

# Through hardships to the stars: Experiences of doctoral thesis supervisors about their doctoral studies and connections with their supervising practice

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## Summary

### Introduction

In the past few decades there has been considerable attention paid to developing and increasing the effectiveness of doctoral studies. It has been noted in several studies (e.g. Barnes & Austin, 2009; Delamont et al., 1998; Lee, 2008) that supervisors' conceptions of different aspects of supervision are formed during their previous study and research experience. Therefore, it has been found that one of the important factors affecting the success of supervision is the way the supervisor him/herself had been supervised in the past.

Doctoral students differ in terms of their knowledge and skills, personal background, but also of their family and work commitments (see more e.g. Ots et al., 2012). Therefore, they also have different expectations and needs concerning supervision (see more e.g. Kam, 1997). Martinsuo and Turkulainen (2011) and Kam (1997) have concluded that the success of postgraduate studies is determined by the reciprocal effect between the doctoral student's expectations and qualities and the supervisor's supervising activities and conceptions.

From the supervisees' perspective, the supervisor's comprehensive domain knowledge (e.g. Mainard et al., 2009) and thorough knowledge about the research methodology in the domain (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002) is seen as the prerequisite for successful supervision. According to Brew and Peseta (2004), the supervisor has to be interested in supervising, has to have clear aims and expectations towards supervisee's research and supervision, and has to organize productive meetings.

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Lee (2008) has found that due to doctoral student's academic development throughout their studies, different types of support are needed at different stages. Adjusting the supervisory style according to doctoral student's academic development enables the supervisee to become an independent researcher (see more Sinclair, 2004). If the supervisee's expectations and needs are concurrent with supervisor's activities, then the supervisee is more satisfied with supervision (Lee, 2008).

One of the important factors impacting the doctoral student's satisfaction with postgraduate studies is the relationship between a doctoral student and a supervisor (Grant & Graham, 1999). Relationships positively perceived by doctoral students foster their success and advancement in their studies, while relationships negatively perceived by students negatively impact their studies (Phillips & Pugh, 2000).

In the process of doctoral studies, a doctoral student has to acquire the domain-specific values, mentality, norms, knowledge and skills, which are needed for succeeding in the scientific community (Gardner, 2010). Lahenius (2012) finds that a lack of opportunities for cooperation can cause a doctoral student to miss out on the experience of working in the community and, therefore, it is important to find this type of opportunity also for doctoral students who work individually.

The aim of this study is to describe the background of the formation of supervisors and to bring out the possible connections they perceive between their own postgraduate study experiences and their supervisory practices. We sought answers to the following research questions in our study:

- 1) Which activities and events do supervisors bring out as important from their own postgraduate study time?
- 2) Who and in which roles do supervisors bring forth as meaningful people when talking about their postgraduate studies?
- 3) Which connections do supervisors describe between their own postgraduate study experience and their current supervising practice?

## **Methodology**

The study's sample consisted of 21 supervisors from two Estonian universities. The majority of the participants were working as professors or associate professors. Ten participants had completed their postgraduate studies before Estonia regained its independence in 1991, 11 supervisors had completed their studies in the Republic of Estonia.

The data was collected using semi-structured interviews. To find out about participants' experiences of their postgraduate studies, the general

question „Please tell us how you were supervised,” which was followed by questions according to the interview plan and clarifying questions, were asked. All the interviews were fully transcribed. To protect the participants’ identities, supervisors and people mentioned in the interviews were given pseudonyms.

The data was analyzed using qualitative thematic data analysis techniques. The thematic analysis consisted of discovering themes and sub-themes and deciding which themes were important in the context of this research. Two authors undertook parallel identification of themes and division of themes into larger categories.

### **Major results and discussion**

The results demonstrated that opportunities for dedicating themselves to postgraduate studies differed among the interviewees. Mainly economic reasons were described as the reason for working during the studies. While previous studies about the lengthening and discontinuation of postgraduate studies (e.g. Ots et al., 2012) have shown that the reason for prolongation of postgraduate studies is various non-academic commitments, our research findings show that work at the university also had been experienced as an obstruction if the dissertation topic was not connected with work commitments.

The will to work and managing alone were aspects recalled with pride from study times. Working alone on a dissertation was described in interviews as a free choice or inevitability. Similarly to Kam’s (1997) study, when analyzing the supervisory relationship in terms of supervisee’s expectations and needs, the results of the present study demonstrate that postgraduate students’ need for support differs. The majority of participants can be regarded as representatives of the *non-dependent supervisee* (Kam, 1997) category, where the supervisee had an expectation for constructive criticism, but where the conductive party in the supervisory process was not the supervisor, but rather the supervisee as being the one setting the mid-term goals and initiating contact with the supervisor in relation to supervision. The supervisor was valued as an academic dialogue partner and feedback provider. If the interviewees had themselves felt shortcomings related to that in the past, they expressed the wish to do better themselves as supervisors.

The study’s results indicated that participants’ descriptions about opportunities for socializing and co-operation during postgraduate studies differed, but no lack of community support was felt. The community

comprised of colleagues, members of research groups and, depending on the supervisor's geographical location, also a supervisor (if supervisor was located in Russia, then the supervisee's community was nevertheless in Estonia, consisting of colleagues). Based on the interviewees' descriptions it can be noted that with regard to the frequency of contact with the community, the study results are in line with Golde's (2005) and Gardner's (2009) studies according to which, the supervisors from natural sciences described working in close contact with fellow doctoral students and supervisor, while only few participants from humanities had had the chance to move forward in research groups while studying and they mostly worked alone. While previous studies (e.g. Lahenius, 2012) have discussed whether and to what extent working individually cause one to miss out on valuable collaboration experience in the community of practice, then the present study demonstrated that if postgraduate students work in a research institution or in a university already while studying, as our interviewees did, then support is received from colleagues and fellow students. According to the interviewees, the community's support in the form of research groups, as well as support from fellow students and family facilitates their completion of postgraduate study.

Despite the fact that the study's findings cannot be generalised, the authors believe that the article offers good material for thought for supervisors, doctoral students and developers of doctoral study. Authors find that the results provide the basis for planning next studies, which could focus on researching the incentives, frequency and content of supervisees' and supervisors' supervisory meetings from the perspective of both sides. For doctoral students, the article could offer encouragement for advancing in postgraduate studies through the motto from the article's title „Through hardships to the stars”.

*Keywords:* postgraduate study, aspirant, doctoral student, postgraduate supervision, interview