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Action plan to prevent and manage conflicts between supervisors and doctoral students

INTRODUCTION

During research studies, differences of opinion often arise between supervisors and doctoral students. They can sometimes develop into conflicts which, in the worst cases, become aggravated and have negative consequences on the doctoral student, the supervisor and the project. It is therefore important to work preventively so that conflicts can be avoided. If a conflict should arise nevertheless, it is essential for both the doctoral student and the supervisor to be familiar with the resources and procedures for conflicts. This action plan is to constitute support for both the doctoral student and the supervisor in a sensitive phase, and it will hopefully contribute to avoiding conflicts.

PREVENTING CONFLICTS

The main causes of conflicts between doctoral students and supervisors are probably insufficient communication and divergent expectations of research studies and collaboration. It is important that the supervisor and the doctoral student share an overall consensus, not only on the structure, delimitation and development of the research project but also and perhaps more importantly, on the framework, purpose and conditions of the overall operation.

The individual study plan is an important instrument in the prevention of conflicts between the doctoral student and the supervisor. The plan must include the commitments of the doctoral student and the higher education institution as well as a timetable, and is to be approved after consultation between the doctoral student and the supervisor (Higher Education Ordinance, Chapter 6 Section 29). The study plan is a “dynamic syllabus” for the doctoral student’s research studies. The supervisor is to provide the doctoral student with support in accordance with the study plan. The plan is to describe the research project, literature, courses, supervision and other resources required to complete the study programme effectively within the stipulated time. The expectations placed on the doctoral student and the supervisor are to be specified and it is important for the doctoral student and the supervisor to be in agreement over the study plan and for its content to be realistic.

It is of the utmost importance for both the doctoral student and the supervisor that the individual study plan be regularly updated abreast of the research studies (at least once per year), as the challenges for both the doctoral student and the research project can never be foreseen. Many of the problems which can arise within third cycle studies can be prevented through systematic planning and adaptation of the

individual study plan. Explicit expectations – of the project, the student and the supervision – increase the chances of discovering and solving problems in time.

Another important part of conflict prevention is to find forms for constructive communication. Regular follow-up meetings between the doctoral student and the supervisor can contribute to enabling minor misunderstandings and disagreements to be sorted out at an early stage. It can be a good idea to have someone who is outside the doctoral student/supervisor constellation to talk to, for help in dealing with misunderstandings between the doctoral student and the supervisor.

Besides the meeting to update the individual study plan, each doctoral student is to have an annual staff appraisal. The staff appraisal is a very important tool for systematic work environment management, aiming to develop both the doctoral student and the organisation. The appraisal is to address the doctoral student's entire work situation. The manager and the doctoral student are to follow up results and work performance, clarify goals and expectations, discuss development and training needs and allocation of responsibilities. Job satisfaction and issues concerning collaboration and working relationships are also to be discussed, as well as issues concerning leadership and supervision. It is also important to ensure continuous follow-up of the appraisal over the following year. It must be underlined that, in all phases of research studies, the doctoral student has/is to be given the opportunity to discuss his or her situation with the assistant head of department responsible for research studies.

To ensure that doctoral students and supervisors have the same information and knowledge about research studies, the Faculty of Medicine's unit for teaching and learning in higher education, MedCul, offers both an introductory course for doctoral students and a course for supervisors. These courses include discussion of various situations which could potentially lead to conflict between a doctoral student and a supervisor. The content of the courses also focuses on the obligations and rights of doctoral students, supervisors and the University. These also become an element of preventive work against conflict.

MANAGING CONFLICTS

If a conflict arises between a doctoral student and a supervisor, it is to be addressed promptly and professionally. Regardless of their nature, it is important to discuss any problems at an early stage. Both the doctoral student and the supervisor have an obligation to contribute to a solution to the situation that has arisen. It is important to keep the discussions constructive and factual (see appendix 1 for concrete tips on what to bear in mind during these discussions).

If the conflict cannot be solved between the doctoral student and the supervisor, the parties involved should primarily turn to the Assistant Head of Department for research studies at the relevant department. Their work duties include *“in collaboration with the Head of Department and the Head of Division, monitoring the physical and psychosocial work environment of the doctoral students and acting as a contact person for individual doctoral students”*. In cases where the Assistant Head of Department, possibly together with the Head of Department, is unable to solve the problem, that person is to contact the Chair of the Research Studies Board who can act as a mediator. The last level of intervention is the Dean.

The doctoral student can also contact the Chair of the Research Studies Board directly.

If the problem or the conflict is related to labour law or falls under the Discrimination Act, the Head of Department should be contacted. Support can be obtained in such cases from the employee organisations, the doctoral students' union and the doctoral students' representative (see below). In serious cases, the conflict can be raised to the level of the faculty's human resources unit or, ultimately, (and through the faculty's agency) to the legal services office within the University.

Bodies which can contribute with support and advice in case of conflict (for contact details, see appendix 2):

- The Postgraduate Studies Office at the Faculty Office can help with advice and support on how to manage the process.
- The Council of Medicine Doctoral Students consists of doctoral students who represent and address certain issues connected with research studies at the faculty. They can contribute with answers to questions concerning research studies, pass on contacts and be supportive doctoral student colleagues.
- One authority which is independent of the Faculty is the doctoral student representative. Here doctoral students can turn for support and advice. The doctoral student representative has a duty of confidentiality and can also help in contacts with relevant authorities at the department or the faculty.
- In case of very severe conflict, you can turn to the faculty's staff support group, which consists of experienced teaching staff. This group cannot help to solve conflicts, but can offer psychological support and practical help in writing statements. Everything is done under strict confidentiality rules and nothing is documented or reported.

GUIDELINES IN CASE OF CONFLICT -

The responsibilities and obligations of the supervisor, the doctoral student and the Assistant Head of Department for preventing conflict and managing conflicts that have arisen

The responsibilities and obligations of the principal supervisor in relation to the doctoral student:

- To discuss and clarify the supervisory role with the doctoral student and discuss and sort out the reciprocal expectations of the supervisor and the doctoral student.
- To pay attention to and take measures against study conditions that could be detrimental to the doctoral student's development and studies.
- At an early stage, to pay attention to and discuss with the doctoral student any difficulties and/or conflicts which have arisen in research studies or in working relationships.
- To contribute actively to putting measures in place if a conflict arises.
- To inform the Assistant Head of Department.
- If necessary, to involve the Assistant Head of Department.
- To take continuous responsibility for the follow-up of the doctoral student's research studies.
- To continue to participate actively in the follow-up of the individual study plan.
- To follow the agreements established in the individual study plan.

- To continue to give the doctoral student advice and support in everyday work.

The responsibilities and obligations of the doctoral student:

- To discuss the reciprocal expectations of the doctoral student and the supervisor.
- At an early stage, to draw attention to and discuss with the supervisor any difficulties and/or conflicts which have arisen in research studies or in working relationships.
- To contribute and participate actively in the implementation of the measures put in place to solve the conflict.
- If necessary, to involve the Assistant Head of Department.
- To follow the agreements established in the individual study plan.
- To obtain support and help from the relevant union representative and/or doctoral student representative, if desired.

The responsibilities and obligations of the assistant head of department:

- In cooperation with the Head of Department and the Head of Division, to monitor the doctoral students' physical and psychosocial work environment.
- In case of conflict, to speak with both parties and gather documentation for the purpose of taking adequate measures to resolve the conflict.
- If necessary, to get support from others such as the Research Studies Board, the human resources unit at the Faculty of Medicine and/or the Occupational Health Service.
- To inform the doctoral student of the support available from the relevant employee organisation or doctoral student representative.
- To appoint a new supervisor without delay if a written request for a change of supervisor is submitted by a doctoral student. This is primarily the responsibility of the Assistant Head of Department and the department. If there are difficulties in identifying a new supervisor, the Chair of the Research Studies Board can provide support in the process.
- To ensure that the process of changing supervisors and the measures put in place are documented.
- To ensure that the individual study plan is updated.
- To hold one or several follow-up appraisals with the doctoral student and the new supervisor to ensure that everything is working as it should.
- To follow up the situation for the previous supervisor.
- To analyse and learn from the incident to avoid a similar situation in future.

CHANGING SUPERVISORS

Experience shows that in the vast majority of cases, doctoral students complete their research studies with the supervisory constellation that was appointed from the beginning. However, there are a number of situations in which it becomes necessary to appoint a new supervisor.

Pursuant to the Higher Education Ordinance, (Chapter 6 Section 28) a doctoral student has the right to change supervisor on request. A change of supervisor can also be appropriate for reasons related to the supervisor's own situation. If all parties are in agreement, a change of supervisor is easy to implement (see link to form below).

Changing supervisors is not always uncomplicated, however, for the doctoral student as well as for the supervisor. A doctoral student who requests it has the right to change supervisors, but it is desirable for the underlying conflict or problem to have been addressed and possible alternative solutions to have been considered. If a doctoral student wishes to change supervisors, he or she is to contact the Assistant Head of Department responsible for third cycle studies at the relevant department.

The Assistant Head of Department is to appoint a new supervisor. A doctoral student who wishes to change supervisors can propose a new supervisor but does not have the right to demand a certain supervisor. The change of supervisors is to be documented and followed up by the Assistant Head of Department. The matter is to be dealt with promptly so that the research studies are not delayed and the doctoral student can continue the thesis work with the same research focus stated at the time of admission.

Brief description of the procedure

1. The doctoral student or the supervisor contacts the Assistant Head of Department to discuss the need for a change of supervisor.
2. A written request for a change of supervisor is submitted to the Assistant Head of Department. (Form for change of supervisor, see link in appendix 2. The field for the new supervisor can be left empty, if no such person has yet been contacted and appointed).
3. The Assistant Head of Department appoints a new supervisor.
4. The Assistant Head of Department notifies the Postgraduate Studies Office for documentation in LADOK.
5. The individual study plan is updated by the doctoral student together with the new supervisor and must be approved by the Assistant Head of Department.

A change of supervisor can also be necessary for reasons other than a request from the doctoral student, for example if the supervisor changes workplace, retires, goes on sick leave or extended leave of absence. In these cases, too, the Assistant Head of Department decides on appropriate measures and the form for the change of supervisor is to be sent in to the Postgraduate Studies Office.

A doctoral student cannot be expelled from research studies unless the vice-chancellor has taken the decision to withdraw resources (pursuant to the Higher Education Ordinance Chapter 6 Section 30).

Appendix 1

POINTS TO REMEMBER IN DISCUSSIONS

1. Identify the purpose and objective of the discussion, be concrete about its content.
2. Agree on how long the discussion is to take.
3. Have the discussion in a neutral and undisturbed setting (switch off all mobile phones).
4. Agree on basic principles.
 - a. Do not interrupt each other; let the speaker finish.
 - b. Strive to understand each other; it is not about who is right or wrong – avoid arguing.
 - c. Deal with the factual matter of the case, do not attack the person.
 - d. Be factual and constructive; use facts only.
5. Avoid verbosity.
6. What can you do to solve the problem? Focus on changes you can affect yourself.
7. Express yourself in the first person and avoid hearsay.
8. Document successes:
 - a. What was the discussion about?
 - b. What agreements were reached?
 - c. Time aspects.
 - d. What decisions were taken?
9. Involve a third party. Although both parties may be striving to collaborate, it can sometimes be difficult to make progress, and involving a third party can facilitate the procedure.

Appendix 2

LINKS:

- Postgraduate Studies Office at the Faculty of Medicine
http://www.med.lu.se/phd_contact
- Research Studies Board
- <http://www.med.lu.se/fun>
- Assistant Heads of Department for third cycle studies
- http://www.med.lu.se/phd_contact
- Doctoral student representative
www.ldk.lu.se/domb
- Council of Medicine Doctoral Students
www.med.lu.se/doktorand/mdr
- Staff support group
www.med.lu.se/foertroendegrupp
- Individual study plan (link to login and manual on how to complete the plan also available on this webpage)
www.med.lu.se/phd/isp
- Staff appraisal
- <http://www.staff.lu.se/employment/terms-of-employment/staff-appraisals>
- Form for requesting a change of supervisor
www.med.lu.se/phd_supervision