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Title Peer mentoring for PhD students – facilitating the emergence of expertise, researcher identity and researcher skills

Submitter Dr. Terhi Nokkala, Ms. Melina Aarnikoivu, Dr. Johanna Kiili

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Introduction

Doctoral studies are loaded with contradictory expectations. Doctorate holders are considered to answer for the toughest demands of working life and their expertise is highly valued. Furthermore, doctoral students and their dissertations produce performance points for university funding, a model typical for [country] universities. Doctoral students often have their own, internal motivation to embark on the doctoral path, while at the same time the early-career stage is increasingly prolonged by the scarcity of permanent academic positions and increasingly tough competition for research grants.

In spite of the unified university demands and regulations for doctoral students, every doctoral path is unique and the challenges of each doctoral student greatly variable. In the academic year of 2017–2018, (the anonymised University) will launch a peer mentoring group pilot project and study. This paper examines how the group supports doctoral students' attachment to the academic community, networking across different disciplines, as well as the development of their expertise and career planning skills. If successful, the pilot project can offer a functioning model for supporting doctoral students as early-career stage researchers in the future; a focus shared also by this paper.

Background and theory

Becoming 'a researcher': building expertise during doctoral studies

Building expertise and becoming a researcher happens gradually while completing one's doctoral studies (e.g. Murray & Cunningham 2011; Mantai 2015) In other words, field-specific and transferable skills do not accumulate only by completing certain stages or by acquiring certain merits but they also increase through every-day actions in different types of formal as well as informal contexts. Together with their every-day life experiences, these skills constantly direct doctoral students towards new skills they might need in their future career (Maunula 2015). However, this development is what Hopwood (2010) calls 'oscillating': instead of gradual and stable progress, the feelings of success and growing one's academic identity can sometimes take faster and larger steps and sometimes a few steps backwards.

For example, Mantai (2015) has studied when doctoral students have felt themselves to be researchers, and discovered that identification as a researcher happens very early on during the doctoral studies. She has identified three categories of practices when doctoral students have felt they have gained validation when growing their researcher identity: 1) research outputs (formal), 2) doing research (semi-formal), and 3) talking about research (informal). In this study, we are focusing on the third category in particular.

(Peer) mentoring as a means of PhD students' support

Previous research shows that mentoring PhD students and early-career researchers supports the establishment of and success on a research career (Laudel and Gläser 2008, Scaffidi et al. 2011; Lindholm 2004). A successful transition from an early-career researcher stage to an independent researcher stage is dependent on how successful the cognitive development of the researcher and the knowledge produced by them is, and on their integration into research community. Moreover, the material basis in the form of salary and research infrastructure has an extremely important role, together with other conditions, such as personal traits, field-specific characteristics, collaborators, and mentors (Laudel and Gläser 2008). Scaffidi et al. (2011) note the connection between a successful postdoc experience and the quality of the guidance and career mentoring received in the early career stage; supporting networking and the emergence of collaborations that facilitate further research career. The authors conclude that universities should pay more attention to facilitating the networking and integration into an academic career of early-career stage researchers.

Aims, data, and methods

The aim of the pilot project and this paper is to find out whether the two peer mentoring groups consisting of two established researchers, who are coordinating the meetings, and four to five doctoral student peers each could help in facilitating doctoral students' emergence of expertise, building their research identity, as well as developing their research skills. The paper is based on two rounds of interviews conducted with the four coordinators and nine peers participating in the pilot. The first round of interviews was conducted before the beginning of the pilot in June 2017 and the second round will be conducted after the first term in late November 2017. The interviews will be transcribed and the transcriptions analysed using a theory-based content analysis (Eskola & Vastamäki 2001) taking into account prior research. The content analysis will focus on those cognitive, organisational, and collective preconditions that have been shown to be significant by previous research. We will specifically focus on the questions of integration of PhD students into the academic community, peerness, and participation. Finally, we will take a look at the perceptions of the participants regarding the impact of the peer mentoring on the researcher skills and research career.

Preliminary results

The first round of interviews shows that the need for sharing thoughts and tacit knowledge between doctoral students is evident. The students often feel rather alone with their problems even if they have a physical academic work community around them on daily bases. However, their problems vary to a great extent: some students have knowledge gaps in the practical implementation of doctoral studies whereas others struggle to organise their work and schedules. The feeling of 'never doing enough' is pervasive.

The experienced mentors, on the other hand, wish to both receive and share ideas ('thinking outside the box') with the group, rather than be in the role of 'an instructor' or 'a supervisor'. They thought that it is an excellent idea to hear of the practices in different faculties and departments. The mentors expect the mentoring group to be a win-win situation for everyone: No-one will lose anything but everyone will benefit.

To conclude, this paper discusses the benefits of intensified multidisciplinary support for PhD students that adds a new element of peer support to the traditional discipline-focused dissertation supervision. Thus it offers a contribution to the conference theme on the notion of balancing the expectations of PhD students and academic community, and specifically to the domain **Postgraduate scholarship and practice**.