

# **Career development programme for PhD students**

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The report is partly based on the reporting submitted for The Centre for Development of Human Resources and prepared by Trine Bovbjerg, Hanne Dauer Keller and Monika Janfelt. See Bovbjerg, Janfelt and Keller: "Arbejds miljø og karriere – to ph.d.-udfordringer" *Dansk Universitetspædagogisk Tidsskrift* årgang 8, nr. 15, 2013, pp. 6-16. Read more about career activities for PhD candidates at University of Southern Denmark in *Ny Viden* No. 3, pp. 20-21.

## **Recommendations in brief**

- Use teachers or consultants with knowledge of the PhD field
- Use certified test users
- Mix the participants from different graduate schools
- Keep the programme in a short time period
- The participants should be at the same level
- Design programmes with both individual and group activities
- Design programmes with possibility to share knowledge and experiences
- Workshops with focus on stress and well-being should be placed in the first year of the PhD period
- Workshops with focus on career issues should be placed in the later part of the PhD period

## **Introduction**

With the increased focus on doctoral education, it is clear that not all PhD students take a degree to become researchers. Some do, but many of them have to or want to find alternative career paths. The thesis is still important in doctoral education programmes, but the candidate him/herself and the broad competencies and transferable skills of the individual are also becoming increasingly important for the individual candidate, for the universities and for the job market. This brings up a whole new situation for the universities if they want to recruit and keep the best talents as researchers. In this perspective, career development activities during the entire PhD process become essential – both for the individual doctoral students and for their universities. It is important that our universities take some strategic steps towards integrating standard career development offers and activities, so that young researchers can see attractive career paths in academia as well as outside academia after their PhD, or later on as a senior researcher.

If the doctoral students can see some long, diversified and clearer career paths and perspectives, I believe it will influence on their effectiveness, completion, well-being and the way the thesis will be drafted and how they will develop their talents. We need a broader discussion about different career paths in the local academic environments and how to develop the talents of our younger researcher.

The doctoral students expect and ask for career guidance, knowledge about the job market and are also very eager to learn more about themselves, learn how to develop their personal talents and capitalize on all the skills that are not core research knowledge.

This report will present a Career Development programme for 66 doctoral students. The programme was carried out at four Danish universities in 2012, with very positive evaluations. This report will also give some concrete examples on how we can deal with career challenges and stress and well-being in the PhD area and discuss why it is important to take care of PhD students career challenges and how career developmental activities can contribute to developing a broad range of skills and competencies.

The report will give a short draft of the ideas and purposes behind the programme, its partners and funding. The report will also mention and discuss participant issues and course content and finish off with some recommendations based on our experiences from the career development programme for PhD students.

### **Ideas and assumptions**

We had an idea and an assumption that stress, well-being and career issues were some of the major challenges for our PhD students. Our assumptions were based on feedback, in particular, from coaching sessions with PhD students. We decided therefore to design the programme around those two main topics. We wanted to give the participants knowledge and some practical tools in how to handle and increase their well-being and how to work with their own careers. Awareness about their personal skills and how they could increase their job satisfaction and develop their competencies were in focus.

From former PhD workshops we knew that many PhD candidates are seeking network possibilities – because of this the networking aspect was also an important part in the construction of the programme. Furthermore we also wanted to put the doctoral students' career development and questions about their work environment on the agenda.

We hoped to produce some results and experiences on how the university sector could work with stress and well-being and career issues, and how we could support the final phase of the PhD process. We also wanted to see if a programme could reduce dropout rates,<sup>1</sup> make the PhD process smoother and promote the PhD process as a whole. The project was therefore also a project where we could develop some methods and a functioning concept.

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<sup>1</sup> The dropout rates at all universities in Denmark (i.e. not completed PhD) in 2011 were 218, and in 2012 the number was 40. Source: UNI-Cs databank, (EAK).

## **Partners and funding**

The project was a cooperation project between the University of Southern Denmark and Aalborg University, and the activities were carried out at four universities: University of Southern Denmark, Aalborg University, University of Copenhagen and Aarhus University. We run the same career development programme for PhD students at each university. The funding was secured by The Centre for Development of Human Resources (Copenhagen) with DKK 400,000. The Centre is run and financed as a joint venture between the State Employer's Authority and the State Employees' Organizations. The purpose of the center is to enhance competence development, provide counseling and disseminate knowledge on competence development.

The project management was located at The University of Southern Denmark, Human Resource Service, with Executive Officer and coach Monika Janfelt as project manager. Human Resource consultant Trine Bovbjerg was responsible for the project at Aalborg University. The Human Resource Services at University of Southern Denmark was responsible for managing the budget and the progress of the project. Monika Janfelt, Trine Bovbjerg and associate professor Hanne Dauer Keller from Aalborg University were teachers at the workshops and consultants at the project. All test feedback interviews were conducted by Monika Janfelt and Trine Bovbjerg who both are certified and qualified test users.

The steering group of the project consisted of the three consultants and manager Jakob Ejersbo from Human Resource Services at University of Southern Denmark. Two PhD candidates, Mette Seidelin from University of Southern Denmark and Lars Oddershede from Aalborg University, and two PhD School managers, professor Carl Bache from University of Southern Denmark and professor Ann Bygholm from Aalborg University. The representative from the University of Copenhagen was HR consultant Kirsten Juncker Christensen and HR consultant Malene Ringvad Friedrich. Administrator Jesper Qvistgaard and manager Jeppe Dørup Olesen represented Aarhus University in the steering committee. The steering group discussed and decided on topics such as recruiting process and evaluation.

The career development programme for PhD students ran from February 2012 to January 2013, and ended up with a conference on the 24 January at Aalborg University, Campus Copenhagen. The conference with the title "New Initiatives in the PhD area – Coaching, talent-development, career choices, network and the cultural dimension" were held together with associate professor Mirjam Godskesen and her group who had carried out a PhD Coaching project.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Read more about Mirjam Godskesen's project in following papers: Mirjam Godskesen et al. "Coaching, netværk og udvikling af forskningsmiljøer – med fokus på ph.d.-studerende". Aalborg University, 2013. Mirjam Godskesen & Rie Frilund Skårhøj: "Evaluation of Coaching Course for PhD students". LearningLab DTU and AAU Department of Learning and Philosophy, 2013.

## **Participants**

We designed a programme for 68 participants and of them 66 completed. Each of the four universities could enroll up to 17 PhD candidates. Our requirements were that the participants have to be minimum ½ year into their PhD studies. It was also a request from The Centre for Development of Human Resources that PhD students from the Social Sciences and the Humanities should be given priority, because some previous activities have been focusing on other faculties. Therefore all the participants from Aalborg University were from those two faculties. At the University of Southern Denmark, The University of Copenhagen and Aarhus University the PhD candidates represented all faculties. About half of the participants (49%) were in their 3-2 year, 26% were in their 2-1 year and 25% were 1- ½ year into the PhD project.

There was a preponderance of women who signed up to take part in the course; 47 women and 21 men joined the course. That makes 74 % women and 26 % men. We do not have a clear explanation for the reasons of this gender distribution. The statistics tell us that in 2008 49% of all PhD students at University of Southern Denmark were female, and in 2013 it was 62%.<sup>3</sup> In 2012, 9.313 were doing their PhD in Denmark, of those 4.760 were men and 4.553 women. If we look at the gender distribution at the Humanities at all Danish Universities in 2012, 434 were men and 565 were women. In the Social Sciences the numbers were; 606 men and 623 women. The statistics cannot completely explain the gender distribution in our programme.

One reason could be the general inequality among the permanently employed research staff. At University of Southern Denmark, as at all the other universities in Denmark, supervisors and professors are mostly men,<sup>4</sup> and therefore the female PhD students do not have the same opportunities as their male colleagues for role models and access to informal knowledge. And because of this courses and development programmes on career issues can be a sort of substitute where they have an opportunity to focus professionally on questions about career identity and career paths. Another explanation could be that women are just more interested in self-development issues than men, and more eager to learn about career management.

## **Content of the programme**

The programme started at the University of Southern Denmark in the spring 2012 and followed up with the same programme at Aalborg University. In the fall we repeated the activities at Aarhus University and University of Copenhagen. We ran the same programme at each of the participants' universities. The programme consisted of two workshops, each of one day duration– the first one

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<sup>3</sup> Source: UNI-C databank, (EAK).

<sup>4</sup> In 2011, 16,2% of all professors in Denmark were women, and 28,5% of all associate professors were women. Source: Fivu.dk, nota om videnskabeligt personale på universiteterne 2011. Uddannelsesministeriet på basis af indberetninger fra universiteterne.

focusing on stress and well-being in research and knowledge work. The other workshop focused on career, competencies and strategies. After the first workshop the participants got an individual feedback on a JTI test (Jungian Type Indicator - a personal preference test) and after the career workshop they got an individual feedback on their Decision Dynamics Career model test.<sup>5</sup> The programme ended with a half-day seminar where we collected the different topics and summed up the course as a whole. Before this last activity each participant was asked to write a minimum one page personal developmental plan, where they summarized what they had learned during the course.

The first workshop “Stress and well-being” had focus on the PhD candidates psychological work environment. We worked with negative and positive stressors and strong traits in academic and research work environments and how you can cope with those factors and the imbalance between resources and demands in a constructive way.

The second workshop focused on career paths in and outside academia, career strategies, competencies and skills. It was obvious that the participants had a great need for knowledge and information both about the position structures at universities and in the public and private job market. The main issues in this workshop were individual career development, sector knowledge and how you achieve growth from your profession.

The feedback interviews after each workshop provided an opportunity to go a little deeper into the issues that had been raised at the joint workshops. The JTI test and the Career model test are both developmental tools that provided opportunities for conversations about favorite preferences, career paths and career drivers. The focus in the personal feedback sessions was on personal skills in relation to the PhD project. Many conversations related to factors that are important to work with when you are in a highly competitive environment such as research. Other frequently discussed topics were how to find a rewarding career path in or outside academia.

It was very time consuming to use self-assessment tools the way we did, and also a rather expensive way to work. 66 persons had individual feedback sessions two times, i.e. 132 individual meetings. Each feedback session took about 1 ½ hour. Despite the high demands on resources it was one of the most rewarding parts of the project. Many of the participants reported that the test was an eye-opening experience which made all the pieces fit together. The test helped them become aware of how they could use their strengths more consciously, and how to work with and take care of their weaknesses. Those tests are some very good tools in conversations and coaching sessions. They also gave the participants some framework, models, categories and ideas on how they could understand themselves and how they could use them in their own self-assessment processes. The tests gave them an understanding and insight of great value.

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<sup>5</sup> For further information about the tests see for example: <http://www.cfl.dk/om-cfl>

The entire programme was concluded with a half-day seminar with focus on the participants' continuing development, but we also worked on how individual preferences (as shown in the test) could be revealed in practice, for example in communication and cooperation.

### **Results from the evaluation**

The career development programme for PhD students got very positive evaluations. 68 signed up for the programme, 66 completed and 56 participants answered the evaluation questionnaires. The statistics in this report are based on those evaluations. In the evaluations numbers five and four stand for *very good* and *good*. If the person gave an activity number one it meant that this activity was *poor* or was *not fruitful* for the person. As part of the programme the participants were asked to write a personal career plan with focus on what they have learned and their thoughts about their future careers. The quotes in this report come from those individual career plans.

In the following I will list some of the main results from the evaluation. The questions we asked come first, followed by the percentage for scores 5 (*very good*), 4 (*good*), 3 (*satisfying*), 2 (*acceptable*), 1 (*bad/little*), 0 (*don't know/not at all*) in the questionnaire. All questions are related to how the individual participant estimates the effect and outcome of the career development programme for his or her PhD project and professional growth.

Question	5 very good and 4 good	3 satisfying and 2 acceptable	1 bad/little/ not at all	0 don't know	Comments
<b><i>Have you become better prepared to deal with the stress factors that are in the PhD process?</i></b>	38%	48%	11%	3%	One participant formulated it this way: <i>"I must learn to say no, so stress does not take over my life. It also means that I have become aware that I must actively strive for well-being"</i> .
<b><i>Have you got a greater clarity about career paths?</i></b>	67%	25%	2%	6%	<i>"...the programme has led to a better understanding of career paths and career structure of academia – things that were previously very unclear"</i> . But the evaluation also points out a desire to know more in detail about concrete jobs and concrete career paths in the industry and other parts of the public and private sector.
<b><i>Have you improved your ability to work with your strengths and competencies?</i></b>	70%	24%	2%	4%	The conclusion here is that these activities matters.
<b><i>Have you become more aware of how you can work with your own career development?</i></b>	79%	17%	2%	2%	One of our purposes with the programme was to address one of the main issues being a PhD student – the high uncertainty about career possibilities and the unclear career paths, and how to navigate in this area. Since career questions are a major factor in the psychosocial work environment indicates this result that that we have contributed in a positive way to address this issue for the participants in the programme. <i>"All in all, I am far more settled in my career after I participated in the career development course and I have confidence and courage to follow the path that I dream of"</i> .

<b>Assess the value and relevance of the JTI test in a development programme for PhD students?</b>	84%	12%	2%	2%	
<b>Assess the value and relevance of the career model test in a development programme for PhD students?</b>	84%	12%	2%	2%	
<b>Has the career programme promoted your PhD process as a whole?</b>	59%	33%	0%	8%	We were interested to know if the programme could facilitate and support the progress and the completion rate for our PhD students and the results show us that career development activities are a good way to facilitate the PhD process.
<b>How was the progress of your PhD project prior to joining the course?</b>	46%	50%	2%	2%	
<b>How was the progress of your PhD project after joining the course?</b>	70%	28%	0%	2%	The answers tell us that our programme has had a positive effect.
<b>Have you ever thought of stopping your PhD project?</b>					25% answered yes. The good news here is that so many did not think of stopping – but there is a lot of money and a lot of human stress and frustration behind those 25%.
<b>Has your participation in the programme contributed to your decision to continue your PhD project?</b>					12% answered yes. It is worth a lot if career development activities can help and support 12% of our PhD candidates to choose to stay on track and complete their PhD degree. <i>“Looking at the long run I now know what I can use my PhD for ... which, of course motivates me to complete the project”</i>
<b>Will you recommend this programme to a colleague?</b>					4 % answered <i>no</i> , and 96 % answered <i>yes</i> .

## The outcome of the programme

Besides the statistics from the questionnaire, the discussions in the workshops and the personal development plans also shed light on the outcomes of the programme.

One of our main messages throughout the programme – the red thread in all activities – was the message about responsibility. Here are two quotes from participants about taking matters in to their own hands.

- *“The experience that I’m not the only one to feel this way and the possibility to openly talk about it has given me more courage to say no to non-project-relevant tasks and given me a greater awareness of the fact that being responsible for own research also in general involves saying no and making demands on the supervisor”*
- *“Where I before the course had a tendency to have a more or less passive attitude to some of the aspects and conditions which I wasn’t satisfied with of being a PhD student. I now keep focus on identifying and reflecting on what I want.”*

In the workshops and the individual feedback sessions we discussed the boundaries and balance between being in charge of your own project and role of the supervisor, and the responsibility and consequences of self-management. We talked a lot about that when it all comes to an end, the results are yours (the PhD students), the stress is yours, the choices are yours and it is also your responsibility to make the decisions about research perspectives, and take the responsibility for the decisions, for better or worse. The work decisions, of course, should be taken in a positive collaboration with the supervisor or research director. It is also important to point out, that stressful work environments are a structural problem and therefore an organizational responsibility. Not just an individual problem.

It is very important to take full responsibility and to be fully in charge of one’s own PhD project. Sometimes, I wonder what happens when a person signs up for a PhD project. Some get a feeling of losing control, others the feeling of being ruled and steered by the circumstances and most of the PhD candidates are striving to fulfill boundless expectations and at the same time perform at high levels in many ways – everything from day one. I think it maybe has something to do with the strong hierarchies at the universities. As a PhD you start at the bottom of the academic ladder, at the same time you start as a novice in a new field of expertise. That is stressful and can be very confusing. The PhD candidate stands there as a grown up with a lot of experiences and competencies and has to start from scratch in order to build knowledge and influence. Our experience is that the responsibility question has been an important issue to raise and address. It has meant a lot for the participants’ way of seeing themselves as PhD students and how to think of their career choices and place in the labour market.

*"I have learned to see possibilities instead of limitations by the fact that I'm taking a PhD degree. Among colleagues within the same academic field many stories flourish about how much you limit your career choices by taking a PhD ... The course has made me aware of the skills and qualifications we as PhD students have and how education as a researcher does not necessarily have to result in a research career, since there are several jobs in the interface between research and e.g. administration."* Here I think that the Universities have a responsibility to focus on both the PhD thesis and the development of personal skills and more generic competencies, for example career meta-competencies such as identity changes and adaptability and take them more seriously.

The following quotations reflect the importance of developing personal skills and the core competencies that support the expert skills.

- *"The personal skills have previously been "a missing link" in relation to the ideas of the future. Academic competencies cannot do it alone"*
- *"...there is so much focus on academic skills at the university, so the personal skills are overlooked"*
- *"Overall, I have learned that I belong here!" (Woman who wants a career as a researcher in academia).*
- *"...give myself permission to critically reflect on whether I'm in the right environment and the right industry – and indeed it was good to think about the idea that it is okay to find out that there might be other jobs and career opportunities"*

This last quotation is a good summary of the course as a whole, because it shows the highlights of the programme:

- *"Apart from the two tests, which gave me a conceptual framework to articulate circumstances of personality, motivation etc., it has been rewarding to discuss with other PhD students in the same situation. It was good that we had nothing in common disciplinary or academically, except our current life situation. There's plenty of academic input from colleagues, but we rarely talk about our life situations and future prospects."*

### **Recommendations, experiences and reflections**

It is our experience that we have hit a need for career development among PhD students that in many aspects had been partly ignored. Career development for PhD students is not a matter of course. Some PhD students are fortunate to have a mentor or supervisor who can both run the

professional guidance and also give career advices and counseling. Most of the PhD students who take part in our programme however only got the professional academic instructions from their supervisors.

It is important to use teachers who have a thorough knowledge of the PhD field in one way or the other when you choose to run those sorts of development programmes for PhD candidates. The tests and the individual feedback conversations were a success and it is important to use experienced and certified test users and choose test tools that can be well connected to the main topics in the programme. The possibility to network was also a success, as was the possibility to share knowledge and personal experiences with other PhD students. It worked fine with a scenario where the participants come from all graduate schools, but should be taken into account how far the participants are in their PhD programme. By organizing the set up across faculties, we created a space where the PhD students were free to talk about career opportunities and issues, job satisfaction, work environment, academia etc. The opportunities for sharing experiences across disciplines was very rewarding for the participants, who in this way not only got perspective on their own issues and challenges, but at the same time got a great understanding of the university as an organization.

The programme gave the participants an opportunity to reflect and increase their awareness on important topics. The programme gave new perspectives on their PhD process, and it became easier to see benefits and opportunities (instead of just seeing obstacles and problems). Many of the participants said that they appreciated that they through their participation in the course they have been “forced” to relate to their own career questions, their future and career goals, to go into the question of responsibility in a serious way and to look at their daily well-being in a constructive way.

It has been clear that the best way to do those sorts of programmes or career activities is to keep it in a short period of time. Our experience show us that it can be a good idea to split the two subjects up, and focus on subjects as stress, work-life balance, well-being and self-management and how to handle and run one’s own research project, in the beginning of the PhD period, and focus on the career guidance in the later part of the PhD process. *“It would be good if there was an offer both at the beginning of the process (after ½ year) dealing with stress management, supervisor/PhD student relationship, and one at the end dealing with skills and career opportunities”.*

We can also recommend more information to the PhD students about concrete jobs and concrete career paths in the industry and other parts of the public and private sector, for example to arrange conferences or events where the PhD students can get information and meet representatives from different parts of the job market.

Finally it is our experience that universities can benefit from collaboration across the university sector with those types of activities. It requires a central project manager and local partners who can take care of practical issues.

## **Conclusion**

The career development programme gave the participants an opportunity to develop some important personal skills about stress management, to create greater awareness about how they can influence on their own well-being and how to work with one's own career development, professional profile and strategic career planning. We focused on two main topics, and worked both on an individual as well as on a group level. Our project has shown that a mix between joint workshops, where the PhD students can share experiences and discuss career topics with doctoral students from different faculties, and tests with individual feedback with focus on the individual doctoral student and his or her personal challenges, are a good and concrete way to work with career clarification for PhD students. This career programme is a concrete example of how we can deal with career challenges in a practical way, based on experiences from a career development programme for 66 doctoral candidates at four universities in Denmark in 2012.