

Case Story: Supporting Doctoral Supervision at the University of Graz

by Gerald Lind

DocService, a center of expertise for doctoral studies, started its work in 2011 with the aim of improving doctoral education at the University of Graz (Austria). While setting up the center the new DocService team (me and a colleague, both part-time employed) defined some key aspects of its future work: counselling doctoral researchers, providing an information platform on doctoral studies, offering a course programme in transferable skills, hosting events for early stage researchers, participating in discourses in the fields of philosophy, history and sociology of science, contributing to reforms in (structured) doctoral education, managing projects related to doctoral studies.

All of these aspects touched doctoral supervision in one way or another. But none of these aspects specifically addressed doctoral supervisors as highly relevant actors in the field. The main reason was that we encountered a strong demand of support by doctoral researchers and the university management. Doctoral supervisors, on the other hand, were sceptical regarding the usefulness of our center. They thought that it takes money away from research and, further, they were not particularly interested in letting anybody interfere with their supervisory work.

So we focused on doctoral researchers and the organisational structure of doctoral studies. The latter was addressed by our first annual conference which dealt with research academies. Among the speakers we invited was Martina van de Sand, Director of the Dahlem Research School, Freie Universität Berlin. In her presentation Miss van de Sand introduced the DRS Award for Excellent Supervision. This award goes each year to two professors who are outstanding supervisors. After the event we discussed with Miss van de Sand the selection procedures and the impact of the award. We learned about very positive reactions by the supervisors and the doctoral researchers.

Thus, introducing an award for excellent supervisors seemed to us the perfect instrument to tackle the question of supervision in doctoral education. We presented the award in the following fashion: "The promotion of young researchers is one of the key tasks of the university. Special commitment to the supervision of doctoral candidates, however, often goes unnoticed in the context of the institution's increasing focus on the quantity of publications and the amount of third party funds acquired by experienced researchers. That is why the University of Graz would like to set an example and recognise outstanding achievements in the supervision of doctoral candidates by bestowing the 'Seraphine Puchleitner Award for Excellent Supervision of Doctoral Candidates' for the first time in 2013." So, instead of working with guidelines for supervision or obligatory courses for supervisors we tried to do it the other way: Making high quality supervision visible and presenting outstanding supervisors as role models. In order to make a statement on gender equality, the rectorate decided

to name the award after the first female doctoral graduate of the University of Graz: Seraphine Puchleitner earned her doctoral degree in 1902.

After we did some research on similar awards we employed the following nomination procedure (which is still in use): All doctoral researchers of the university are invited to nominate supervisors for the award. For the nomination the doctoral researchers have to fill in a question form on three areas of supervisory work: research project/thesis including financial situation, doctoral seminars and discursive culture within the research group, networking and introduction to the activities of the scientific community. They also have to write a nomination text on the reasons for their nomination. After the nomination is submitted we ask the nominees for their supervisory principles. After the call for nominations is closed a jury reads and evaluates the documents handed in. The award ceremony is a part of the annual conference of DocService. The topic of the annual conference in 2013, where the first Seraphine Puchleitner Award ceremony took place, was therefore accordingly "Supervision in Doctoral Education".

By introducing this award we were able to create the basis for a new supervisory culture at the University of Graz: Supervisors feel not only acknowledged by the institution but also by their doctoral researchers. Since 20% of all supervisors working at the University of Graz have already been nominated, many of them received positive feedback on their supervisory work for the first time in their careers. Moreover, all nominees had to reflect upon their supervisory practices. Many of them mentioned that they were thankful for this opportunity to bring their supervisory principles to paper. And, finally, the award created a positive attitude amongst the supervisors towards the work of DocService. Sceptics became cooperation partners and new projects emerged in the aftermath of the award ceremony, which takes place in 2015 for the third time.