

SUCCESS AND CHALLENGE OF DOCTORAL SUPERVISOR TRAINING: DEVELOPING AN OUTERMOST PRODUCTIVE AND SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISORY CULTURE

© Mara Montetti

**HELMUT BRENZEL***Privatdozent, Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany and Trainer and Consultant in Higher Education*

When UK colleagues began to challenge traditional concepts and practices of doctoral supervision in the mid-1980s they questioned two notions: the belief that a good researcher is automatically a good supervisor and the belief that becoming a good supervisor is learning by doing. Consequently, they introduced supervisor training. Now, 32 years later, we are convinced that these beliefs were dangerous myths, preventing the development of the quality of doctoral supervision and the well-being of both supervisors and doctoral students.

Meanwhile, enormous progress has been achieved in establishing supervisor training. The UK and Australia have developed outstanding practices and performance by implementing obligatory supervisor training provided by in-house trainer staff, by establishing special units and institutions in charge of the training of young researchers (such as the Oxford Learning Institute and the UK Vitae programme) and by associating the permission to supervise a certain number of doctoral candidates with the initial and follow-up training of supervisors (e.g. the framework agreement of the GO8 universities in Australia). Ireland is performing very well too in implementing and researching doctoral supervision.

In Scandinavian countries there are very good practice examples e.g. at the universities of Aarhus, Copenhagen or Stockholm, where the Karolinska Institute (KI) has initiated a three-year international project to improve the already high level of KI itself as well as of national and international partners. Starting from almost zero we see an increasing flow of successful improvement efforts in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Switzerland, as well as current initiatives on this type of practice in Italy and early developments in the eastern European countries.

Since 2011, I have provided supervisor training for 14 German universities and research Institutions, and for nine universities in five other European countries. The request for supervisor training is constantly growing in a number of universities. In addition to the impact of training, I can identify a change from just trying out a single supervisor training course towards a more continuous offer of up to at least two workshops per year. The technical universities in Dresden and Munich and well recommended research institutions such as Max Planck and Helmholtz are now convinced of the useful effects of supervisor training, and universities of applied sciences are detecting it as an appropriate means for national and international cooperation.

My best practice examples for reaching high impact are the universities in Santander and Tarragona where I had the

opportunity of training at each one approximately 120 younger supervisors within two and half years in order to quickly reach the critical mass for establishing a community of best professional practice of trained supervisors and for providing a trainer for the supervisor programme. Examples of such desirable impact programmes are still a rare event, but I receive indications and requests that other universities will follow this success path towards long-term comprehensive and sustainable supervisor training.

The initial workshop I am providing is targeted towards younger supervisors, although this is a wide notion of 'younger', and some interested experienced supervisors are welcome. It is constituted as a comprehensive concept of seven indispensable modules which relate necessarily to each other in order to create the necessary synergy effects; a minimum level standard which can be reached by an intensive two-day workshop comprising international developments in doctoral supervision; supervisory biography; expectations; roles; supervisory relationship; style and conflicts; selection of doctoral candidates; warning signs and remedies; and working with a supervisory toolkit, "Intervision", which is a technique of peer group supervision. The workshop can be adapted to the needs of postdocs by adding a focus on co-supervision and motivation problems, and it is offered in a slim one-day version for doctoral candidates in order to provide supervisors and students with the same knowledge as any professional team.

The most impressive and enthusing experience is to see the eagerness of the younger supervisors to participate in the training sessions. They openly express how grateful they are for this opportunity, that they are lacking a systematic approach and procedure, that they do not know whether they are doing it right, and that they are afraid to carry out their tasks and responsibilities without professional knowledge and thus maybe causing major mistakes. In large universities they suffer from a lack of time and from being overtaxed. Supervisor training provides the support and promise to give time sovereignty back for good supervision practice. As an experienced dean of a Spanish faculty reported in a follow-up

workshop, using the major improvement measures suggested during the workshop helped her “to save time and to work much more relaxed”.

It is important to stress that such a concept cannot be based on ‘tips and tricks’, on short lists of easy and quick cooked recipes for all cases. It is based on a deep understanding of the concepts, categories, problems and challenges of doctoral supervision, a careful analysis of supervision cases through which real practical and successful solutions can be elaborated. The training is founded in the willingness of the participants to critically reflect their positions and attitudes, and in the responsibility and intervention of the trainer to carefully deal with moments of resistance and uncertainty while improving practices and mindsets of supervisors. The fascinating and amazing experience is that almost all the younger supervisors in Europe, wherever I have given trainings, show the same bright openness and problem awareness for learning and change.

This does not mean that things are already done. On the contrary, many universities are still hesitating or even avoiding high impact programmes in supervisor training instead of taking this area into the core strategic plan of the university. In addition, the backing by a national higher education policy

may not be precise enough, but sometimes satisfied if at least ‘something’ is happening in this direction.

But the most dangerous challenge is the widely unknown and unidentified problem with a lack of follow-up, and long-term training and support measures for supervisors. By leaving the colleagues on their own again after the initial workshops causes a high danger of falling back into isolation from others and into old practices and attitudes. Supervisors do expect from university heads that training and support is serious, not only for a short time or for a presidency, but for their whole academic life.

What we urgently need for our newly-trained supervisors is a highly attractive, helpful and comprehensive package of follow-up measures which support and accompany them in their future professional performance: measures for additional topics and modules, for refreshing the lesson learnt, for community building, for opportunities to jointly discuss and solve problematic cases, for jointly developing supervisory tools or journal contributions, for informal meetings such as supervisory lunch talks, for international cooperation and cultural awareness, and thus for jointly creating and keeping the mission and vision of developing an outermost productive and supportive supervisory culture.

HOW TO ACHIEVE OUTSTANDING QUALITY IN RESEARCH SUPERVISION BY PROVIDING AN INTEGRATED SET OF ACTIONS, MEASURES AND TOOLS

