Doctoral supervisor education in Denmark: aiming to foster reflective practitioners

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Published in:
Doctoral Education Bulletin

Publication date:
2017

Citation for published version (APA):
Quality in doctoral supervision is an increasing organisational focus area for universities and the need for supervisor development and training is widely recognised. However, there is no systematic overview of competence development activities for doctoral supervisors in Europe in general and there are great variations in the different practices. Many universities do not offer any courses while others have semester-long courses. A complete mapping of all competence development activities for doctoral supervisors in Denmark was carried out in 2015. The mapping focused on the teaching formats, the content and the quality criteria for good supervisor education. We hope that these insights can inspire the development in other European countries.

DOCTORAL SUPERVISION IN TRANSITION

Traditionally, doctoral supervision has been a ‘lonely business’. Doctoral supervisors, who are not formally educated to carry out this role, have a tendency to supervise doctoral students as they were supervised themselves. International research on doctoral supervision now recommends a stronger pedagogical approach to research education. Hence, from being a Master-apprenticeship relationship with tacit understandings of the supervisory process, supervision is now framed as pedagogy in higher education with its own theoretical frameworks.

The changing context of PhD education in Europe raises a question on how to support and prepare supervisors to meet the needs of a growing and varied doctoral student cohort. Competence development can take many forms and core questions are: What topics are relevant to teach? What is an adequate course format? What defines quality in supervisory competence development?

In the Nordic countries, course activities began around the year 2000 inspired by the development in the UK and Australia. In Denmark and Sweden the development of courses has benefited greatly from active national networks on supervisory training and development for almost a decade. Today seven out of eight Danish universities offer competence-building activities for doctoral supervisors.

DOCTORAL SUPERVISOR EDUCATION IN DENMARK: AIMING TO FOSTER REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONERS

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Our survey showed that the traditional course format is prevalent. A typical course lasts two to three days and includes between six and 60 hours of study activity. Courses are often organised with some weeks in between course days and with exercises to be done before and in between. The courses are predominantly discipline specific and institution specific, but some are offered jointly between science and health faculties, and social sciences and humanities respectively. A single course is offered across all faculties and institutions aimed at very experienced supervisors.

The themes most often taught are supervisor roles, relational issues including the alignment of expectations, how to support development of independence and communication methods. Communication covers active listening, questioning techniques and the use of meta-communication. In half of the courses the following themes were taken up: well-being and handling crises, feedback, intercultural supervision strategies, rules, writing strategies and the research environment.

QUALITY CRITERIA

The quality of courses can be measured through participant evaluations, as well as to what extent they aim at changing the supervisors’ understanding and practice: are the courses mainly aimed at 1) simply transmitting basic information to the supervisors, e.g. about rules and regulations; or, aimed at 2)
developing supervisors’ skills, or 3) at a higher level to foster critical reflection on the supervisor’s own practice.

University management focuses on the supervisors’ need for information on rules and procedures. This type of knowledge mainly seems relevant for supervisors if they have a concrete problem. Participants assess course sessions on rules and regulations most positively if the topic is taught in the form of a quiz combined with plenty of time for specific questions from participants.

Skills development is mainly about how supervisors interact with their doctoral students. It includes basic communication skills, but also how to motivate, give feedback, help to plan the project and even how to work together. It is important not only to introduce methods but also to gain experience with them during the course in order to support the actual implementation in supervision practice.

Furthermore, supervisors’ reflection on their practices should be encouraged. Doctoral supervisors are competent high-level academics with strong reflection skills, but often they have not used these skills to analyse their supervision methods. Thus, it is important to introduce supervisors to mental models of supervisory strategies. As high-level academics, they quickly apply the models to their specific challenges and benefit greatly from discussions with peers during the courses.

DOCTORAL SUPERVISORS AS REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONERS

High quality courses aim at fostering supervisors’ critical reflection. Reflection requires more than the introduction of relevant tools, principles, models, and concepts. There is no ‘one way’ to be a good supervisor. On the contrary, the good supervisor is flexible and can reflectively adjust to different doctoral students, phases of the projects and the specific challenges of the research topic. Therefore, flexibility is often argued as being the most important quality of good supervision. But how is reflective flexibility developed?

Flexibility is closely connected to the ability of both reflection-on-practice and reflection-in-practice. Reflection-on-practice can be learned in courses by connecting mental models of supervision with participants’ individual experiences through sharing stories from their practice. This is a significant eye opener for many participants.

Our mapping showed that courses aimed at fostering reflective practitioners were based on a significant amount of experimentation and feedback on reflection-in-practice. Here, participants were asked to try out different things in between the course days in their daily, local practice, applying the skills taught at the course, and subsequently to reflect on the experiences with colleagues in peer supervision groups, preferably based on observation of each other’s supervision in situ or during the course.

Developing doctoral supervision courses that support supervisors’ progress as reflective practitioners is challenging, since it requires an active and participatory approach of both supervisors attending the course and course instructors. In terms of the outcome, however, there is no doubt that the improved results justify the effort. There are no short cuts to improved pedagogical competence development.