

Addressing a gender perspective in postgraduate supervisors' training in a scholarly way – an example from Uppsala University / Sweden

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Abstract

The presentation describes a project at Uppsala University aiming at introducing a gender perspective in postgraduate supervisors' training in a scholarly way. Based on interviews with supervisors, some strategies for a gender-sensitive supervision will be suggested. I will also discuss how the project report has been received and what impact it has on my professional role as an educational developer.

Introduction

Gender equality is a topic frequently discussed in Sweden. A report published in 2011, on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Research, stresses the importance of gender equality in higher education for a variety of reasons:

Gender equality in higher education is essentially an issue of fairness for individuals. But it is also an issue that is crucial to the legitimacy of higher education as an institution that serves and unites our society and, in the long term, to the development and competitiveness of Swedish society. (Delegationen för jämställdhet i högskolan, 2011:15)

Training programs for postgraduate supervisors provide an opportunity to discuss gender within academia in general and linked to postgraduate education in particular. The participation in these programs is mandatory for supervisors at Uppsala University according to the local guidelines "Teaching and Learning at Uppsala University". These state that all newly employed university teachers

must have done training in university teaching and learning, based on national course objectives. The training will comprise ten weeks of courses or the equivalent [...]. If the teacher has tutoring tasks, training relevant to these tasks must be included. (Uppsala University, 2008:14)

The training program for postgraduate supervisors at Uppsala University is currently equivalent to three weeks of full time work including seven on campus meetings. The course has a Swedish and an English language version, each usually offered once per semester. It is attended by supervisors from all faculties with about twenty to forty participants in each.

Since a couple of years, the course includes - as most equivalent courses at Swedish universities - a topic on "gender and research supervision".

It is important for postgraduate supervisors to discuss gender equality due to a number of reasons. Research clearly demonstrates that culture and norms within academia still generally favor men. (Husu, 2005) National and local investigations into postgraduate students' learning experiences show, amongst other things, that female doctoral students experience higher levels of stress compared to their male peers and that they are more critical towards the working relationship with their supervisors. (Jacobsson & Gillström, 2008) Female postgraduates do not feel as included as their male peers within the department as a whole and might be exposed to subtle or invisible discrimination. (Björnermark & Kettis-Lindblom & Wolters, 2008) Postgraduate studies considered as a process of socialization not only mean becoming a member of an academic community of practice. It also means becoming a member of a *gendered* community of practice. (Salminen-Karlsson, 2006) (Johnson & Lee & Green, 2000) As an already established member of the academic system, the supervisor may therefore be considered as a "master" and thus as a key actor in order to enhance gender equality within academia. Supervision practice offers an opportunity to discuss academic culture, norms and routines with the supervisee as well as a possibility to change at least some of them. It is thus vital to raise supervisors' awareness about gendered norms and structures as well as about hidden discrimination in academia, in order to increase their knowledge how to tutor both women and men in a gender-sensitive way.

The topic of gender equality is however difficult to deal within supervisors' training programs for a variety of reasons such as diversity in terms of the supervisors' prior knowledge depending on their subject fields, varying opinions of the topic's overall meaning as well as difficulties in linking gender issues to their own supervising practice. Course facilitators might arrange the gender session in different ways: Sometimes educational developers themselves facilitate the topic; sometimes it is conducted by an "expert", either a researcher in gender issues or an expert in gender equality (e.g. a person from the university's gender equality office). Different solutions seem to involve certain risks: educational developers may experience a lack of knowledge when it comes to gender, while researchers into gender might be perceived as far too theoretical and gender specialists as being too prescriptive. Moreover, a general lack of research into gender and supervision makes it difficult to find a working material that links gender to supervision from an educational perspective. According to a newly published Swedish report, there is a significant lack of research into gender and postgraduate studies, which urgently needs to be addressed. (Bondestam, 2010)

To get around these barriers, a project financed by the Swedish "Delegation for Gender Equality in Higher Education" was set to run at Uppsala University in 2010. The aim of the project was to produce a working material which could be used in supervisors' training programs as a starting point for the discussion. The main idea was to include facts about gender equality as well as a toolkit with concrete ideas and suggestions for gender-aware supervision practices. The project resulted in the report "Könsmedveten forskarhandledning – teoretiska utgångspunkter och praktiska erfarenheter" [Gender awareness in postgraduate supervision – theoretical perspectives and practical experiences] published in 2011, which has been used in the course for supervisors at Uppsala University since then.

In section I, the report builds on previous research on gender within academia including various studies on postgraduates learning experiences such as the national "Postgraduate

Student Barometer” and local equivalents. In section II, the report contains a toolkit for gender awareness in supervision covering the following topics:

1. A professional approach towards supervision
2. Gender-related expectations in the relationship between supervisor and supervisee
3. The socialization into a scientific (and gendered) community of practice
4. Gendered norms and practices within academia
5. Constructive and non-gendered feedback
6. The research seminar as an academic practice and arena for feedback and encouragement
7. Discussing future perspectives with the supervisee – a supervisors’ task?
8. Alternative models for supervision
9. Postgraduate education – the supervisors as well as a departmental responsibility

Method

The crucial concern for the project was to present a toolkit with practical ideas and suggestions for gender sensitive approaches in postgraduate supervision, since this was nearly non-existent in previous literature. I decided therefore to interview supervisors at Uppsala University with a special interest in, and commitment for, gender issues. By attending as a guest the supervisors’ training program in spring 2010, I had the opportunity to observe the discussions about gender and supervision and was able to pick out a few persons with a strong commitment for the topic and willingness to be interviewed. A few more supervisors were chosen based on my own and my colleagues knowledge about them; some of the interviewed supervisors even recommended other persons to be interviewed. In total, interviews with ten supervisors were carried out, both women and men, either well experienced or quite new as supervisors, from all scientific fields across the university.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted on an individual basis and lasted in average between one and one and half an hour. Besides a core body of questions posed to each supervisor there was also considerable time for the interviewees to get into what they considered being particularly relevant. In order to catch the interviewees’ spontaneous thoughts, every meeting started with the open question “What does gender-aware research supervision mean to you?” Topics further addressed were the professional role and power position of the supervisor, how to provide feedback on supervisees’ ongoing work, the role of the research seminar as an arena for encouragement at the department level etc. Some of these questions were based on results from local and national surveys on postgraduates’ working conditions and learning experiences. Problems that usually come up in those are “dependence from the supervisor”, “stress and pressure”, “who is fitting into the (gendered) role of the researcher and who’s not” and so on.

In order to secure a ‘good enough’ documentation – there were no economic resources to record and transcribe every single interview – I took extensive notes during every session. These notes were transcribed in detail afterwards and sent to the interviewees, which were invited to correct and change just as they preferred. While finishing the report at the end of the project, all interviewees got the opportunity to read and approve the manuscript before it went to press.

Since the main purpose of the project was to develop a broad spectrum of ideas and suggestions for gender awareness and gender-sensitive approaches towards supervision, the

report doesn't focus on the individual supervisor's perspective or on a comparison between them. The report is divided into thematic chapters instead, gathering advice and ideas from all supervisors within a certain topic under one heading. Each chapter begins usually with an introduction aiming at putting the supervisors' ideas into a more theoretical context by linking their concerns to models and theory emanating from different scientific perspectives such as gender theory, educational research, ethnography, sociology and linguistics. After that, the supervisors' suggestions are presented in detail. In order not to be too prescriptive, I consciously avoided commenting on or evaluating these ideas: each reader has to make her / his own decision which suggestions are fitting for her / him according to different subject contexts, different tutorial constellations and supervising traditions and – last but not least – personal supervising philosophy and supervisory style.

Findings

Since the toolkit for a gender-sensitive supervision is the most interesting and innovative part of the report from an educational perspective, I will present two detailed examples of topics covered in the report: “A professional approach towards supervision “ and “Gendered norms and practices within academia”. It is however necessary to outline two specific characteristics of postgraduate studies in Sweden first, which have a great impact on the situation of both male and female doctoral students and therefore gives important information in order to understand the specific context of postgraduate studies in Swedish higher education:

To begin with, in many countries the responsibility for children is one of the biggest obstacles for women to study on the postgraduate level. In Sweden, however, childcare is a public responsibility also legally guaranteed for all children from the age of one to 12. There is moreover a parental allowance giving all parents the opportunity to stay home from work in order to take care of small children. The allowance is paid for a total of 480 days per child. These arrangements create better conditions for both women and men to combine an academic career with having children and to manage the balance between work and private life.

Secondly another frequently occurring problem in an international context is postgraduate students' inadequate or uncertain financing. In Sweden, the “Higher Education Ordinance” states that all postgraduate students must have a full-time funding before they are admitted to a postgraduate program. Currently the financing consists in most cases of a four-year PhD-position with a locally regulated salary. There is also the guaranteed possibility of prolongation when postgraduates have teaching tasks during their studies or have been on parental leave. Exceptions from that are found in the domain of medicine where it is common to do a PhD without a PhD position while having a clinical position as e.g. doctor or nurse.

A professional approach towards supervision

The relationship among supervisor and supervisee has been a crucial point for all the supervisors I've met. Considered as a teaching practice, research supervision has its own specific conditions: In opposite to most other teaching activities, it builds upon a relationship between just a few individuals which lasts over a long period of time. According to the Swedish educational researcher Lena Fritzén, postgraduate supervision involves the ideal of “communicative action” as described by the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas. (Fritzén, 2009) A supervisor thus needs to develop outstanding communication

skills in order to provide a genuine dialogue with the student and in order to establish a deep mutual understanding. From this relational and communicative point of view, gender is a determining factor for how tutorship is performed. Both parts have conscious and unconscious beliefs and ideas about what it means to be a woman or a man, what is fitting within the concept of “femininity” and “masculinity” and what is not. These beliefs have an influence on how supervision practice is enacted due to assumptions and expectations mostly never explicitly expressed. The mentoring relationship has furthermore a strong dimension of power (e.g. Grant, 2010): Asymmetrical by nature with its roots in an old academic tradition, it has a strong patriarchal subtext. Both supervisor and supervisee have been traditionally men, often compared to “master and disciple” or “father and son”, a model which according to all of the interviewed supervisors is no longer suitable for supervision.

With this in mind, a recurring theme is how a professional relationship can be developed as opposed to the old patriarchal model with its unclear boundaries between professional and private life. However, one of the supervisors stresses that especially in male dominated areas it is still common that male supervisors become friends with their male students. According to the interviewed, this contains the risk of excluding women from informal networks and the support, guidance and encouragement provided within those – the risk of so called invisible or hidden discrimination.

Another supervisor points out that friendship has to be avoided especially when a male supervisor tutors a female student. It is the supervisors’ responsibility to keep a professional distance in order to prevent the potential abuse of power or a relationship perceived as uncomfortable by the student. Clear boundaries prevent misunderstandings, help both parts to solve conflicts in a professional way when they occur and make it easier for both parts to meet even in more informal contexts such as conference dinners.

While underlining the importance of being professional, many supervisors stress at the same time that a good professional relationship has to be *personal* in order to establish a safe and fruitful learning atmosphere and a productive dialogue between tutor and tutee. Thus, a professional relationship means to “be personal, but not private”.

Transparency regarding roles and responsibilities is thus a key factor for gender awareness in supervision. Clarity prevents both parts from building the relationship upon usually unconscious and unspoken expectations based on traditional gendered stereotypes. Gendered stereotypes operate in both directions influencing how tutors perceive and treat their tutees but also vice versa - how doctorates perceive their supervisors. Some of the interviewed women share the experience that doctorate students have different expectations on their supervisors depending if the supervisor is male or female. Traditional stereotypes about “femininity” including qualities such as helpfulness, carefulness and availability lead to higher demands on female supervisors concerning these qualities. Several of the interviewed women have made the experience that they in some cases not have been appreciated for their scientific qualities, but for their “female” qualities, which makes them feel strongly uncomfortable.

Furthermore, gendered expectations affect the triangle between main supervisor, assistant supervisor and supervisee, which is the regular constellation in Sweden due to the “Higher Education Ordinance”. Supervisor teams with a more experienced and merited male main supervisor and a female assistant supervisor tend to be particularly problematic according to some of the interviewees: The constellation leads easily to certain roles with the main

supervisor mostly perceived as scientific authority while the assistant supervisor is expected to take care on the relational and problematic aspects during the doctorate. Moreover, one of the supervisors emphasizes that female supervisors in male dominated fields as science and technology become role models for other women whether they like it or not. Due to her experience, female doctorates tend to strive for friendship with their female supervisors, which although it is understandable also can cause problems when role-boundaries become too vague.

To summarize, there are many reasons to strive for a professional relationship. Here are some of the supervisors' practical suggestions:

- It is ok to be personal in sense of getting to know each students' unique and individual character, but one should not hang out with students in one's leisure time
- It is important to make a clear border between the professional and the private, e.g. not to become friends
- A professional tutor does not invite students to his / her house, does not go to the sauna together with students etc.
- In order to avoid the risk of developing a "false friendship" which is not on equal terms, one should not become friends with the students
- The professional distance helps in cases when conflicts occur
- It may be helpful to initiate and end every tutoring meeting with a short informal conversation about more personal things, but the main part of the meeting should focus on professional questions and the students' work
- Separate professional and personal issues: always start with the tutoring meeting and go on with eventual personal issues after that, perhaps in another environment such as the lunch room etc.
- There may occur situations when the supervisees private life influences the professional sphere, e.g. in case of a personal crisis such as illness, divorce etc. The main part of the tutoring should even in those cases focus on the task; it's better to talk about the more personal aspects separated from the tutoring meeting
- It is important to negotiate about mutual roles and expectations with your student in order to agree on what the student is supposed to do and how the supervisor can contribute
- The tutoring room should neither signalize power nor intimacy

Gendered norms and practices within academia

Self-awareness and self-observation in terms of reflecting about own beliefs, values and practices are the first step towards a gender-sensitive approach according to many of the interviewed supervisors. This includes also the awareness about culture and norms within academia in general and within one's own subject and department in particular.

One of the supervisors' main points is that postgraduate studies not only mean to produce a thesis, but also to *become* a researcher and a member of the academic community. In accordance with Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning and learning as identity formation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), he claims that the students' socialization constitutes "half of the postgraduate education in total". It is therefore a vital part of the tutoring task to take responsibility for this by helping postgraduates to analyze and understand academic culture and norms. The interviewee, who has his own academic background in the field of history, points out that some groups, such as women, traditionally have been excluded from academia.

To name but one example, it took almost 400 years from the foundation of Uppsala University in 1477 until the first women began her studies in 1872. Culture, norms and standards within academia have thus originally been designed for an exclusive group. It is therefore extremely important to facilitate especially the newcomer's introduction process and to help the students – generally speaking both men and women - to learn about the *tacit knowledge* within academia. Questions that need to be addressed are for example: “What is considered to be a good / outstanding thesis in our discipline?” or “What is a ‘good enough’ standard?” in order to make demands visible and to reduce unnecessary stress and pressure. The striving for transparency means also to analyze the discipline and the departmental culture from a gender-perspective including dimensions of power: “What power-relations and hierarchies exist within our field?”, “What characterizes the dominating culture within our department?”, “What are the norms of being a researcher?”, “How much are you supposed to work?” and so on. To explore and discuss these questions together with the supervisor helps the student to “break the code”. Transparency concerning norms and standards makes it easier to adapt to the existing culture as well as to develop one's own attitudes and consider the pro's and con's connected to individual choices.

According to another interviewee, the supervisor is always a role model herself / himself and should therefore be aware of how she/he acts and deal with people in everyday life. Especially a senior researcher embodies “normality” and “normativity” for younger and less-experienced postgraduates and should be aware that she/he transfers values and norms to a new academic generation.

Several of the interviewees consider standards and norms within academia as gendered and originally designed in order to fit the traditional majority. This may concern standards for research as well as academic rituals and symbols. Traditional rituals which are often conducted at Uppsala University considering its long history, express a strong idea of an “upper-class culture and heteronormativity”, as one of the supervisors puts it.

Quite a few of the interviewees think about norms in terms of who is perceived as a talented or even outstanding researcher. There are different standards for women and men due to gendered expectations: women and men are perceived and assessed differently. In many academic environments, collective ideas about who is suitable for doing research and who has the potential to become an excellent researcher are gendered – the ideal researcher still considered to be a man. Since the whole concept of excellence is gendered, women run the risk of being questioned as researchers and being subjected to hidden discrimination. Gendered norms are also a reason for why female postgraduates more often are asked to do so called invisible, low-status work such as administrative tasks (as writing a protocol) and tasks connected to social activities (as arranging an informal “come-together” at the department level). The very image of a promising researcher is still gendered, underlines one of the supervisors who is a professor in the field of technology. Gendered expectation concerning academic excellence and suitability are a crucial cause for gender inequality in academia. For women there is always the risk of being neglected or not getting encouragement to the same extent as men, which makes women feel as outsiders who are not fully accepted within the academic system.

Another area of interest frequently mentioned by the interviewees is gendered expectations about how much a scientist has to work. Is it possible to combine a private life with an academic career? Some of the supervisors think that the very ideal is still a person, traditionally a man, who devotes his whole life to research. It is transferred as a kind of

“academic myth”, e.g. by anecdotal narratives, from one generation to another. In opposite to this, some other supervisors believe that this old ideal is on its way out because it is rejected by a younger generation, both women and men, which don't find it attractive. New ideals of gender equality and work-life-balance replace old ideals and lead to new demands. A major part of the supervisors has been thinking about particularly parenthood and academic career. Some ideas concerning work-life-balance and parenthood are the following:

- Don't expect your student to work while being on parental leave
- Be aware that students who are parents can be tired or sometimes late concerning deadlines etc.
- Try to appear as a “human being” and remind the student every now and then that “life is more than research”
- Try to be a good role model, e.g. if you think that family life is important, express this towards your students
- Respect office hours for meetings, seminars etc. according to Uppsala University's “Parental policy”

Discussion

Since the report was published in 2011, it has been used in the supervisors' training programs at Uppsala University as well as in consultations at different departments and faculties. I have also been invited to arrange seminars for supervisors at other Swedish universities and have presented the report at several conferences. Formative assessments of these seminars as well as direct feedback from participants give evidence that the material works well according to the projects aim to provide a discussion material as well as a toolkit for gender-sensitive supervision.

The report has been perceived as “scholarly” because of its use of previous research as well as interviews with supervisors from all over the university. The interviews in particular increase the materials' credibility and benefit my legitimacy as educational developer. Many supervisors realize that the advice presented in the report describe good supervising practice in general, which makes it possible to use it in many different contexts and increases the supervisors' motivation to learn more. Most of the critical comments have been about the fact that the focus on gender exclusively doesn't take other categories such as ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, disabilities etc. into consideration. On the one hand, I really agree with the idea that an intersectional approach would have been fruitful corresponding to the factual situation at a lot of faculties with e.g. increasing numbers of international postgraduate students. On the other hand, I am convinced that focusing on just one aspect makes it perhaps easier to realize in which way e.g. gender influences the interaction between tutor and student more distinctly.

During the next two years, I'll be a part of the FESTA-project financed by the European Union (= Female Empowerment in Science and Technology Academia). This project explores gender at seven European universities investigating aspects such as the concept of research excellence, formal and informal decision making and meeting cultures. As a part of the FESTA project, I will arrange study circles for supervisors, interview supervisors and doctoral students and continue my work with a toolkit for gender-sensitive supervision.

The project as a whole has strengthened my conviction that a scholarship of educational development is fundamental in order to increase credibility and legitimacy. A good way to continue is, as I believe, to conduct educational projects with educational developers, teachers and supervisors as well as students working together.

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