

The Changing Nature of Supervision

AN EXPERIENCE'S NARRATIVE, NOT A MODEL

Possible lessons from a personal experience

The case: reforming supervision at EUI (2002-09).

The context: a unique case of non-national PhD program

The diagnosis: dissatisfaction with the results and outcome

The analysis: the creeping transformation of the PhDs programs

The strategy: sticks, carrots and moral suasion

Implementation, Results, Conclusions

The Case: EUI

A European « animal » created by international treaty: paradoxes and contradictions of a contorted compromise.

Muddling through without a model. Learning by doing.

The lack of recognised academic leadership (short-term appointments, deep disciplinary divisions, contradictory views about the nature of the institution)

The Context: A Unique Case of Non-national PhD Program

The EUI is created in 1972 and initiates its activities in 1976:

At the time, extreme heterogeneity of the doctoral studies: no doctoral schools, no doctoral programs but a centered-thesis and centered-supervision bilateral system.

Variegated situations in Europe, from a quasi slavery system to benign neglect.

In many countries, University professors had no PhD degree. Few countries were granting PhDs and few had real PhD programs up to the 80/90ies.

The Diagnosis: an unsatisfactory situation

1992: a critical evaluation but resistance to implementation from all fronts (students and supervisors)

2001: A thorough analysis of the failures (training, completion rate, time to completion, quality of supervision, placement)

2002: election on the basis of a reform platform (grant duration, first structured year, checks and controls, conditionality, quality assessment, institutional support)

The incremental transformation of the PhDs « programs »

The new link between PhDs and grant support

..... entails selection and an increasing « collective/collegial » management of the processes

.....and introduces pressures about completion rates and duration of the PhD.

Some disciplines (economics) adopt the American model and start to transform the nature of the program and the content of the « thesis ». Other disciplines resist the change. The « battle » often takes place within new and rather artificial constructions, the « doctoral schools ».

Accademia is unable to absorb all PhDs holders: placement becomes a real issue

The strategy: alliances, sticks and carrots

No reform of such a touchy nature (telling academics what to do and how to do it) can succeed if top-down imposed.

No reform can take place and have success without the support of part of the stakeholders, supervisors and supervisees.

The strategy was **to link some material or non material benefits to precise and binding conditions** and to leave to soft law the most controversial measures in order to build up a minimal consensus and expect **improvement thru imitation and competition.**

The « package »

The contract: guaranteeing the funding of a fourth year provided that the advancement of the work be certified by the concerned department according to precise checks (first year, 18th month, 36th month). No defence possible after five years.

Setting up of a **Dean of studies' position** in charge of elaborating rules, rights and duties.

Setting up of **soft rules** (codes of conduct) related to supervision and relationship supervisee/supervisor.

Setting up of **assessment procedures** by maximizing the rules of confidentiality.

Setting up of a **first structured year**

Professional skills taught from the 3rd/rd year in relation with the post-doc program (Interview techniques, paper presentation, seminar presentation, research proposal writing etc...)

Psychological support: caring about mental health and stress.

Placement: requesting action from the departments by requiring statistics about students' performance (front-runners in Economics, laggards in History)

The implementation

Resistance from the Member-States to funding and to the Deanship

Resistance from some departments to the creation of a first structured year and to the possible exclusion of students after the first year.

Resistance from students to the setting up of regular checks on the advancement of the thesis

BUT: it has been possible to overcome most of these resistances by linking the various elements and by refusing to grant one without the other . There was no coherent opposition front as everybody could find some positive elements in the package and that it was difficult to say no to « reasonable » claims such as the right to a proper supervision or the duty to complete after 4 years of public funding.

An efficient tool was the shift from a rather cosy departmental atmosphere to a more challenging idea of a « School » where common rules would be applicable (however with flexibility).

The results

Over a period of 7 years:

Time to completion: < 5 years

Rate of completion: > 85%

More PhDs were defended between 2002 and 2009 than between 1976 and 2002.

The Deanship has been so well accepted that every department introduced subsequently a department director of graduate studies.

The granting of a Master diploma at the end of the first year was conceived as a two-fold instrument: forcing the departments to put flesh on the bones and offering a possible way-out to the weaker students. **This second part of the objective has failed.**

Conclusions

Supervision of the past was a hierarchical one to one relationship characterized by the complete discretion of the supervisor (choice of the topic, of the methodology, nature and intensity of the supervision). **To-day 's supervision is more « contractual »** and requires rights and obligations on both sides. The supervisor is still unique but **assessment and advices are more collegial** and support from other colleagues considered as a necessity and not an infringement on « reserved territory ».

These evolutions have to be framed and supported by references'rules in order to consider them as normal practices.

The supervisee must feel responsible vis à vis the funding institutions and the supervisor responsible for the training as well as for the placement of the supervisee.

The transformation of the needs as well as the transformation of the supervision and training produce a transformation of the thesis itself. Not anymore a life masterpiece but rather one step in a professional process.