Charter Quality of PhD Supervision

Although the importance of high quality PhD supervision is undisputed (Mainhard, Van der Rijst, Tartwijk, Wubbels, in press), in practice few is done to assure a minimal level of PhD supervision quality. With this charter PrOUt likes to draw attention to the importance of monitoring supervision quality.

Quality defined

The quality of PhD supervision is defined in different ways according to different perspectives. Rather than defining supervision quality in terms of effectivity (e.g., months needed to complete the thesis) or based on the quality of the product (i.e. the thesis), PrOUt approaches the issue of supervision quality from the perspective of the interaction between supervisor and PhD candidate. High quality supervision is assured by clear agreements and transparent communication between candidate and supervisor

Supervision quality concerns

PrOUt is well acquainted with personal stories from PhD candidates struggling with their supervision at Utrecht and other universities. These stories indicate that problems appear to arise due to a lack of meta-communication about expectations and results, and confusion about roles. Explorative research by the Netherlands Centre for Research Schools and Graduate Schools (2008) confirms these indications. In addition, this study concludes that PhD candidates who appreciate the quality of their supervision more are also more positive about the progress of their dissertation.

Recommendations

First, in order to profoundly survey concerns we have informally heard, a thorough investigation of quality of supervision, preferably university wide is recommended (c.f. Sonneveld, Yerkes & Van de Schoot, 2009). Second, PrOUt would welcome a more standardized format for evaluation of supervision during the "R&O" meetings. Formalizing openness of communication by procedurally discussing and yearly assessing not only (expectations on) output, but also relationship and collaboration issues between supervisor and PhD candidate, would certainly help improve perceived supervision quality. A good example of a measure taken to deal with supervision issues, that could be used to guide R&O meetings, is the currently used assessment program at the faculty of Law. Third, knowledge about their rights and obligations could assist PhD candidates in stimulating discussions with their supervisors. Supported by PrOUt, a committee of PhD candidates, supervisors, ICT- and P&O representatives has been formed that will put together an information website for PhD candidates.

Concluding

A lot can be said about the quality of PhD supervision; little can be demonstrated. We hope that this issue receives more attention in the future; in terms of research, yearly supervision evaluations and information to new PhD's.

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