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Personal Development Planning as a means to strengthen supervisory relationships in doctoral education (0180)

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Outline

Background

Personal development planning is widely used in the UK in efforts to strengthen student learning in higher education (Strivens & Ward, 2010). This is not commonplace in the Danish Higher Education system, but it is being used during an introductory course for new doctoral students at the University of Copenhagen, where the aim is to equip them to take charge of their PhD education. The course was opened in 2007 in a response to the growth and diversification of the doctoral student community and currently runs six times each year, reaching over 100 students. As part of the course, participants make a personal development plan that requires them to reflect on their learning goals for the PhD study, and beyond, examine their competencies and deficiencies, and consider the actions needed to reach those goals. They are required to share their plan with their supervisor, to ensure that the goals and plans they have made become integrated into the PhD process. The plan, together with a reflective note on the meeting with their supervisor, is submitted to the course team, and individual, formative feedback is provided.

Immediate post-course evaluations are very positive, and a qualitative evaluation in 2009, from students who had attended the course some eighteen months earlier, showed significant benefits (Grumløse, Kobayashi, & Grout, 2010). Although the supervisory relationship was not the focus of this evaluation, it did indicate that the discussion with the supervisor about personal development planning was important for the participants' ability to take charge of their education and establish a strong working relationship with the supervisor.

The present study explores this outcome further by asking if the discussion with the supervisor specifically about personal development planning strengthens the supervisory relationship in the longer term, as perceived by the student.

Theoretical approach

We use the understanding of agency and the approach to analyse transcripts as described by McAlpine & Amundsen (2009). They describe agency as an evocation of identity: as the capacity to construct narratives in terms of personal intensions and the ability to influence one's experiences, or 'acting to shape and not just be shaped by the contexts in which they [are] acting' (p. 109). We selected 110 reflective notes written by course participants as part of the assignment during 2009-2011 that indicated that the meeting with the supervisor mattered to them, either by pointing to some difficulties, pointing to decisions taken about

supervision, or giving an indication of expectations for an improved relationship. These 110 reflective notes were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and for expressions of agency (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009).

The authors of the notes were then contacted by email and asked to reflect further on the effect of the meeting with their supervisor. In each email we included the text of the reflective note from that person's assignment with the aim of stimulating their reflection. We received back 72 of these stimulated reflections (65% response rate).

Results

Analysis of the reflective notes revealed a number of aspects (examples in italics below) that indicated how the meeting helped the doctoral students to move towards taking charge of collaboration with the supervisor.

A different kind of meeting:

"After the meeting with my supervisor we both felt it was good to talk about these things, that we generally don't have the chance to talk about. We found the questions difficult since they are about things we are not used to talk on a regular basis."

Opening difficult issues

"It felt a bit strange to talk to him about that, but on the other hand it is really good that he knows me, to be able to support me in the way I need it".

Building a stronger relationship

"I think this meeting was really helpful and we will be able to do things better from now on ... I think I feel more comfortable when it comes to my relationship with my supervisors".

The stimulated reflections were analysed and categorized according to type and degree of long-lasting effect. We found the following four categories:

- 1) No effect. The doctoral students describe this as a lost cause, as their supervisor was too busy or indifferent, and they did not get much supervision in spite of the meeting.
- 2) For this group the meeting mattered as something to carry with them. The meeting did not affect their supervisory practice, but the consciousness of the meeting was supportive in the process.
- 3) The third group experienced the meeting as an opportunity to talk about sensitive issues and change some practices in the supervisory process.
- 4) The group that perceived the greatest benefit from the meeting describe it in terms of a turning point. This could be in understanding roles and mutual expectations, e.g. realising that the supervisor expects the student to take a lead.

Implications

Higher education literature describes the relationship between doctoral students and their supervisors from different perspectives, usually referring to the power relations between the two, and advocating for the importance of clarifying expectations to the supervisory process. Hemer (2012) discusses the relationship in terms of setting boundaries vs. building a working relationship, and explores supervision over coffee in 'third places' as a means to strengthen the relationship. This dimension of 'closeness', building a robust and trustful relationship, and finding a comfortable distance in the working relationship has been the topic of only a few studies, as noted by Hemer (2012). The present study illustrates how personal development planning can work as an asset in establishing good working relationships in doctoral education, but also points to the difficulty in reaching those supervisors who are implicated in category 1 above. These appear to be too busy to contribute effectively to the process or are largely indifferent towards doctoral education.

References

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