

SUCCESSFUL SUPERVISION

A TWO-WAY PROCESS



CONTENT

Foreword	5
Find the right person	6
Matching expectations and roles	7
Project planning and the PhD plan	8
Meeting activities	10
Research environment	13
Text production	14
Code of conduct	16
Different cultural backgrounds	16
Advice and assistance	17
PhD student counsellor	18
Read more	18
Contact	18
Background	19



FOREWORD

This publication is aimed at supervisors and PhD students at the Faculty of Health, Aarhus University, and gives advice about how the parties can collaborate to ensure a successful supervision process. For information about the formal aspects of the PhD programme, please refer to the Graduate School website.

The purpose of the publication is to assist supervisors and PhD students in optimising the supervision process. Good supervision is essential for a successful degree programme. The Graduate School therefore wishes to emphasise the importance of positive and productive collaboration between students and supervisors.

A good student is a curious and committed individual who is ambitious and prepared to be dynamic and take the initiative in the collaboration during the PhD degree programme. Similarly, a good supervisor is an individual who – in addition to academic knowledge, international networks and solid research production – is good at communicating and creating a friendly and productive environment.

The many and varied PhD projects make an important contribution to the faculty's research activities, and it is the aim of the graduate school that all PhD students should be skilled researchers by the end of their

degree programme. Each student must complete a coherent project, acquire the necessary tools and be able to carry out research of high international quality. The graduate school is therefore responsible for ensuring that all students have optimal conditions for developing their research potential. It is, however, the responsibility of the individual student to complete the PhD programme, and the main supervisor is responsible for providing support throughout this process in the form of qualified feedback and supervision. All parties are responsible for ensuring that the process functions optimally.

We hope this publication will contribute to the continued improvement of the quality of the supervision process for the benefit of both PhD students and supervisors at the Graduate School of Health.

Lise Wogensen Bach

Head of Graduate School of Health, Aarhus University

FIND THE RIGHT PERSON

There are several ways to commence a PhD programme. You can define a project in collaboration with a supervisor or respond to notices and go for a “job interview” with the supervisor who advertised the project. Regardless of the procedure, both the student and the supervisor must clearly state their expectations to the other party before committing to working together.

The following questions are intended as a supplement to the basic assessment of academic qualifications. The questions can assist you in determining whether you have found the right person to collaborate with. It means that you know the other person’s approach to supervision requirements, supervision style, work methods, etc. and are able to agree on the way you want to collaborate.

SUPERVISOR

- How do you assess the student’s need for supervision?
Can you and do you want to be contacted regularly, or are you very busy and do not have time for close collaboration?
Do you expect to be abroad for part of the period?
Do you have a colleague who can make a commitment to taking over if you are not present?
- Does the student have the necessary initiative? Do you need to be involved in all decisions regarding the project, or do you prefer that the student decides when your help is needed?
- Do you expect to work with the student in a team, or are you looking for a student who is prepared to work very independently?
- Does the project involve activities beyond normal working hours, and is the student able and interested in participating in these?

STUDENT

- How much guidance do you think you will need? Do you need a supervisor who is present a lot of the time? Have you considered whether the supervisor is sufficiently available? Are there areas where you have a special need for supervision? Will you need additional supervision because the area is new to you? Will you need help with practical matters?
- Will you need personal contact and informal exchange of ideas? Or do you prefer a little, but very specific advice?
- Are you good at working independently, or do you prefer teamwork?
- Are you prepared to work overtime? Can you and are you interested in working nights and weekends? Are you worried about whether the project can be completed in the prescribed time?

When stating your wishes and needs for a three-year working relationship, it is important to understand that we are all part of a larger context. Both supervisors and students are part of a network of colleagues, management and rules, and have both a private life and professional commitments to consider.

MATCHING EXPECTATIONS AND ROLES

During the initial meetings, the supervisor typically assesses the academic level of the student, whereas the student primarily checks whether the right chemistry is present. However, one of the most important aspects of establishing a good supervision process is to create the right match of expectations and roles. The whole process works much more smoothly if the parties are able to commence the collaboration by expressing their expectations to the exact form of the working relationship and the sharing of responsibilities.

A number of specific topics should be addressed during the initial meetings:

- It is a condition of enrolment that the financing of the project is in place. Be open about your thoughts regarding resources – are additional funds required, does the project involve considerable operating costs, or are any applications outstanding, etc.?
- The PhD Executive Order stipulates requirements about active participation in research environments and gaining teaching experience. Do you and your supervisor agree on the practical interpretation of these requirements? To what extent can this be planned before enrolment?
- Graduate programmes organise various more or less compulsory activities such as summer schools and targeted courses. What does the programme in question offer and what are the student's plans?
- Employment as a PhD student involves teaching. What is the norm at the department in question? Can the supervisor/department offer teaching assignment of relevance and sufficient number of hours? Can the supervisor/department offer supervision of teaching assignments?
- For some tasks, the entire responsibility lies with the supervisor, for example in connection with the final proposal for an assessment committee. A number of other tasks require that you agree on how to share the responsibility, e.g. project-based topics, applications, notices convening meetings, etc. Who will be responsible for what?
- A PhD project description must be available upon enrolment. Do you agree on the validity and relevance of the project, and can it be completed in three years?
- Will parts of the project and/or the qualifications of the student demand supervision outside the field of the supervisors expertise and/or than what the supervision can provide, so that co-supervisor/collaborations are needed?
- The PhD programmes include a change of research environment/ stay abroad. What attitude do you and your supervisor have to this part of the PhD programme?

PROJECT PLANNING AND THE PHD PLAN

The PhD plan can be more or less detailed, but should include a timetable, an agreement about the form and amount of supervision, plans for the project, courses, change of research environments (preferably abroad) and teaching activities, a budget and agreements regarding copyrights and patents, if applicable. The intention of the PhD plan is to ensure that the student and the supervisor make their expectations clear.

It is important that both parties are aware of expectations and plans at all times and are open to changes and new ideas. The three mandatory evaluations are a good time to discuss this, but these should not be exceptional. It is always important to adjust the PhD programme and ensuring that the project and the student make progress.

Meetings with the entire supervisor group are recommended as a basis for the evaluations. These meetings should include project status, PhD programme details (courses, change of research environments/periods abroad, participation in conferences, teaching, etc.) and career planning. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to confirm that the degree programme is being completed in accordance with the PhD plan and, if necessary, explain any changes to the plan. It is therefore also the responsibility of the supervisor to prepare the assessment of the midterm evaluation.



MEETING ACTIVITIES

Regular supervision meetings are essential for the supervision process, as they provide the forum for advice and academic assistance. Experience from successful degree programmes shows that these meetings are used to discuss both the expectations to the collaboration and project-related issues (decisions, plans, results, etc.).

You must agree on how often you meet. It is therefore a good idea to prepare a meeting calendar early in the programme. It ensures on-going dialogue in what is often a busy working life.

According to the PhD Executive Order, the main supervisor is obliged to hold regular meetings, but it is often the student who takes the initiative to organise meetings with the supervisor group.

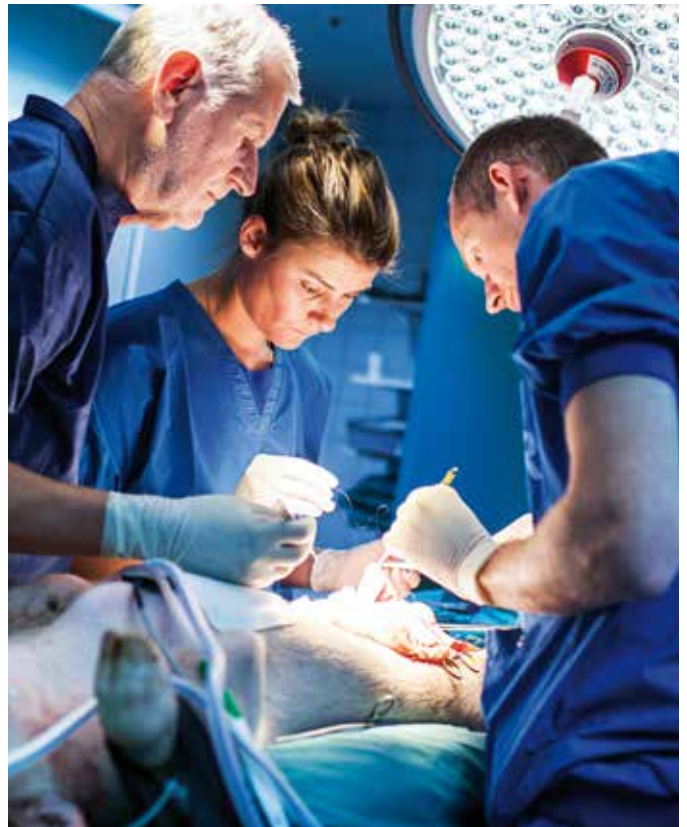
SUPERVISOR

- Encourage the student to take the initiative regarding meeting activities.
- Begin by asking the student what the objective of the meeting is. At the end, you can ask if the objective was met.
- Familiarise yourself with the needs of the student for the meeting in question. Carefully check any forwarded material.
- If you need further information, just ask the student.
- Set aside sufficient time for the meeting, be on time and make sure you are not interrupted.
- Follow up on what you decide and be as specific as possible in your recommendations.

STUDENT

- It is your responsibility to take the initiative for the meetings and to convene the participants.
- Prepare an agenda and distribute it to the participants before the meeting. You can forward proposals for texts or protocols, research findings, etc. along with the agenda.
- It is important that you clearly state the objective of the meeting. Instead of leaving your supervisor to guess, express yourself as clearly as possible and stick to your questions until you have received an answer.
- If anything is on your mind, say so. You are entitled to set personal boundaries.
- Agree on regular meetings. It is a good idea to agree on the date of the next meeting before you part.
- After the meeting write down what you agreed and distribute it to the participants immediately after the meeting. This prevents misunderstandings and can serve as a starting point at the next meeting.
- Attend agreed meetings, arrive on time, be prepared, and switch off your mobile phone.





RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

Students often mention academic networks and communities as important factors for a successful degree programme.

SUPERVISOR

- Introduce the student to local and international research environments.
- Introduce the student to other researchers in the field as well as relevant seminars, workshops and conferences.
- Encourage the student to participate in journal clubs.
- Support the student's participation in the Graduate School's PhD day.
- Support the student's teaching activities and inform the student about the department's requirements and possibilities regarding teaching and communication activities.
- Keep the student informed about the research group's relationship with the management of the department, other research groups and academic areas, as well as internal organisational and financial matters.
- Monitor the student's development. Point out both efforts and project progress that are outstanding, sufficient or insufficient in order to discuss possible changes.
- Talk to the student about the future – give advice about how the student can have his/her wishes fulfilled and point out obvious career opportunities (industry, clinical or research).
- Take initiatives to secure the student's continued career as a researcher if the student displays a particular talent.

STUDENT

- You are expected to take an active part in your own research group and the shared academic environment.
- Contact other relevant academic networks and research environments.
- Keep yourself informed about project-relevant literature and academic developments in your field.
- Participate in the procurement of research funds for the group.
- Keep your supervisor informed about positive and negative developments in the research project.
- Ask yourself if you would like to and have the ability to continue with research work beyond the PhD programme.
- Discuss your plans for the future with your supervisor.

TEXT PRODUCTION

Students and supervisors should agree on how they plan to work with manuscripts and presentations. People have different ways of writing and different needs for feedback. Some people write many drafts and improve them along the way in accordance with the overall goal. Others write finished sections right away in accordance with a carefully prepared outline. Some need assistance to plan the material – others need assistance with communication or procedures. Common to all is the fact that writing an article is something you have to learn and that the feedback should match the student's experience. It should therefore change character as the degree programme progresses.

Regarding the PhD dissertation, this is normally discussed between the student and the supervisor, but it is the student who has the final responsibility for the content. The supervisor's main task is to supervise, i.e. to support the writing process and ensure that the dissertation can be assessed, which means that it should be submitted correctly and comply with formal requirements.

Very often, research projects involve collaboration between different groups/researchers. It is advisable to try to obtain written agreements about the actual responsibilities and assignments for the individual project partners, including an agreement on authorship, copyright, patents and the like. This will aid in providing a fruitful collaboration without unnecessary misunderstanding and dispute between partners. Also, this will help all partners to be involved in the appropriate parts of text production.

SUPERVISOR

- Encourage the student to write on an on-going basis and check progress.
- Make an appointment with the student when you are ready to provide feedback. If you are unable to get back to the student at the agreed time because of the amount of text involved, work pressure, etc., contact the student immediately to make a new appointment.
- Carefully study the student's draft and base your feedback on the student's own considerations.
- Take responsibility for making a partnership agreement in case of collaborative project.
- Ensure that laws and regulation regarding publication are met.

STUDENT

- The more you write, the better you get at it.
- You should begin writing at an early stage and set aside approximately three months for finalising the dissertation at the end of the period.
- Keep your supervisor informed about progress and current issues.
- Hand in well-prepared drafts – the text should not be finalised but coherent, and the objective must be clear.
- Give your supervisor plenty of time to read it.
- Agree on the type of feedback depending on your needs. When sending a text to your supervisor, explain how close it is to being finalised, what you would like feedback on, and what you are particularly satisfied or unsatisfied with.
- Inform your supervisor if you discuss your work with others, including which parts and at what phase of the writing process that project partners should be involved
- Adhere to the relevant laws and regulations relating to publication.



CODE OF CONDUCT

Aarhus University has recently stated a Code of Conduct for research. It is important that everyone involved with research know this Code and adhere to it. In particular, research leaders are responsible for implementing the Code in their research environment. This includes introducing PhD students to the Code, and ensuring that they understand and adhere to it.

SUPERVISOR

- Introduce the Code to new students.
- Outline the implications of the Code to your research area.
- Explain your interpretation of the Code into the current student's project.
- Explain the consequences of non-adherence to the Code.

STUDENT

- Make yourself acquainted with the Code.
- Ask freely about the Code and its implications.
- Be precise when asking about the relevance to your project.

For more on Aarhus University's Code of Conduct, see:

www.au.dk/en/research/responsible-conduct-of-research

DIFFERENT CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS

The Graduate School encourages the collaboration with researchers outside Denmark. Therefore, supervisors are encouraged to collaborate with non-Danish students, and Danish students can meet non-Danish supervisors affiliated with the Graduate School. This type of inter-cultural interaction can lead to various problems. To optimize the collaboration with a partner with a foreign background, consider the following:

SUPERVISOR

- Make yourself aware of your own cultural background and what influence it has on your behaviour and thinking, both personally and professionally.
- Be open to the challenges that may come from cultural differences between you and your student.
- Do these differences offer additional benefits or opportunities?
- Openly discuss these issues with the student without prejudice or discontent.
- Be open to the fact that some projects have special requirements for a person with or without a specific background.

STUDENT

- Make yourself aware of your own cultural background and what influence it has on your behaviour and thinking, both personally and professionally.
- Be open to the fact that special challenges may occur due to these differences.
- Identify the possible benefits and positive outcomes these differences may give.
- Welcome any discussion about these differences, but also demand that misunderstandings or prejudice should be faced in the early phase.

ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE

Major problems often begin as small problems left unsolved. It is therefore important to quickly agree on a solution and no problem is too small to be discussed.

Both students and supervisors should address any aspects they are unhappy with and try to solve the problem informally through dialogue. No matter how trivial the problem may appear, you are encouraged to initiate a discussion as soon as possible. You can seek advice and assistance from colleagues, who often have experience with similar situations, co-supervisors who know the entire supervisor group and the PhD system, the PhD Association and the HE PhD Administration.

If problems arise, you should first of all determine whether the problem has to do with the relationship between the parties. This often happens when the parties have not discussed and agreed beforehand how to handle the topic. Specific problems should be discussed at a supervision meeting. Try to discuss the issue in general and non-accusatory terms, and ask whether it is possible to change the form of the collaboration.

- Prepare thoroughly. What would you like to say and clarify, and how can you say it so that you maintain constructive collaboration?
 - Prepare the meeting participants. Clarify the issue in writing and distribute it to the participants so they have time to think of possible solutions. Formulating a problem in writing also makes it easier to understand.
 - Do not address serious topics immediately before holidays or important events.
 - Create a good setting for the conversation and make sure there is sufficient time and that you are not disturbed.
- Avoid making accusations. Base your arguments on your own situation, and explain how you experience the other party's words or actions.
 - Use examples to explain your situation, if possible.
 - Expect that it takes time to establish a new way of collaborating.
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PHD STUDENT COUNSELLOR

Both supervisors and students can ask the PhD student counsellor for assistance in case of problems with the supervision. In addition, the student counsellor offers personal conversations with students who experience difficulties or unsatisfactory situations with regard to personal motivation, the social environment at the workplace, planning their own time, etc. In that regard, the student counsellor provides professional assistance by helping the students clarify their situations and options. In case of difficulties with the collaboration, the student counsellor can also give advice about rights and obligations within the PhD degree programme and provide an overview of possibilities for conciliation.

The student counsellor does not deal with administrative issues and instead refers to the HE PhD Administration, which can assist with questions regarding enrolment, PhD plan, finance, dissertation, etc.

If the problem cannot be solved in any other way, it is possible to change the composition of the supervisor group subject to application to the HE PhD Administration. In addition, both supervisors and students can always contact the HE PhD Administration in confidence and have a duty to do so if circumstances prevent the completion of the project.

READ MORE

“Successful Supervision – a Dialogue Facilitator” by Kerstin Lagerström and Eva Flodström from the Career and Recruitment Unit, Karolinska Institutet:

www.ki.se

This publication is not a complete account of relevant rules and procedures and must be read together with the PhD Executive Order, guidelines and other information on the Graduate School's website:

www.phd.au.dk/graduate-schools/health

CONTACT

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PhD student counsellor:

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PhD Association in Aarhus:

phdforeningen.health@au.dk,

www.phdassociation.dk,

Facebook: PhD Association Health

BACKGROUND

This publication is the result of a workshop that took place in June 2008 with a large number of representatives from the Graduate School. Both students and supervisors have been deeply involved in the process of identifying and selecting the typical problems discussed in the publication. Together with the PhD student counsellor and the management of the Graduate School, they have identified solutions and tools that can help promote a good process.

Working group participants: Anne Nyholm Anthonisen, Berit Eika, Else Tønnesen, Gitte Wichmann-Hansen, Helle Prætorius, Iben Møller Jønsson, Jane Skov, Lise Wogensen Bach, Merete Ipsen, Michael J. Mulvany, Peder Charles, Per Höllsberg, Tanja Hansen and Troels Thim.

The publication has been revised in September 2015 by the PhD Committee of Health.

