



Faculty Office

## Action plan to prevent and manage conflicts between supervisors and PhD students

### Introduction

During PhD studies, differences of opinion often arise between supervisors and PhD students. They can sometimes develop into conflicts which, in the worst cases, become aggravated and have negative consequences on the PhD 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 PhD student and the supervisor to be familiar with the resources and procedures for conflicts. This action plan is to constitute support for both the PhD student and the supervisor in a sensitive phase, and it will hopefully contribute to avoiding conflicts.

### Preventing conflicts

The main causes of conflicts between PhD students and supervisors are probably insufficient communication and divergent expectations of PhD studies and collaboration. It is important that the supervisor and the PhD 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 study program as a whole.

The individual study plan is an important instrument in the prevention of conflicts between the PhD student and the supervisor. The plan must include the commitments of the PhD student and the university as well as a timetable, and is to be approved after consultation

between the PhD student and the supervisor (Higher Education Ordinance, Chapter 6 Section 29). The study plan is a “dynamic syllabus” for the PhD student’s studies. The supervisor is to provide the PhD student with support in accordance with the study plan and the PhD student undertakes to follow the 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 PhD student and the supervisor are to be specified and it is important for the PhD 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 PhD student and the supervisor that the individual study plan is followed up and, if necessary, revised as the PhD studies progresses (at least once per year), since the challenges for both the PhD student and the research project can never be foreseen. Many of the problems which can arise within PhD studies can be prevented through systematic planning and revision 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 PhD 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 PhD student/supervisor constellation to talk to, for help in dealing with misunderstandings between the PhD student and the supervisor.

Besides the meeting to follow up the individual study plan, those students who are employed as PhD students at the Faculty of Medicine are furthermore to have an annual staff appraisal. The staff appraisal is a very important tool for systematic work environment management, aiming to develop both the PhD student and the organisation. The appraisal is to address the PhD student’s entire work situation. The manager and the PhD 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 the studies, the PhD student has/is to be given the opportunity to discuss his or her situation with the deputy head of department responsible for PhD studies.

To ensure that supervisors have relevant information and knowledge about PhD studies, a mandatory course for supervisors is organised on behalf of the Research Studies Board. The course discusses, among other things, various situations that could potentially lead to conflict between PhD student and supervisor. The content of the course also focuses on the obligations of the PhD students, supervisors and the University. To ensure that all PhD students have a good understanding of what the education contains and what expectations are reasonable for the education, the Research Studies Board also organises a mandatory introduction for all PhD students in connection with admission. This will also be part of the work to prevent conflicts.

### **Managing conflicts**

If a conflict arises between a PhD 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 PhD 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 PhD student and the main supervisor, the co-supervisor can also be involved in the first step. After that, the first point of contact is the deputy head of department for PhD 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 PhD students and acting as a contact person for individual PhD students”. In cases where the deputy head of department, possibly together with the head of department, is unable to solve the problem, that person is to contact the vice-dean responsible for PhD-studies who can act as a mediator. The PhD student may also initiate direct contact with the vice-dean. The PhD student can also contact the doctoral student Ombudsman (see below) for support, also early in the process. The last level is the dean.

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 PhD students’ union and the PhD students’ representative (see below). In serious cases, the conflict can be raised to the level of the faculty’s Human Resources & Recruitment Section or, ultimately, to the legal services office within the University, with the help of the Faculty.

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

- The PhD Studies Office at the Faculty Office can help with advice and support on how to manage the process.
- The Medical Doctoral Student Council consists of PhD students who represent and address certain issues connected with PhD studies at the faculty. They can contribute with answers to questions concerning PhD studies, pass on contacts and be supportive PhD student colleagues.
- One authority which is independent of the Faculty is the doctoral student Ombudsman, the DOMB. Here PhD students can turn for support and advice. The doctoral student Ombudsman has a duty of confidentiality and can also help in contacts with relevant authorities at the department or the faculty.

## Guidelines in case of conflict

Below are the responsibilities and obligations of the principal supervisor, the PhD student and the deputy head of department for preventing conflict and managing conflicts that have arisen

### **The responsibilities and obligations of the principal supervisor in relation to the PhD student:**

- To discuss and clarify the supervisory role with the PhD student and discuss and sort out the reciprocal expectations of the supervisor and the PhD student.
- To pay attention to and take measures against study conditions that could be detrimental to the PhD student's development and studies.
- At an early stage, to pay attention to and discuss with the PhD student any difficulties and/or conflicts which have arisen in the studies or in working relationships.
- To contribute actively to putting measures in place if a conflict arises.
- To inform the deputy head of department.
- If necessary, to involve the deputy head of department.
- To put extra emphasis on the follow-up of the PhD student's studies.
- To follow the agreements established in the individual study plan.
- To put extra emphasis on giving the PhD student advice and support in everyday work.

### **The responsibilities and obligations of the PhD student:**

- To discuss the reciprocal expectations of the PhD 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 PhD 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 deputy 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 deputy head of department:**

- In cooperation with the head of department and the head of division, to monitor the PhD 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 co-supervisors, the vice-dean responsible for PhD studies, human resources support at the relevant department office, the Human Resources & Recruitment Section at the Faculty of Medicine and/or the Occupational Health Service.
- To inform the PhD student of the support available from the relevant employee organisation or PhD student representative.
- To find a new supervisor without delay if a written request for a change of supervisor is submitted by a PhD student. This is primarily the responsibility of the deputy head of department and the department. If there are difficulties in identifying a new supervisor, the vice-dean responsible for PhD-studies 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 followed up and revised where necessary. Any deviations from the study plan should be documented.

- To hold one or several follow-up appraisals with the PhD 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, PhD students complete their 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 PhD 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).

In some cases, the change of supervisor may be complicated for the PhD student and the supervisor. A PhD 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 PhD student wishes to change supervisors, he or she is to contact the deputy head of department responsible for PhD studies at the relevant department.

The vice-dean responsible for PhD-studies is to appoint a new supervisor. A PhD 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 deputy head of department. The matter is to be dealt with promptly so that the PhD studies are not delayed and the PhD student can continue the thesis work with the same research focus stated at the time of admission.

### **Brief description of the procedure**

- The PhD student or the supervisor contacts the deputy head of department to discuss the need for a change of supervisor.
- A written request for a change of supervisor is submitted to the deputy head of department. (Form for change of supervisor, see link in appendix 2).
- The deputy head of department sends the form to the PhD Studies Office who prepares the application for decision.
- Vice-dean responsible for PhD-studies appoints a new supervisor.
- The PhD Studies Office documents the change of supervisor in LADOK.
- The individual study plan is updated by the PhD student together with the new supervisor and must be approved by the deputy head of department and the vice-dean responsible for PhD-studies.

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



## 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).
  - a. Recording the conversation may be appropriate in some cases however but avoid doing so without the knowledge of all participants.
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

Contact details - The PhD Studies Office, deputy head of department, the Research Studies Board

<https://www.intramed.lu.se/en/phd-studies/contact-us-regarding-your-phd-studies>

Doctoral student Ombudsman

<https://www.lundsdoctoralstudentunion.com/your-rights>

The Medical Doctoral Student Council

<https://www.intramed.lu.se/en/phd-studies/networking-support-and-guidance-during-your-studies/networking-and-support-service-new/medical-doctoral-student-council>

Networking and support services

<https://www.intramed.lu.se/en/phd-studies/networking-support-and-guidance-during-your-studies/networking-and-support-service>

Individual study plan (link to login and manual on how to complete the plan also available on this webpage)

<https://www.intramed.lu.se/en/phd-studies/admission-examination/planning-your-phd-studies/individual-study-plans>

Staff appraisal

<https://www.staff.lu.se/employment/terms-employment/staff-appraisals>

Form (including form for changing supervisors)

<https://www.intramed.lu.se/en/phd-studies/forms-and-certificates-needed-during-phd-programme>