the research group in order to make full use of the peer effect. During the last phase of a dissertation the supervisor/advisor should:

1. Realize what are the student's capabilities
2. Mentor the doctoral candidate to build up a profile
3. Learn how to write a recommendation letter

Conference summary (*Andreas Frijdal*):

1. *Admission*: The best practice models of Europe should be practicably adapted to local structures.
2. *Status of students*: Students should not be employees but researchers. Doing a dissertation is much more a matter of attitude than a matter of regulations. Competition is good if it stimulates research, but students should also be able to count on solidarity. Even in structured programs creativity should be given enough space.
3. *Thesis*: Every university should define acceptable standards for a thesis. The most acceptable thesis is not necessarily the best thesis.
4. *Placements*: Universities should also be judged by the placements of their graduates. An important message for doctoral candidates should be that they do not fail if they do not continue with academia.