

The professionalization of doctoral supervision at URV: the training of supervisors from a *glocal* perspective¹

Joan Josep Carvajal, María Ercilia García, Mar Reguero, Mireia Valverde

Group of trainers for the professionalization of doctoral supervision
University Rovira i Virgili, 43007 Tarragona (Spain)

Abstract

We present here the evolution of the process of professionalization of the doctoral supervision in the University Rovira i Virgili, the public university of Tarragona (Spain), and describe the programme of courses developed for the professionalization of the doctorate, to be delivered to doctoral supervisors and PhD researchers.

¹ The authors acknowledge the English translation of this chapter by Carlos Mario Quintero.

Context

The Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV) is the public university of Southern Catalonia, created in 1991, restoring the 16th century Tarragona University. From the very first day, its aim has been very clear: to place knowledge at the service of society in order to contribute to the social and economic development of its environment. One of its characteristic features is a considerable social and territorial implication with its surrounding region, which has been recognised by international bodies such as the European University Association (EUA) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

In spite of being a young university, the URV is ranked as the world's 76th best university under 50 years of existence, and it is among the 500 best universities according to the Times Higher Education 2017.

The URV is structured in 12 faculties offering more than 100 programmes of study in a broad variety of knowledge areas for over 15.000 students spread amongst 47 undergraduate degrees, 49 master degrees (20 of which are interuniversity, and 5 recognised as International Master's Programmes by the Catalan Government) and 23 doctoral degrees.

The URV employs more than 1100 professors and almost 700 staff. To comply with the University's mission of generating knowledge and to respond effectively to the needs of society in the current context of crisis and reformulation of the model of economic development, the URV is applying an active policy that aims at reinforcing the research profile of the institution by increasing visibility, and providing support to research, development and innovation.

Particular mention should be made of the Campus of International Excellence Southern Catalonia (CEICS²) promoted by the URV and recognised by the Spanish Ministry. The CEICS represents the strategic union of different organisations and structures involved in teaching, research, knowledge transfer and the productive sector in Southern Catalonia. Its objectives are to become an international benchmark in knowledge and competitiveness within the areas of Tourism, Heritage and Culture, Oenology, Nutrition and Health and Chemistry and Energy. It also seeks to become the heart of an authentic region of knowledge that can play a key role in the future growth of the region and its productive network.

Certified under the requirements of ISO standard 9001:2008, the URV's quality management system ensures the quality of the research, development, innovation, and knowledge and technology transfer carried out by the institution's 108 research groups and 5 innovation centres. The URV also enjoys the HR-Excellence in Research

² Campus d'excel·lència internacional Catalunya sud (CEICS).

Certification from the European Commission. It ensures the implementation of a Charter & Code, and shows the commitment of the URV to implement best practices regarding researchers.

In terms of doctoral education, the Doctoral and Postgraduate School (EPD)³ at the URV deals with over 1200 PhD students at any given time and is responsible for organising the URV's doctoral programmes. The Doctoral School works to promote synergies between the various knowledge areas with interdisciplinarity as the driving force behind innovation and continuous improvement. In fact, doctoral education has been recognized as a strategic tool to consolidate the position of the university in the international arena and to create innovative synergies within the socioeconomic local context.

For this reason, the development of a research culture within the university considering all the stakeholders involved in the doctoral process has been a priority for the URV in recent years. It is in this context that providing specific training for PhD supervisors has been identified as a first step towards the quality assurance of doctoral education.

The process at the URV

The URV has developed a whole process of professionalization of doctoral supervision. External referents were followed, but adapting them at the same time to the needs and characteristics of our university and to our closest university context, where this culture of professional supervision did not exist yet. One of the actions of the EPD of the URV consisted in the setting up of a stable structure to guarantee the training of this group of professors, which has become the engine of this process: The Group of trainers for the professionalization of doctoral supervision (GFPD⁴). The description of the different stages that have made possible this development from a chronological point of view are outlined below.

The origins: initiatives

The initiative of promoting the programs of training for supervisors at the URV was generated in a non-rushed way, almost unintentionally at the beginning, but soon was considered as a necessity that had to be supported by the institution.

In the first Forum of the Campus of International Excellence of Southern Catalonia (CEICS, <<http://www.ceics.eu/es/>>) in November 2011, an entire session was devoted to doctoral studies, given that it was perceived as a strategic aspect for the

³ Escola de Posgrau i Doctorat (EPD).

⁴ Grup de formadors per la professionalització del doctorat (GFPD).

future of the URV and for the research agents of the CEICS. The state of the art and the hot topics of the time were presented, highlighting among those the development of a new model of schools of doctorate that had been successfully implemented in Europe in recent years. In this context, the executive director of the Doctoral School of the University of Frankfurt, Dr. Helmut Brentel, was invited for his long experience in this area. He commented on the importance of doctoral supervision and remarked that it needed to be considered as one of the strategic axes for universities willing to increase the impact of their research.

From his participation in the forum, arose the opportunity to offer the first workshop on doctoral supervision at the URV promoted by the CEICS in the spring of 2012. This workshop was well received and showed that it was necessary to generate a sufficiently important number of doctoral supervisors to promote a cultural change that would allow to systematically incorporate the training for doctoral supervision in the institution. The first edition was a complete success and the participants' satisfaction was so high that the experience was repeated in 2013 in the framework of the CEICS. In these two years more than 80 doctorate supervisors participated in the intensive 2-day programme of training in supervision.

As can be seen, the initiative emerged without a previously established plan, and little by little, without pressure, spread within the organisation. It was not necessary to convince the managers of the institution because this initiative was perceived by all as "a success". Then, when the URV set up its new EPD, inspired by the model of the leading modern Doctoral Schools in Continental Europe, a turning point occurred. The new Direction of the EPD, led by Dr. Francesc Díaz, brought a change of mentality on the importance of this type of training for the institution. What was happening at the URV-CEICS was unique in Spain and not widespread in Europe: an annual systematic program of training for PhD supervisors. From that moment on, the professionalization of doctoral supervision was prioritized and considered a strategic axis in the mission of the EPD, supported and promoted by the whole group of coordinators of the doctoral programmes and the indispensable collaboration of the rector's team.

First tests: the initial training courses

The first edition of the supervisors' training course was addressed mainly to unexperienced supervisors because it was considered that this type of training programme would have little to offer to the senior supervisors, given their long experience and probably their already established ways of working. Senior supervisors might have perceived differently the importance and the need of these training courses.

However, from the beginning, the effectiveness and attractiveness of this training programme caught the attention of the most experienced professors, who actually showed a special interest in taking part.

In parallel, it seemed necessary to actively involve the coordinators of the doctoral programmes, since they were the direct contact with the supervisors and were also responsible for the quality of the programmes. Therefore, their disseminating role of this training activity was fundamental. It was with such purpose that a specific workshop was organised where Dr. Brentel presented the content and objectives of the training given to supervisors to the coordinators of the doctoral programmes. This initiative generated a rich internal debate on whether it was suitable to recommend this training to all the thesis supervisors. Without any doubt, it would impact on the quality of the supervision provided, on the reduction of conflicts among PhD candidates and supervisors, in a better programming of the theses development, which would ultimately allow to finish the theses in the established deadlines, and globally, on the prevention of candidates quitting their PhD with unfinished theses.

Regarding the structure and orientation of the training program, it consisted of two levels, one of initial training (two full days long) and one of follow-up (a full day long), to be completed in the academic year next to the initial course.

Finally, to disseminate the culture of doctoral supervision as a task of professionalization and to close the circle of agents involved in the doctorate, Dr. Brentel also gave a half-day course addressed to PhD candidates.

Making it ours: creating the URV's team of trainers

As Picasso wisely said once, "inspiration exists but has to find you working". The training courses and workshops promoted by the CEICS represented the continuous and sustained work preceding this inspiration. The integration in the organisation of a systematic training programme well accepted by doctorate supervisors was a capital antecedent, when the direction of the EPD created a tailor-made training programme for the URV.

It was necessary to adjust this programme to our own cultural and idiomatic idiosyncrasy, adapting it to the type of interrelation established in Spain between PhD researchers and supervisors. These adaptations included also additional topics like the administrative processes that have to be followed by both PhD candidates and supervisors, given that the changing governmental laws and regulations are not always well known.

Therefore, the advocated model consisted in creating our own training materials and team of trainers, integrated in the EPD, and transferring the leadership of the project from the CEICS that acted as the perfect incubator to the URV Postgraduate and Doctoral School.

With this aim, Professor Helmut Brentel designed a specific program for the URV team of trainers, featuring different experiences. This personalised program contributed to a deeper understanding of all the tasks and challenges of doctoral supervision, to prepare the future trainers to be able to develop their own methodologies and materials.

Given the strategic importance of this initial training of the trainers, the EPD also invited Professor Pam Denicolo, from the University of Reading, engaged in the quality agencies of the doctoral supervision in the United Kingdom, to give a course to the trainers' team to broaden their perspective on the international developments in the professionalization of doctoral supervision.

A university with its own model of doctoral supervision training

Following the plan of the EPD, the URV group of trainers designed tailor-made training programmes for the professionalization of the doctorate at the URV, to be delivered to doctoral supervisors and PhD researchers.

Specifically, the training addressed to supervisors consists of an initial course on the basic topics of good practices in doctoral supervision and a group of thematic follow-up workshops, centred in other relevant subjects for the supervision not treated in the initial training course.



Figure 1. Collaborative work during the training courses and workshops on the Professionalization of Doctoral Supervision carried out at the URV where the classroom is organized in different ways according to the different training activities programmed.

Each module of these workshops starts with a short presentation of the main concepts that will be covered, followed by interactive exercises performed by the supervisors in groups, working in round tables, as it can be seen in Figure 1.

The introductory training course includes the following contents:

- *Introduction to good practices in supervision.* This part offers a general insight to the current international context of the professionalization of doctoral supervision, going through its historical evolution, the concept of supervision, the need to produce doctoral theses of high quality and the implications of the professionalization of doctoral supervision.
- *Supervision, a multidimensional task.* The main functions of supervisors are analysed: guidance and academic and professional support, and follow-up of these tasks.
- *From the “ideal” to the “real” candidate.* The aim is to identify the main preferable characteristics in the profile of the ideal doctoral candidates, and to assist supervisors with the design of tools to remediate the competency disadjustments of their PhD candidates, thus helping them in the development of their future professional career.
- *Supervision, a question of style.* The characteristics and roles of an effective supervisor are described, as well as the importance of an effective relationship between supervisors and PhD candidates. Special attention is given to the expectations of both supervisors and supervisees and to the diversity of styles that can facilitate an effective supervision.
- *Problems in supervision: symptoms, diagnosis and treatment.* The focus is on the anticipation of the identification of potential sources of problems and conflicts that can emerge throughout the living cycle of the doctoral thesis. Tools to help solving these issues are presented and discussed.

In addition, the course includes a description of the new administrative and evaluation procedures integrated in the different phases of the doctorate where supervisors take part in. In general, it is the EPD staff of the URV who provides this description, what shows again that the task to set up a doctorate of quality is a collective effort.

The basic training programme consists of a two-consecutive-days immersion course, in sessions of 8 hours per day, in a modular classroom that allows different participant distributions according to the conditions required by each training activity. The objective is that there is a “before and after” in one’s own conception and awareness of their supervisory role. To achieve this, emphasis is given not to the conceptual contents, but above all to the process based on the experience.

Supervisors of different disciplines and with different degrees of experience work together in a collaborative way. This methodology allows supervisors to create their own tools that facilitate and systematise the process of supervision. Attendance is therefore indispensable in the development of this training programme, with the added value of making possible the interaction between peers and creating a forum of dialogue on the doctoral supervision as a professional practice, which up to now did not exist in our university. This diversity between participants is beneficial because it reveals that, despite the very different ways of working in different areas of knowledge during the doctorate, the main challenges and problems are common to all. Therefore, although the task of the supervisor is often very individual and solitary, the training activities provide room for meetings and support that many times continues and goes beyond the duration of the workshop.

These training activities are not aimed at giving global and magic recipes to become a good supervisor. Quite the opposite, what is looked for is that the participants are able to create their own tools to perform a systematised follow-up of the process of supervision when needed, and always adapted to their specific needs in a continuous evolutive process.

This first edition of the new training program was given at the URV during the academic course 2015-2016. Since then, the URV offers two editions of the initial training course and one edition of the follow-up course per academic year. Regarding the latter, it is offered to the supervisors that have already taken part in the initial training course, in a format of a single session. It treats topics as co-supervision, remote supervision, supervision of singular PhD candidates etc., and it is backed up by experts in the specific treated topic.

It is necessary to highlight the novelty that represents to address a course to doctoral supervisors. This is an initiative that had no precedents neither in the URV nor in its closest university environment. Usually the improvement of the teaching quality is based on activities addressed directly to the students, but in this case the improvement of the quality of the doctorate is achieved through the professionalization of the supervisory task of the theses' directors, making supervisors aware of the importance of the doctoral supervision at personal and institutional level. This task is usually carried out solely through not codified tacit knowledge, reason why one of the objectives of this programme is to express it in an explicit and systematic way.

Regarding the course for PhD researchers, it is targeted mainly at candidates of the first year of their doctoral period and is given in a 4-hour single session, following the same methodology of the courses for supervisors described previously. The aim is to offer PhD candidates insight and tools to manage their project, their research

education, their work/life balance and to collaborate with their supervisors. The structure of this training includes the following points:

1. Doing a PhD: what got you here and what you expect from it.
2. The supervisor: expectations and roles.
3. Challenges and potential problems throughout the PhD.
4. Your career plan.

The capacity of improvement of these training programmes can be summarized in the following final objectives of the course:

- Become aware of the new roles of supervisors in the context of the new doctorate.
- Give tools for the early identification of potential conflicts and resolution of the existent ones in the relation between the supervisor and the PhD researcher.
- Develop a culture of supervision that is simultaneously productive and supportive of the PhD candidate.
- Help achieving satisfactory doctoral experiences, for both supervisors and PhD candidates.
- Advocate on the quality, efficiency and excellence of the doctoral education.
- Create a common and generalised research culture.

The impact on people at the URV: the community of good practices in doctoral supervision

As a result of the training courses that they had attended, a group of supervisors considered that it would be necessary to carry out, on a continued basis, training actions or initiatives on the professionalization of doctoral supervision. The CEICS, as promoter of the first training programme, considered that this idea had to be encouraged and supported, and consequently, a first meeting of interested supervisors was organised in November of 2013, with the aim of creating a community of good practices on this subject. This meeting served to present what a community of good practices is, how it works and how it is organised (Figure 2). The community was in fact created with the common aim of “making the doctoral supervision an exceptional experience at human and research levels at the URV departments, at the URV itself and at the CEICS”.

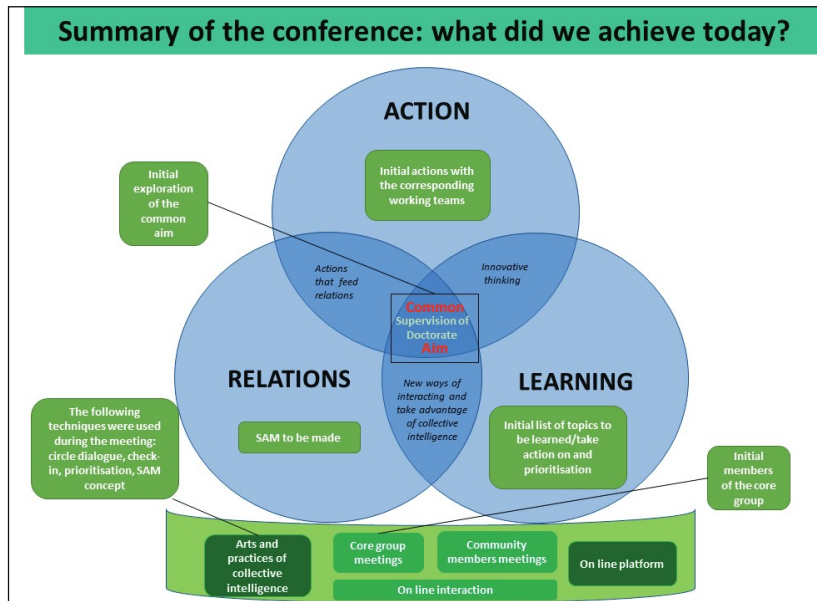


Figure 2. Objectives presented to the Doctoral Supervision Community of practice.

The topics on which the community wanted to learn and address were the following:

- ✦ structuring the supervision: candidates selection, supervision teams, co-supervision
- ✦ strategy and supervision rules: optimum number of PhD candidates per supervisor, prizes for percentages of theses completed, ...
- ✦ dedication (time and commitment) and status of the supervision task: incorporation of the supervision as a teaching task, affording quality time to supervise, recognition of the efforts and quality of the supervision, prioritization of dedication to other efforts
- ✦ learning to supervise: evaluation and improvement of the supervision practice, available resources, categorisation of supervisors, good practices, skills for resolution of conflicts and problems
- ✦ interaction candidate-supervisor: clarifications on expectations and on the relationship candidate-supervisor, giving and receiving feedback; detection, treatment or avoidance of problems
- ✦ professional career: identification of weaknesses, skills development, courses offerings, support to individual career paths, knowledge of the labour market for doctors

- ✦ research environment: being exposed to a stimulating and interdisciplinary environment; having a wide vision of the scientific context, ethics, carrying out good and responsible laboratory practices, respecting common values
- ✦ progress and output of the candidate: planning and monitoring, thesis defence, quality evaluation and process quality, socialising, presentations and publications
- ✦ recruitment and selection of candidates: criteria, strategies and techniques, testing skills and competencies already at this initial stage.

Likewise, PhD candidates, former PhD researchers and the employers of PhD researchers and Doctors were also identified as potential members of this community of supervisors of doctoral theses.

The meetings were organized including a social event, to strengthen the personal relationships between supervisors of the institution, followed by a short presentation on a relevant aspect of interest in supervision given by a keynote speaker. The meeting finished with some interactive activities related to practical questions in the task of supervision. Figure 3 shows different moments of one of the meetings of the community.



Figure 3. First Meeting of the Community of good practices on Doctoral Supervision at the Institute Pere Mata (Reus).

Resulting from this initiative, it was agreed to request an interdepartmental teaching innovation grant to the Education Sciences Institute of the URV. The aim was to develop this community of good practices, as a non-formal process, that allowed innovating at the doctorate, to develop doctorates of excellence, providing PhD

candidates with a good professional level and transversal and social competencies, as well as developing theses of high scientific and social impact. Expected outputs of this project were a portfolio of actions for doctoral supervision, production of innovative mechanisms for learning and generating ideas, and enhancing the relations between the members of the Community. A total of 26 supervisors coming from 12 different departments of the URV took part in this project, thus showing its transversality.

Eventually, the project did not progress, but the grounds for the action are already built, waiting for a core group to mobilise again the community.

Conclusions and future perspectives

Resulting from the process described, an important critical mass of trained doctoral supervisors has been created at the URV, representing practically 50% of the total of potential supervisors of this university. This has brought the culture of the supervision beyond the scope of the individual to widely achieve the institutional level.

The impact of the good results obtained has motivated other national and international universities and academic organisations of higher education to request this training. Background and externalization has given us an experience that has allowed us to be part of the network of leaders in the professionalization of the doctorate. Thus, the exchange of experiences and good practices in this context creates synergies that constantly enhance the scope of the doctoral project at the URV. The training programme reinforces the institutional strategy of the professionalization of the doctorate, becoming an example of good practices that the URV disseminates in national and international forums of doctoral education.

The development of this project is consolidating the fundamental steps in the process of achieving doctoral excellence at the URV, regarding the task of supervisors as well as the results obtained by the PhD researchers, but also regarding the shared experience that, if satisfactory, favours the quality of the doctorate.

The professionalization of doctoral supervision also contributes to the improvement in the efficiency of the results obtained during the doctorate (outputs), including publications and curricular skills. One of the distinctive characteristics of the training carried out at the URV is the special attention given to the development of the professional career of the PhD candidates from the beginning of the doctoral programme. The supervisor is directly involved in the process of planning a professional career tailor-made for each of the PhD candidates. Through a first analysis of the initial competencies already shown by the PhD candidate and of the occupational options for a doctor, the pairing “supervisor-PhD candidate” focuses on designing a

plan for the acquisition and improvement of competencies with the aim of increasing the employability chances of the PhD candidate beyond the purely academic field.

The evolution of the vision of the doctorate in Europe indicates that raising awareness of the quality of the doctoral process must come hand in hand, in the very near future, with the employability of PhD researchers. Therefore, the URV, through this training initiative, is a frontrunner of this evolution.

This experience is one more example of how a young and relatively small university, like the URV, gains visibility at international level, thanks to the development of a strategic objective and the coordinated action of the members of the university community, the corresponding organisational units (EPD and CEICS) and the support of the rector's management team, thus becoming a reference of good practices in the field of the doctoral supervision.

Now it is necessary to consolidate this leading and innovative position working in different areas. On the one hand, we must go deeper in the dissemination of the culture of professionalization of doctoral supervision in our own university, making all actors involved take active part in this process: supervisors, PhD researchers, coordinators of doctoral programmes, research groups, the EPD and other administrative units as well as the rector's management team.

Besides, it is necessary that the rest of the external agents involved see the value of the doctorate, by means of the definition of new professional profiles for our PhD researchers. Such professional profiles should improve the employability of these PhD researchers and increase their impact on a knowledge society. These efforts must continue, being in line with the university policies defined by the European Union but also by taking part in the established forums and contributing to their development to define how to evaluate the impact of the professionalization of doctoral supervision.