

Internationalization of the URV's doctoral supervision training model

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1. The professionalization of doctoral supervision at the URV

The interaction between a doctoral researcher and his or her thesis supervisor is not strictly based only on the relationship between professor and doctoral researcher. Indeed, in the current university context, the idea of the supervisor as a figure of academic authority, intellectual superiority and distant leadership is becoming obsolete. A professional thesis supervisor must go much further, exercising not only the role of expert but also that of mentor, coach, director, manager, and evaluator, though it is extremely difficult to play some of these roles simultaneously.

This makes it necessary to professionalise doctoral supervision. A supervisor cannot therefore just be someone who has carried out their own research and become an expert in their own field of study. They must also have a series of supervisory skills. These include being able to:

- ✦ select doctoral researchers,
- ✦ establish working relationships with them,
- ✦ guide them throughout their research project,
- ✦ support them in their personal and professional progress,
- ✦ support them in the final stages of the process and the defence of their doctoral thesis,
- ✦ evaluate their work, and
- ✦ help disseminate the knowledge generated in their thesis.

All these skills need to be attained, yet it is very likely that they have never been part of a supervisor's educational background. We propose to define the task of supervision as a collective effort, a responsibility shared among the research group, the team of supervisors, the doctoral researcher, the doctoral school and the university itself. Moreover, the institution must provide the tools needed for the professional development of supervisors, whether this entails providing supervisors with specific training in supervision or fostering the exchange of experiences in this area. These principles also indicate that it is the universities that should promote a common culture for doctoral supervision and create a context that leads to the professionalization of the task.

Since 2012 the URV's Postgraduate and Doctoral School (EPD) has implemented a doctoral supervision professionalizing process at the University, developed by Dr Joan Josep Carvajal and Dr María del Mar Reguero from the Department of Physical and Inorganic Chemistry, and Dr María Ercilia García and Dr Mireia Valverde from the Department of Business Management.



Fig. 1. Some of the URV'S trainers during a training session.

The preparation for this model was inspired by various international trends in supervisory training, both in terms of the principles behind the above trends (we took the Salzburg II Principles (EUA-CDE, 2010) as reference) and in terms of the development of the specific activities and the configuration of the training team (we drew on the experience of the Anglo-Saxon, central European and Scandinavian schools). The end model, designed to incorporate both international trends and the

URV's own characteristics, has become an annual systematic supervisor training programme that is now an international reference and an example of good praxis.

2. Beyond the confines of the URV: sharing experience

In 2015 the URV's training programme, now consolidated, caught the attention of the AUIP (Postgraduate Iberoamerican University Association), which quickly understood the interest this training product could attract for Latin American universities. It therefore invited the EPD and the training team for the professionalization of URV's doctoral supervisors to present their doctoral supervision professionalization model and conduct a training course at the Universidad del Valle (Cali, Colombia) for doctoral school directors, vice-rectors for research, and doctoral programme coordinators. In total, the course was attended by 36 participants from 25 universities from 9 Latin American countries (Colombia, Peru, Mexico, Argentina, Uruguay, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador and Bolivia). The wide range of experiences in the training of doctoral supervisors from these universities and countries should be noted. Colombia and Peru, for example, have research groups that are already working in this field and have even produced numerous publications, while other countries, such as the Dominican Republic, are just now beginning to offer doctoral programmes.



Fig. 2a. Training course taught at the Universidad del Valle (Cali, Colombia), September 2015



Fig. 2b. Training course taught at the Universidad del Valle (Cali, Colombia), September 2015

The interest and course evaluations were extremely favourable. This encouraged the AUIP to offer new courses for the future and a new edition was carried out at the Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas (Ciudad Vitoria, Mexico) in September 2016. This is a chance to pass on the culture of doctoral supervision professionalization simultaneously to a large number of universities.

The URV's doctoral supervision training model has also been noted in the European context. The URV's doctoral supervision training group was invited to present their programme as an example of good praxis in the training of doctoral thesis supervisors at the 9th EUA-CDE Annual Meeting, which addressed the theme *Doctoral Supervision – practices and responsibilities* and was held in January 2016 at Delft University of Technology. Our programme was presented during the second plenary session on "How to engage and train supervisors", moderated by Dr Flavio Canavero of the Polytechnic University of Turin, from three different perspectives: Dr Helmut Brentel as a supervisor trainer at the beginning of the programme, Dr Ercilia García as a trained supervisor, and Dr Sandra Samper as a doctoral student who completed her doctorate under the supervision of a trained supervisor. The audience was mainly made up of directors of doctoral schools and vice-rectors of research from various European universities. The URV was represented by the speakers at the plenary session and the rest of the URV's doctoral supervision training group.

Dr Helmut Brentel described the evolution of the URV supervisor training programme from its origins to the creation of its team of trainers. He emphasised the results of this programme, particularly in terms of quickly attaining a critical mass of trained PhD supervisors who understand and share the potential both to improve the quality of doctoral education for all those involved and promote the professional abilities and future professional careers of doctoral researchers. He mentioned that it

was this incipient culture of supervision professionalization that led to this initiative by the teaching and research staff themselves to create a community for promoting good praxis in doctoral supervision. Finally, he highlighted the URV's decision to support the creation of its own group of supervisors dedicated to the professionalization of supervision that would help to develop and disseminate this culture of good praxis.

The URV's experience led Dr Brentel to suggest that European universities should include a policy to implement a supervisor training programme as part of their own strategic development plan in order to share the common principles of excellent supervision praxis. The URV provides a good example of such a policy.



Fig. 3. The URV's training team, with Helmut Brentel and Alexandra Samper, participating at the 9th EUA-CDE Meeting on Doctoral Supervision – practices and responsibilities (Delft, Netherlands), January 2016.

From the perspective of the trained supervisor, Dr Ercilia García then compared the supervisor's initial situation (before training) with a black box in which the supervision process remains hidden and obliges each supervisor to learn from their own experiences and their own errors and achievements. In most cases this becomes a solitary task with no communication between supervisors. However, the current requirements to obtain impact results in an increasingly shorter length of time requires a process of structured supervision. For this reason, Dr García underlined how the training programme changed her general concept of doctoral research supervision and described how she understood the relationship with the doctoral researchers under her supervision. She also recommended the professionalization both of the relationship between supervisor and doctoral researcher and of the supervision process, which, she

suggested, was a team effort. She highlighted her greater effectiveness as a supervisor and the improvement she had experienced in her personal wellbeing and stated that she was now more aware of the whole process as a member of an institution. The result of her experience is an increase in her perception of her role as part of the URV's strategic effort as well as her appreciation of the university's recognition of the value of supervision by including it in its commitment agreements and showing commitment to the training of URV trainers.

Dr García encouraged the universities to follow the URV's example by committing to training their supervisors in order to achieve efficiency and excellence, ensure the quality of doctoral programmes, create a research culture and, ultimately, provide doctoral researchers with a satisfactory research experience.

Finally, Dr Alexandra Samper presented her opinion on how her supervisor's training changed her experience of the doctoral programme. She pointed out, for example, that the first impact was seen in improved communication in terms of both frequency and content and the focus on developing the skills needed to reach international standards and finding solutions for the specific needs encountered during the research process. Secondly, with regard to motivation, she said that she had received much more support both to overcome the frustrations of the process and to increase her level of autonomy and that this had encouraged her to create her own network to support other doctoral researchers and to establish academic and professional contacts to plan her options once their doctoral programme was completed. Her experience has made her aware of which aspects need to be developed during an academic career in which supervision is one of the key responsibilities and helped her to understand her supervisor's role and responsibilities much better. She stressed that the aim is not just to complete a good doctorate but to enjoy the doctoral experience in order to become a doctor.



Fig. 4. Helmut Brentel, Ercilia García and Alexandra Samper, plenary speakers on “Engaging and training supervisors” at the 9th EUA-CDE Meeting: Doctoral Supervision – practices and responsibilities (Delft, Netherlands), January 2016.

The meeting was very well received by all participants and generated a lively discussion on the URV’s experience and how it compares to the practices employed at other universities in attendance.

3. Contributing to the field: *Tarragona Think Tank on PhD supervisory training: challenges and good practices*

Thanks to the above experiences, the URV is now in a position to organise activities that contribute to the development of doctoral supervision training and to establish a group of experts in this area.

Coinciding with the EUA-CDE annual meeting held in Tarragona on the 16th and 17th of June 2016, the URV’s doctoral supervisors training group, together with Professor Helmut Brentel, organised the first *Tarragona Think Tank on PhD supervisory training: challenges and good practices*. This meeting, which was held before the conference, brought together some of the most influential experts in doctoral supervisory training in Europe from numerous universities, including the Karolinska Institute of Stockholm, University College Dublin, Vitae UK, the University of Surrey, the University of Reading, Université Pierre et Marie Curie, Université de Pau et des Pays de l’Adour, and the University of Leuven.

At this meeting, participants shared the practices and programmes that are beginning to become consolidated at their respective universities and identified the main characteristics, such as duration and frequency, the voluntary or obligatory nature of thesis supervision training, the profile of the participants and trainers, and the teaching methods employed. Also discussed were the institutional experiences that led to the development of these programmes, which are still not widely used in

the European context but have been implemented in other university systems such as the one in Australia. Other topics discussed include the institutional support given to these types of initiatives and how they have (or have not) entered the strategic agenda of each university.

Also at the meeting, an exercise was conducted to detect and discuss the main challenges faced by doctoral supervisor training in the current context, to visualise the ideal characteristics and conditions for supervisor training, and to determine how to identify when we have attained them.

One of the main challenges identified for the future is how to measure the short, medium and long term impact of this training on the level of satisfaction of doctoral researchers and their supervisors, the results achieved by doctoral researchers, their entry into the labour market and the impact on the university, as well as the methods used to collect this information.

4. Conclusions and future prospects

This experience is another example of how a small and young university such as the URV can become visible on an international scale thanks to the development of a strategic objective and coordinated action among the members of the university community, and become a benchmark for good praxis in the field of doctoral supervision.

Now we must consolidate this leading and innovative position by working in several areas. Firstly, the culture of supervision professionalization must be disseminated within our own university to ensure the participation of all the agents involved: supervisors, doctoral researchers, doctoral programme coordinators, research groups, the Postgraduate and Doctoral School and other administrative units, and the rector's management team.

Secondly, external agents must visualise the value of doctoral programmes by defining new professional profiles for our doctoral researchers that would improve their employability and increase their impact in a society of knowledge.

These efforts must remain in line with the university policy defined by the European Union. We must also participate in established forums, contributing to their development to define how to evaluate the impact of the professionalization of doctoral supervision.

Testimonial

The Mexican academics who participated in the debates during the workshop/seminar [...] agreed that much of the success was down to the technical content of the activities [...] and the experience and high professional and academic standards of the professors who led the session.

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