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How do doctoral students and supervisors communicate?

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DISCUSSING THE THESIS WRITING – HOW DO DOCTORAL STUDENTS AND SUPERVISORS COMMUNICATE?

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Abstract

Effective communication between students and supervisors has been shown to be of importance for a high quality doctoral education by many pedagogical studies (Manathunga [1], Delamont, Aktinson and Parry [2], Halse and Malfroy [3], Bergnéher [4]). This contribution focuses on communication between supervisors and doctoral students with regard to the writing of the doctoral thesis. When it comes to supervising the thesis writing process, researchers emphasize the importance of taking four aspects into account: The thesis addressee (For whom does one write?); The kind of texts to be discussed during supervisory meetings (How preliminary should they be?); Writing planning (Is it necessary or not?); Feedback (What kind?). These aspects become even more crucial when the thesis is written in a foreign language, which is the case in the present study, based on empirical data collected within third-cycle education in foreign languages (specialization in French and Italian linguistics) at Lund University in Sweden.

With the aim of investigating whether and how the four topics above were actually discussed during the supervisory meetings, four supervisors and their respective doctoral students, having completed their education, were interviewed individually. This contribution accounts for and analyzes their testimonies.

The testimonies provide evidence of varying degrees of effectiveness in the communication. The results show that there are no given answers to the four questions above, which in itself proves that they need to be discussed. More importantly, the results clearly indicate that such a discussion is essential to achieve the goals of a doctorate, namely a thesis of an excellent scientific standard and the recognition of an autonomous researcher. From the analysis of the participants' answers it emerges that the communication must be open (not based on assumptions), on a regular basis (since different decisions can be made at different phases of the writing process) and constructive (self-confidence being a major quality of the independent researcher).

Keywords: Thesis writing, interview, communication, supervision, feedback, third-cycle education.

1   INTRODUCTION: THE THESIS

Third-cycle education is expected to lead to two products: a thesis and an autonomous researcher. On *studera.nu* [5] a neutral, non-commercial website about higher education in Sweden, one can read under the title "The importance of the thesis": "It is now increasingly said that the most important result of third-cycle education is an autonomous researcher, rather than a doctoral thesis."

The thesis however holds a key position in third-cycle education since the intended learning outcomes of the doctoral degree are both achieved *and* examined through it. According to the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance, Annex 2, Qualifications Ordinance [6], for the degree of doctor the third-cycle student shall

> demonstrate the capacity for scholarly analysis and synthesis as well to review and assess new and complex phenomena, issues and situations autonomously and critically, demonstrate the ability to identify and formulate issues with scholarly precision critically, autonomously and creatively, and to plan and use appropriate methods to undertake research and other qualified tasks.

These competences, which can mostly be achieved through the thesis, are also reflected by it. Although it takes many years to write a thesis (according to The Swedish Research Council, Vetenskapsrådet [7] the average time under the period 2002-2004 was 5,5 years for students in the Humanities, that is 1,5 years more than the 4 year third-cycle education), it is not supposed to reflect the learning process, but rather to prove that it has been fulfilled. A thesis is "a reflection of the student's academic and intellectual maturity" (Sachs [8] p. 99); "It [a thesis] constitutes objective

evidence of the author's knowledge and capabilities in the field of interest and is therefore a fair means to gauge them" (Agarwal, Yadav, Chavali and Kuman [9] p. 86).

Thus, the thesis is at the same time the path and the goal for third-cycle education. This paradox indicates the complexity of the process leading to a thesis: it is a holistic rather than a linear process, consisting of several parallel activities, such as gathering information, making associations, writing and reading (Brodin, Lindén, Sonesson and Lindberg-Sand [10] p. 196). Moreover, a thesis is a kind of "literary genre" (Carter [11] p. 726 and [12] p. 11) that has to follow academic writing conventions; these vary substantially according to discipline, the differences being both in language habits and the way arguments are built up (Brodin et al. [10] p. 198 and ff.).

According to the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (Högskoleverket [13] p. 27), students in the Humanities typically write monographs. In foreign language third-cycle education these are written in the target language. The outcomes for a degree of Doctor in French Linguistics, for example, are as follows: "the ability to communicate appropriately and confidently in French in speech and writing in different registers, especially in academic contexts". The oral communication skills can be practiced theoretically until the day of the public defense, when they are assessed. But the thesis, the final evidence of the written skills, has obviously not been written on the defense day. This shows the thesis paradox in a nutshell: although it takes several years to write it, it stands in itself as synchronous evidence for goal attainment. In this paradox lies a challenge for students, whose difficult task is to make the diachronic writing process harmonize with the synchronous final product. The supervisors' main role should therefore be to provide students with advice and guidance in order to ensure the quality of the finished thesis.

Third-cycle education in Sweden covers 240 HE credits, the equivalent of four years. 180 credits (or 75%) are earned through the thesis. Discussions about thesis writing should take a predominant place in the student-supervisor relationship. Thesis writing deserves attention even from a quantitative point of view and there are good reasons to investigate how discussions can be made productive.

Effective communication between students and supervisors has been shown to be of importance for a high quality doctoral education by many pedagogical studies (Manathunga [1], Delamont et al. [2], Halse and Malfroy [3], Bergnéher [4]). When it comes to supervising the thesis writing process, researchers (Appel and Bergenheim [14], Handal, Lauvås and Andersson [15], Delamont et al. [2], Brodin et al. [10]) emphasize the importance of taking four aspects into account: The thesis addressee (For whom does one write?); The kind of texts to be discussed during supervisory meetings (How preliminary should they be?); Writing planning (Is it necessary or not?); Feedback (What kind?). Considering the fact that writing the thesis is a process, one can argue that these topics need to be discussed often. What does this look like in reality?

2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this qualitative case study, based on the subjective accounts from four doctoral students and their respective supervisors, is to investigate whether and how the four topics above were discussed during the supervisory meetings. The study is intended to contribute to a deeper knowledge about communicative practices in the supervisory relationship and aims at providing advice to supervisors for productive supervising of thesis writing.

3 EMPIRIC DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Four supervisor/doctoral student couples in French and Italian linguistics active at Lund University during 2000-2015 were interviewed. All but one wrote a monograph and all wrote in a foreign language, French, Italian or English[1]. The four supervisors are called S (a-d) and their students D (a-d). The couples are called C (a-d). In C-a, C-b and C-c the supervisor is male and the student female. In C-d both are female. D-d had taken the doctor's degree a few years earlier, D-a had just taken it whereas D-b and D-c were very close to the defense day. S-d had many years of experience as a supervisor, the others had had three to six doctoral students (both doctor and licentiate degrees). All students had also a second supervisor but refer in their answers to the principal supervisor.

The interviews, 20 to 45 minutes long, were recorded by mobile phone at the university during spring

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[1] For the sake of anonymity it will neither be specified which language every single student used nor who wrote a compilation thesis.

term 2015. The participants were promised that only interview transcripts would be shown in the study, they were informed of its purpose and were promised anonymity. They were also informed that their respective supervisor/student would be interviewed as well.

4   TESTIMONIES

This section accounts for the answers given by the participants when asked whether the four topics presented in section 1 were discussed during supervisory meetings.

4.1   The thesis addressee (For whom does one write?)

The addressee-question is particularly relevant in thesis writing since the degree of specialization varies in its different parts. In C-a this topic was discussed:

(1) S-a: Absolutely, we discussed this often. It's not easy, there is no right and wrong, there are choices and you have to discuss them and also their consequences. It's about how specialized one should be, how many people should be included as readers and also at which level, it's impossible to address everyone. It depends also on some chapters, which I believe should be more inclusive than others [...]²

D-a confirms this:

(2) D-a: My supervisor and I talked about this a lot because I realized that this was one of the toughest things … I thought that everything I wrote seemed so banal because I was thinking of a specialized reader who already knew everything I was about to say. But then when I got help to break this down it became easier to write. It ended up with me thinking of some colleague … a real person, who was in the same research field as I, and who maybe could think that what I had to say was not that stupid. […]. There was a lot of stuff that I thought I have nothing say about, I can't just say this […]

It appears in (2) that in order to find one's position in the text and make one's authoritative voice heard (Brodin et al. [10 p. 197, p. 202) it is necessary to switch between different virtual readers in different parts of the thesis. In the comment below S-a considers the correlation between the reader imaged by the student and the building of his/her self-confidence:

3) S-a: A kind of filter comes when one writes, that is the reader whom you can't see. The filter acts as a kind of self-criticism that stops the writing. Writing is very different compared to talking: when you talk, you stay in front of an audience and you can read the reactions. But when you write, you don't know whom you're addressing. We talked about this often, don't be too critical when you write a draft, just let it out, as if it were a speech, don't read your text in order to assess yourself, just let it out so you have an amount of text and you can feel "today I've written three pages, that's great!", your self-confidence will grow in this process.

In C-c the topic was never discussed: D-c says that she wrote for the scientific community and S-c says that the addressee is a specialist, which was taken for granted and never discussed. S-b says that the topic was never discussed but adds, later on in the interview, that D-b's thesis lacked stringency and was sometimes like a handbook, because D-d addressed the wrong reader at some points. D-b recounts how she herself dealt with the addressee problem:

4) D-b: My writing process was: let it out and then work on it. And the "let it out" process is to me a kind of stream of consciousness, just to get the thoughts out and then phrase them again and put them at the right place. So one could say it was for myself, and then later on I focused on other readers. My supervisor was one of them, I wanted it to sound fine, but then I didn't manage. But also I imagined the defense situation, what I was writing should be good enough for the external reviewer, if he asked me what I meant at a particular point, I hade to stand for it.

This account clearly shows that different addressees can be focused on during the writing process and that the question needs to be discussed on regular basis since it cannot receive a definitive answer.

When asked whether they believe their students wrote for them, the four supervisors give a negative answer and seem to mean that it would be inappropriate. But three of four students admit that they did write for their supervisor, which is completely understandable if one considers that the supervisor was

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² In the transcripts "…" indicates a pause, and "[…]" that some words have been deleted.

actually the one who read their text. Account (4) shows a problematic aspect in the light of what Cotterall points out: "scholarly writers are expected to develop their own 'voice' […] and infuse their writing with a sense of personal identity" ([16] p. 414). D-b endeavored rather to satisfy the supervisor's stylistic preferences ("it wanted it to sound fine").

The accounts indicate that all four students had to think out a reader, even D-c who refers mechanistically to such an abstract thing as "the scientific community". The reader of a handbook, a specialist, a colleague, a supervisor or oneself: these all can be suitable or unsuitable imagined addressees and to focus on each of them can have both favorable and inhibitory effects on the writing. It all depends on which part of the thesis and which phase of the process the student is in. Supervisors can help students to identify and relate to suitable addressees.

4.2 How preliminary should the texts to be discussed during supervisory meetings be?

All supervisors in this study agree that the students should start writing the thesis as soon as possible. This implies of course that the supervisor accepts drafts. The question however is rather *how* the preliminary text is expected to look; the range of possibilities is large, including more or less edited versions, such as a bullet pointed list, a mind map or a text that very much resembles the final work. Handal et al. insist on the importance to "establish a basis for dialogue about the unfinished" ([15] p. 26)[3]. They believe supervisors should encourage students to use prewriting techniques such as mind mapping, "a useful tool to pin down unfinished thoughts, a way of sharpening the thoughts". Delamont et al. ([2] p. 128) observe:

> Students should be encouraged to realize that early drafts are just that. Supervisors therefore need to establish the kind of trust that allows students to share preliminary draft material with them. The supervisory relationship needs to give students "permission" to produce material in a preliminary form, in the knowledge that they will be redrafting. Equally, supervisors need to be able to comment constructively on draft writing without undermining the student's confidence by being unduly critical of early efforts. As with so many aspects of that working relationship, this is based on the establishment of mutual trust and confidence.

D-c states that she only gave her supervisor "papers with headings" and when asked whether her supervisor had accepted other kinds of texts, she says she had no idea. H-c confirms that the topic was never discussed:

5) H-c: We never met and talked about keywords or mind mapping […] It was always edited texts […] We never talked about this, we never discussed this. I believe this was something we both took for granted […] I think we shared the same opinion, since she never gave me anything else.

Account (6) shows that there is an intimate relation between the text and the student. For D-a the text is an achievement that provides evidence of her ambition and capability:

6) D-a: I think it was more fine for him to receive unfinished texts than for me to give him. I felt often guilty about not having achieved any further when I gave him a text. I wanted to give him something that should be as ready as possible. I wanted to show him that I was working.

Bad consciousness can be read between the lines in account (7) as well, when D-b recounts that due to external circumstances she found herself forced to write a large portion of her thesis under time pressure:

(7) D-b: Personally I think retrospectively that it was a good process, just let it out and then... Then of course it was painful for my supervisor. But I had no choice, the time-schedule pressed me. I thought I must get some kind of feedback: "Can we do something with this huge amount of text, or shall we just give up and say good bye?" So I told myself: just send the text! It was very, very unfinished, poorly written. So I really pity him.

D-b seems to have adopted the strategy recommended by S-a in (3): she produced a large amount of text regardless of quality, well aware of the need of further processing. D-b experienced the advantage of writing "for herself" but her supervisor was not prepared to receive such a large and unstructured text. D-b recounts that he got a "shock". He could neither "get a grip on the thesis" nor give feedback: "When I had questions about my text, he wouldn't help me, he wouldn't give me tips". According to H-

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[3] In this article, all English translations of quotes from Swedish pedagogical literature are my own.

b, in ideal supervisory praxis, the supervisor gets "pretty early" a "cohesive and complete text": this is a problematic statement however, due to the contradiction between time (*early*) and quality aspect (*cohesive and complete*). Missing communication in C-b about planning the work and defining the kind of text to be delivered had a bad impact on the supervising, which in fact didn't take place.

The interviews prove that none of the supervisors actively encouraged the student to use prewriting techniques such as mind mapping and that the students themselves are inclined to write edited texts. This is a tendency that must be stopped sometimes. Prewriting techniques can be useful at some phases of the writing process, for example when disposition or line of argumentation are to be discussed. The small size of the texts produced in prewriting makes frequent meetings possible, which is desirable during some phases. Moreover a sketch is a less personal kind of text with which students don't need to identify, which can ease performance anxiety.

Supervisors and students must negotiate on regular basis which kind of text is to be expected at each meeting. Assumptions like "my student had the same preference as I had, implicitly, I believe," (H-d) or "I believe this was something we both took for granted" (H-c) imply a dangerous and unnecessary risk. In the light of these considerations, a writing schedule seems indispensable.

4.3   Writing planning (Is it necessary or not?)

Delyser ([17] p. 170) describes the challenge a thesis writer has to face: "the most daunting part of the task is […] simply getting started and then keeping at it". In 1969 a governmental reform was introduced in Sweden, which aimed at increasing student completion and reduced the education time to four years. With the 1998 reform, financial conditions for incoming doctoral students were improved in order to increase their chances to complete their education in due time. Swedish third-cycle education has become time-pressed and the aspect of writing scheduling has gained increased relevance, as can be observed in pedagogical research literature. Handal et al. ([15] p. 134) stress that supervisors should "help students to write in an optimal way using the time they have at their disposal". Appel and Bergenheim ([14] p. 176) observe: "If you feel resistant to sitting down and writing, then it's tempting to do something else you are keen on. It is therefore important to plan writing time and keep at it".

According to the regulations for third-cycle education at the Faculties of Humanities and Theology at Lund University ([18] §5.2):

> The supervisors are responsible for continuously following up and supporting the doctoral student in their work. This includes regular documentation, in the individual study plan, with regard to the student's progress (exams, completed courses within the doctoral programme, presented material etc.), and their own work performed as a supervisor, and verbal agreements. If the work does not proceed according to the individual study plan, measures must be taken.

Although the rules about the individual study plan are very clear (" The individual study plan is to be drawn up by the supervisors and the doctoral student collectively […]", [17] § 5.3) they don't seem to be always followed, as the interviews show.

S-b believes that "Concentration is absolutely necessary for writing, one needs several weeks in a row, real write-periods". Anyway, he tended not to interfere in the student's planning, especially not when D-b found herself in a delicate personal situation since the studentship had ended, "of respect for her". For C-c, the individual study plan is not a shared responsibility:

(8) S-c: The individual study plan is the students' concern. What drives the work forward is the students' thoughts and their work rate. I really don't believe in a supervising model in which the supervisor decides together with the student: "during fall term, you write chapter two". Not at all. I don't interfere […] I don't believe in that kind of steering […] If the student openly expresses a particular wish like: "I can't teach this year because I want to concentrate on writing", that's one thing, then you have to respect that […] But it's nothing I sit down and discuss with the students, oh no!

The attitude shown in (8) would probably cause uncertainty and disorientation in most students. Clearly, D-c managed to plan the thesis writing work all by herself. Nonetheless, such an attitude implies that the supervisor doesn't assume a responsibility that is actually formalized.

Delamont et al. ([2] p. 128) comment on the balance between reading and writing: "Indeed they [students] often need to be persuaded to stop reading the work of others, in order to step back from

other's people writing […] in order to start marshalling their own work into their own texts". D-a tells that she had "stop reading periods", in which she was supposed to do nothing but write:

(9) D-a: It was like: "Don't' read any more!" My supervisor told me not to read anymore and instead to start writing. I was not able to read just a little bit. So I had to stop completely in order to feel myself obliged to trust that I could write.

However, Delamont et al. ([2] p. 127) don't think that writing should be seen as "a separate kind of activity" and stress the importance of creating "regular work habits [that] can help transform writing into perfectly manageable everyday activities". D-d comments on an interesting aspect in this regard:

(10) D-d: Some terms I didn't teach but that didn't make things better. Actually, the best parts of the thesis I wrote when I taught a lot, when my children were small and I came here in the evenings. Then I wrote my best pages. But, sure, I had such a term, no teaching, now you have to focus, but that was mostly good for the thinking. To write was no problem, then you just write, you got it, you just put it down on paper.

This account suggests that to schedule writing time might create an expectation that can end up in frustration and deception if the outcome is bad. At the same time, D-b admits that she needed time for thinking, and that the planning was helpful after all.

No matter what relation the student has to writing, the supervisor has to monitor the writing process. The individual study plan appears as a perfect tool for discussing and planning.

4.4 Feedback (What kind?)

According to Delamont et al. ([2] p. 125) "Writing is not a special kind of experience and […] it is not a natural talent. While it seems to be true that some people find it easier than others, it does not come naturally to anybody: it is something that all authors have to work at". Feedback from the supervisor is at best an important support during the student's writing but it is not exempt from risks: "When the feedback doesn't work, learning gets worse" (Brodin et al. [10] p. 222). Carter ([12] p. 105) stresses that "[…] students tend to regard supervisors' comments as signs of their own failure". On the other hand, positive superficial feedback can arouse suspicion ("a vague, superficial praise can anyone give, even a person who has not read thoroughly", Handal et al. [15] p. 151). *Sandwich-model* feedback*,* where critical observations are preceded and followed by praise, tends to be perceived as dishonest (Handal et al. [15] p. 152).

Since all the interviewed students wrote in a foreign language, the level and kind of feedback become even more crucial issues. D-b recounts that the *stream of consciousness* technique she adopted was a way for her to get around the language obstacles:

(11) D-b: In order not to get stuck as a second language learner, not to feel impeded by the fact that I was writing in a foreign language, I tried to just let it out, and afterwards I would touch it up. Then I felt that I enjoyed dealing with the language.

As previously mentioned – see quote (7) – this technique, which D-b chose on her own, had bad consequences for the supervision: the supervisor couldn't get a grip on the text and wouldn't give feedback on it.

D-c welcomed the positive effects of the limitations depending on writing in a foreign language: "I like to write in X just because I feel myself limited, which forces me to express myself I a simple way, I cannot use rhetorical devices". H-c had quite different thoughts about D-c not writing in her mother tongue:

(12) H-c: Well, yes, it was an obstacle for her. Because … supervising deals very much with language and style, actually more than with content. You have to realize that […] a text written in language X and a text written in language Y are profoundly different. If I am used to express myself in language Y and I just transfer a given content to language X, then I produce an unreadable text.

Appel and Bergenheim ([14] p. 181) believe that direct and detailed instructions don't favor the writing process: "[…] It's rather about to make students reflect upon their text and see it with new eyes. How do you reason here? What do you mean by this? Are there any alternative ways to look at that?". This kind of feedback was exactly what D-c got:

(13) D-c: It was never detailed comments, it was rather like: this is unclear, here you have to explain better. And sometimes it was comments on my language that was not so good. Sometimes I wished I had received more detailed comments and above all more concrete ones, because sometimes it was hard for me to understand what the problem was: when you write a text, you are so very biased, you are in your own world, in your thoughts, and if the critical comments are too vague, then you don't understand them, you cannot relate to them. […]. So I really think it's important that supervisors learn how to be more detailed, more concrete in their critical comments.

This account can be compared with the following:

(14) D-b: The comments were very specific, like he did not understand, something was unclear, this or that should be rephrased. They were mostly about my language use, very seldom about the text structure. I think this is what I was hankering after: How should I think? How should the overall structure look like? I can't remember that I ever got a comment about that. It was about the language, meaning my poor language.

In contrast with what Appel and Bergenheim point out, the common points of view expressed in both (13) and (14) indicate the students' need for concreteness when it comes to feedback. Open questions may create uncertainty, especially if the student doesn't feel (s)he can ask for more explanations and has to interpret the feedback alone, a task which becomes a performance in itself:

(15) D-c: Of course you can go back and ask "what do you mean here?" but sometimes you feel a little bit ashamed because it is tough to be criticized, but if you moreover show that you don't get the criticism, then you feel even more stupid. So the question was: am I doing well now? I still wonder whether I managed to write as you are supposed to.

Feedback must be evaluated in relation to sender, receiver and context (Brodin et al. [10] p. 222). The accounts above show that feedback is a topic that should be discussed, if it has to fulfill its important function to guide and support the student's writing. The next account shows the baffling effect of missing feedback and the negative effect on self-confidence of total absence of positive feedback:

16) D-b: There were no positive comments whatsoever on my text, I don't think I ever got a positive comment from him. Which is very important, actually. Because I thought all the time that what I had done was shit, since there was no positive feedback on 50 pages. Maybe the lack of comments meant it was OK, though. However, it's nice to get a little gold star now and then. It makes you feel better. Otherwise you feel alone with your text which only contains mistakes. So if supervisors can find something good, they'd better highlight it so one can feel "I'm not that bad".

Through feedback supervisors can strengthen students' self-confidence, which needs not mean that they should give faked positive feedback. In a mutually respectful relationship with the supervisor a student shall have no reason to believe that positive feedback is false, which Handal et al. warn for ([15] p. 152).

5   CONCLUSION

The main question in this study, based on empirical data collected within third-cycle education in foreign languages (specialization in French and Italian linguistics) at Lund University in Sweden, was whether and to which extent supervisors and students discuss the following topics: For whom does one write the thesis? How preliminary should the texts to be discussed during supervisory meetings be? Is it necessary to plan writing? What kind of feedback should be used? Four supervisors and their respective doctoral students active in the period 2000-2015 were interviewed.

The accounts confirm that the issues are relevant and also that they are intertwined: the issue of which kind of text should serve as a basis for supervisory meetings is for example related to the writing planning issue; the kind of feedback has to be discussed and decided in relation to the kind of text. There are no definitive answers to the questions since they depend on context, individual preferences and stage in the process. This is why they have to be aired on regular basis. The answers should represent jointly agreed strategies and choices. Through this communication, supervisors can support doctoral students during the multiannual process leading to the finished thesis, a final product of which the intrinsic diachronic dimension is not supposed to be noticeable.

Effective supervision presupposes that the topics above are discussed in an open, frequent and constructive communication. Openness means that thoughts and opinions must be actively exchanged, not taken for granted or assumed. Frequency is motivated by the necessity of revising and assessing decisions and choices at different stages of the process. The spirit of constructiveness is essential for building the students' self-confidence: supervisors bear a broad responsibility in this respect.

Students refer in their accounts to feelings of helplessness (13), loneliness (16) and shame (15). Uncertainty, bad conscience and performance anxiety are other psychological states that are given expression.

One could of course question the representativeness of the four students at the Department of foreign languages in relation to the 3032 doctoral students active to some degree at Lund University (*Annual Report* [19] p. 27) and to Swedish doctoral students in general. In this respect, it can be useful to refer to the report "Hur mår doktoranden?" (How do doctoral students feel? [20]), published in 2012 by The Union of Civil Servants (ST), the Swedish National Union of Students (SFS) and The Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees (TCO). The report presents a survey in which almost 600 doctoral Swedish students in humanities and social sciences answered questions about their psychosocial working environment.

Although none of the questions in the survey addressed specifically the work with the thesis, some of the results can be read in relation to it, as for example: "A relatively large proportion (41%) don't' think they get enough support and encouragement from their supervisor. The proportion is even higher if one focuses on specific groups" (p. 26). Two of the questions regarded specifically feedback on tasks such as teaching and doctoral courses: neither of them "is valued very highly" (p. 29). One of the proposed measures is: "Improve feedback to the doctoral students on theirs tasks, in particular with regard to teaching" (s. 44). On the basis of our investigation we would like to add "… and with regard to the thesis writing".

Two of the supervisors in this study express their unwillingness to intervene in writing planning, in order to respect the student's private life. This tendency is not good, since it practically implies non-supervising. On the basis of the results of this qualitative case study, it can be argued that an open, frequent and constructive discussion of the four highlighted topics is essential to the attainment of the goals of a doctoral degree, namely a thesis of an excellent scientific standard and the recognition of an autonomous researcher.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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