

Thoughts related to challenges experienced throughout the PhD Meeting of the Graduate Program for Oral Sciences, Forensic Medicine and Bioanthropology, held at Bymose Hegn, Helsingør on November 13-15 in 2019.

We want you to be happy!

1. Expectations. You probably have high expectations about your PhD and perhaps imagine that your supervisor is like this:



Although all supervisors have many of the qualities visualized in the drawing, the truth is that all supervisors also have some flaws. But well, so does everyone!

2. Alignment. Start by aligning your expectations regarding the work/project with the supervisors. Talk openly about which are your strongest features to make this project happen. Furthermore, discuss the aspects of your personality or project that are challenging for you – the ones that you need with. The expectation form filled at the start of your PhD study shall be revisited and expectations realigned at the evaluation periods required by the PhD School. Well-aligned expectations minimize the risk of problems occurring throughout your PhD.

Alignment of expectations sheet: <https://healthsciences.ku.dk/phd/apply/applying/expectation-alignment/>

3. Loneliness. Doing a PhD can at times feel lonely. It could be because you feel alone in your workplace or you feel that your project is too specific. It may help to identify the source of loneliness before you search for help. We advise you to join the PhD network, who meets regularly for lunch, a cup of coffee, and other fun activities.
4. Peer PhD group. Young scientist group. Follow-up meetings and social arrangements. A good network of PhD students is very useful support for you. Others in the group have had similar experiences and can help you along the way with practical information but also to give you support when/if things become challenging. Participate, we want you and need you there!
5. Structure. It may become very difficult to run your project successfully without structure. Project management course offers good tools for you to manage your project. Make a list of assignments and prioritize the tasks. Have a realistic plan with milestones, dividing it in smaller tasks. Agree with your supervisor and have fixed appointments with your supervisor and a clear division of tasks – this makes it easier to keep track of the project's progress. Consider a PhD mentor program. Please look at the documents available at PhD School webpage:

To lead the way: the relationship between the PhD student and the supervisor.

https://healthsciences.ku.dk/phd/hoejrebokse/ku-brochure/KU_god_vejledning_UK_2013_web.pdf

6. Motivation. Motivation varies during the length of your PhD study. Try to think why you decided to make a PhD and why it is important for you and why you have lost your motivation. It could be frustrated expectations with the supervisor or the project, lack of work-life balance or personal problems that interfere with your work. Involve your supervisor and ask him/her to help you – it may be possible to get extra help for you in the project for a period of time. Try to make a plan regarding your work and dividing your problem in smaller parts – that often helps to give you an overview and make the problem easier to handle/overcome. Do not underestimate the power of your peers - discussing with your peer PhD colleagues may also be helpful. Remember to rethink about what it takes to motivate YOU! There are many strategies out there but not all may work for you.
7. Stress. Taking a PhD may be stressful in periods. Identify external and internal factors. External factors: expectations, supervisors, work load, plan, structure. Internal factors: redefine your goals/priorities and make new action plan. You can start by prioritizing the tasks together with your supervisor and making a new plan together, if relevant in collaboration with the co-advisors. Perhaps your supervisor can allocate extra resources to the project, so you can discuss this possibility too. Think about your work-life balance. Contact the PhD coordinator who can talk to you and guide you to get help. It is also possible to get some hours of psychological support offered by KU (Prescriba) for problems that negatively influence your work.

8. Conflicts. Disagreements between you and the supervisor or between different supervisors or advisors may occur. If this is the case, we offer here some guidelines about how you can try to handle this before the problem escalates.
 - On the personal level. Try to tackle the problem first by discussing it directly with the persons involved. This is difficult and uncomfortable but often is the best way to resolve the disagreement or come to a compromise with the least possibility for misunderstandings, distress or permanent damage to the relationships on the long run. If the disagreement is between supervisors, as a student try not to take sides. People can disagree and still work well together. Try to look at the issue from a logical, emotionless perspective. Often it helps if you use this strategy to approach the subject: when you say this, I understand that... I felt that... It makes me think that... so I want to discuss this with you because it makes me uncomfortable / it demotivates my work... I would like to discuss how we can overcome this problem and help each other to have the project running smoothly again. You may contact the PhD coordinator for counseling about how to attempt solving the issue on a personal level.
 - On the group level. Try to discuss the problem openly together with all parties involved. Involve all supervisors and ask their help to solve the issue and have the project running again. People not directly involved in the problem/disagreement can often come with good suggestions towards a compromise.
 - On the department level. If the above solutions did not work, one may try to ask for help at the department level. The institute is interested in having the students finalizing their PhD and is willing to help.
9. Conflicts about co-authorship. Revise the Vancouver recommendations. Try to make an action plan to tackle the problem at the personal level. At group level, discuss changes that deviate from the original plan of authorship and make all members aware. At the organizational level, guidelines are not currently available for disclosure of tasks involved in the publication.
10. Unbalance responsibilities. Tasks such as routine work, teaching, academic work, or other activities outside the project can make you feel overwhelmed. This can be exacerbated by the sense of fairness (or lack thereof) or experience of differences between different students in same institute and different institutes in SUND. Make it visible to your supervisor how much time you are using for the different tasks and how much time you have available. Realign expectations with supervisors, agree on priorities and deadlines, and discuss the need of extra resources or sharing activities with someone else. Plan ahead together with your supervisors, ex. reduce tasks close to conference deadlines or write-up periods. At the organizational levels there are some regulations regarding the maximum work load and teaching (or communication) activities.

Best regards

PhD coordinators Ana Benetti and Sys Johansen