
Training programme in soft skills for doctoral thesis supervisors

PID_00240524

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UOC teaching material



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The assignment and creation of this teaching material have been coordinated
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First edition: February 2017
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Av. Tibidabo, 39-43, 08035 Barcelona
Design: Manel Andreu
Publishing: Oberta UOC Publishing, SL

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Introduction

In the knowledge society, the training of researchers has gained importance on the basis of supervising theses so that they act as a gateway to the research culture and as a means of acculturation within the scientific community.

The European Union mandates (EHEA) give a clear idea of where the training of doctors needs to be headed and how it should be done (Irish Universities Association, 2008; Vitae, 2010), LERU (2010). In the UK, the Roberts' Review, has influenced the training of PhD students in cross-cutting skills ranging from technical and training skills to teamworking, leading to training in transferable skills to professionalisation, and of course, in the labour market (Hernández and Díaz, 2010). This not only includes intellectual and technical skills but also includes others such as social skills, leadership and management.

When PhD students abandon their research studies, this is caused by multiple concurrent factors, such as academic proficiency, psychosocial factors and an institution's culture. For example, 13% of PhD candidates abandoned their studies in relation to the number of students who enrolled during the 2007-2008 academic year and those who presented their thesis four years' later, according to data from the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE). Of them, the factor that has the greatest effect overall is thesis supervision (Armstrong, 2004; Difabio, 2011).

Every thesis supervisor, when acting as a research project leader for a PhD student, assumes a leadership style (Fernández and Wainerman, 2015) in accordance with the planned aims, but the relationship that is established between the supervisor and the PhD student must not be forgotten, which reinforces the personal guidance that is given in both academic and non-academic aspects. As Wainerman (2011) claims, the skills required for a research project are only acquired through the involvement and guidance of a "master" in a project.

At present, thesis supervision is understood as an educational practice which belongs to the teaching professions of research and doctoral education (Fernández and Wainerman, 2015; p. 161), which confers an active role upon a supervisor.

In reference to academic aspects, a thesis supervisor becomes a model and a facilitator of learning (De Cruz Flores et. al., 2010; Difabio, 2011; Fernández and Wainerman, 2015) who:

- a) Fosters reflection.
- b) Helps to manage knowledge.
- c) Clarifies expectations and limitations.
- d) Shares in the development process (clear aims, updated information, revision of written work, immediate feedback).
- e) Plans meetings and motivates the student to publish.
- f) Provides practical support as an advisor (resources, institutional policies, connections with other professionals).
- g) Adjusts the level of difficulty for PhD students.
- h) Has to maintain a realistic and constructive professional relationship with a PhD student.

The preparation process of a doctoral thesis is a pathway towards constructing the PhD student's identity as a researcher, where they experience moments of frustration, loneliness, uncertainty, questions and ambivalence, and as a result, they need the support from their supervisor so that it creates the social and emotional conditions necessary to enable them to forge ahead with their project.

In the light of this, and taking into account the following:

- a) the roles of a thesis supervisor, as have been mentioned;
 - b) the fact as to what is being researched and how a thesis is supervised involves different skills (De Cruz et al., 2010; Halse, 2011; cited in Fernández and Wainerman, 2015);
 - c) the role of a thesis supervisor is not solely to supervise and guide the process but they must also stimulate, provide empathy and feedback to foster learning (Manathunga, 2007);
 - d) the relationship with their supervisor is one of the most influential factors in the probability as to whether a doctoral thesis is completed (Fernández and Wainerman, 2015); and
 - e) when considering the number of withdrawals,
- the quality of thesis supervision constitutes a key factor.

With this in mind, the aim of this course in Soft Skills for thesis supervisors has been established.

“Knowing others is wisdom, knowing yourself is enlightenment”. Lao Tzu

Contents

Module 1

General introduction

Maite Durán Fabrè

1. Soft skills and emotional intelligence
2. Motivation to change. The comfort zone as a supervisor
3. Being aware
4. Circle of Influence
5. Scale of commitment
6. The stages of change

Module 2

Leadership as a model for PhD students

Maite Durán Fabrè

1. What makes a leader? Self-leadership
2. The wheel of competencies as a supervisor
3. My professional values
4. Self-sabotage when faced with a thesis
5. The hero/heroine when faced with a thesis
6. The PhD project's SWOT analysis
7. General action plan based on each SWOT analysis

Module 3

Managing the PhD student's beliefs when faced with their task

Maite Durán Fabrè

1. The map
2. How your beliefs impact on the process of PhD thesis supervision
3. Limiting beliefs and enhancing beliefs when faced with work and a PhD student
4. Cognitive distortions and irrational beliefs
5. Deconstructing limiting beliefs

Module 4

Emotional management of situations which may arise in relation to the PhD student

Maite Durán Fabrè

1. Emotions. How they work
2. Positive intent with regard to work and situations
3. Resources for emotional management to progress during the process of supervision

Module 5

Stress management when faced with different thesis projects and when mentoring a PhD student

Maite Durán Fabrè

1. Anxiety and stress
2. Sources of stress when faced with thesis work and PhD students
3. The personal traffic light
4. Coping strategies when facing each work process
5. Mindfulness and other coping techniques

Module 6

Managing PhD students: interpersonal and communication skills

Maite Durán Fabré

1. Active listening
2. How to ask questions?
3. Assertiveness
4. It's the 'what', no it's not, it's the 'how'! Techniques
5. Constructive and motivational feedback within the thesis preparation process

Module 7

Learning management: time management and planning

Maite Durán Fabré

1. Time management applied to thesis projects
2. Planning that is aimed at the thesis

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