The Perspective of PhD Supervisors

The PhD journey:
A shared responsibility

Universität St.Gallen

Foreword

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For us, training doctoral students is a joyful duty of collaborative research, an opportunity for critical discourse and a responsibility at the same time. With almost 600 doctoral students, the doctoral programs represent a significant part of our work. In the context of the Global School in Empirical Research Methods (GSERM), we do not only train our own doctoral students but have established ourselves as one of the leading European doctoral schools for external doctoral students. Doctoral education that meets national and international quality standards is a key objective for the new Rectorate that took office in 2024. For this reason, we have initiated the second edition of this brochure, which has proven popular and important both within and outside our university.

Since the first edition of this brochure in 2019, significant developments have occurred within the HSG doctorate. In addition to improved employment conditions and external appraisal of the thesis, from February 2024 onwards, all new PhD students enter a PhD agreement with their supervisors. This agreement is an essential component of the embodied shared responsibility of the doctoral process, of which we are all deeply convinced.

We thank the authors of this brochure, Florian Schulz and Katharina Molterer, most warmly for their tremendous engagement for doctoral students, and wish all doctoral students and their supervisors an inspiring collaboration, as well as much joy and pleasure within the mutually shared responsibility of their research project.

Note from the authors

This brochure presents a co-constructive supervision model for PhD students and PhD supervisors. The model highlights the principles of *transparency, cooperation and ethically informed professionalism.*

The brochure rests on our firm conviction that the PhD process is a shared responsibility between PhD supervisors and PhD candidates. We also believe that maintaining high work satisfaction and a positive work relationship throughout the process will positively affect the quality of the thesis. We therefore underline the importance of transparent communication, the clarification of expectations, a shared understanding of rights and privileges and sensitivity to possible role conflicts.

A PhD process typically has several stages, each with unique issues and challenges that must be continuously addressed and clarified. While many of these issues and challenges apply to any PhD process, some are related to the specific supervision framework at the University of St.Gallen. Given the complexity of the PhD process, this brochure sets forth to provide a comprehensive framework and practical guidance for each of the stages.

Supplementing the university's official guidelines, the brochure offers both supervisors and candidates the possibility to develop a tailor-made supervision strategy in accordance with their ideals, specific areas of research, institutional requirements and personal preferences. Notably, the brochure focuses on building the dyadic work relationship between PhD supervisors and PhD students. It does so even if we are aware integrating others into the PhD process is often a key to success and can help mitigate many possible role conflicts.

Good academia relies on good relationships. They are a source of motivation and learning and a space where ideas and feedback are shared. Yet, building and maintaining good academic relationships is no trivial task and needs continuous effort. Here, our thanks go to all faculty who have invested time and effort in building a positive PhD support culture at the University of St.Gallen. We especially thank Fiorella Schmucki and Sabrina Helmer for their ongoing initiative and for making the second edition of this brochure possible.

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Please note

The brochure supplements the University's official regulations and guidelines but does not substitute a close reading and use of these materials.

Introduction for PhD supervisors

Academia has changed significantly in recent decades. While its key virtues, curiosity and knowledge creation, remain essential, the tempo of academic life has accelerated significantly. Its tasks and challenges have diversified. Today, academics are expected to build international networks, publish in highly competitive outlets, secure research funding, provide innovative and participatory teaching and facilitate academic programmes. They must often promote their research and demonstrate its positive impact on local and global communities. Finally, as digital technologies have created more flexible work conditions, combining in-presence with online communication and disconnecting from the never-ending workload has become a challenge that needs to be continuously managed. As an early phase of an academic career, the doctorate also requires skills beyond "only" writing the dissertation. It often demands effective project management, balancing multiple roles and responsibilities, creating collaborative networks and promoting one's ideas to both a scientific and the general audience.

The recent developments have not only altered the circumstances for PhD students but also for their supervisors. PhD supervisors may find that the PhD process and challenges they experienced during their own studies have changed significantly, requiring a different approach to supervision than the one they received and might be inclined to carry forward.

Against this backdrop, the PhD process can be seen as a socialisation process during which the PhD candidate acquires skills to complete the PhD project successfully – and beyond. [1] It's widely acknowledged that both PhD supervisors and PhD candidates hold responsibility for the PhD process and must devote time and effort to creating a good supervision relationship.

Moreover, it is well known that positive PhD supervisor-student relations are associated with higher motivation levels and the overall quality of the submitted thesis. In contrast, poor relationships often negatively impact a candidate's well-being or even lead to interrupting the doctoral project. [2] [3] [4]

Given the importance of the supervisor's role, it is essential to consider how best to establish good rapport, which is the basis of effective and empowering PhD processes that lead to successful project completion. This starts with PhD supervisors carefully considering the recruitment process of new PhD candidates and allowing enough time for the selection and preliminary meetings. A structured recruitment process is often crucial to getting the PhD journey off to a good start.

[1] Wright, T., & Cochrane, R. (2000). Factors influencing successful submission of PhD theses. *Studies in Higher Education, 25*(2), 181-195.

[2] Devine, K., & Hunter, K. H. (2017). PhD student emotional exhaustion: the role of supportive supervision and self-presentation behaviours. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 54*(4), 335-344.

[3] Devos, C., Boudrenghien, G., Van der Linden, N., Azzi, A., Frenay, M., Galand, B., et al. (2017). Doctoral students' experiences leading to completion or attrition: a matter of sense, progress and distress. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, 32*(1), 61-77.

[4] Ives, G., & Rowley, G. (2005). Supervisor selection or allocation and continuity of supervision: PhD students' progress and outcomes. *Studies in Higher Education, 30*(5), 535-555.

What is good PhD supervision?

In response to the changing circumstances of PhD supervision, two questions have gained increasing international attention: How can good PhD supervision be defined? And which factors does this involve? For example, The Salzburg Recommendations of the European University Association (2005) offer a useful ethically informed framework by suggesting that PhD supervision:

– is a long-term commitment;
– needs to be based on fairness, respect and transparent agreements as the foundations of a good working culture; and
– exceeds merely providing instrumental support as PhD supervisors ought to help PhD students maintain focus and motivation. [5]

A key prerequisite for successful PhD supervision is to devote continuous attention and interest to PhD students and their projects. This requires allocating sufficient time to this all-important task. Further, PhD students must be given enough time to work on their PhD projects. Typically, a minimum of three years of full-time PhD studies and pursuing a PhD project are increasingly considered the norm for dissertations in the cultural, social and economic sciences. Parallel to the PhD project PhD students often perform tasks at an institute or chair to get better insights in academia and to fund their doctorate.

We believe that good PhD supervision requires explicitly addressing how to provide and organise good guidance, evaluation and feedback. Hence, what follows is an overview of these central aspects of PhD supervision and practical advice for organising the PhD supervision process to ensure that candidates and their academic work can thrive as best as possible.

[5] European University Association. (2010). Salzburg II Recommendations: European universities' achievements since 2005 in implementing the Salzburg principles. *Brussels: European University Association.*

PhD supervision recommendations

Ensure fair working conditions for internal PhD students

Internal PhD students are employed at the University or at one of its institutes or chairs. PhD supervisors who employ PhD students become their employers/superiors and hence need to perform basic managerial and leadership duties. These include ensuring fair working conditions consistent with our University's culture and with applicable employment laws. Ensuring that PhD students can generate sufficient income to sustain a basic standard of living is important for both internal and external PhDs. Moreover, it is advisable to discuss their task portfolio and work-time issues regularly. This ensures a balanced workload — between the PhD project and other duties — and any necessary rebalancing.

Shaping the PhD agreement

A completed and signed PhD agreement is a requirement to be admitted to all HSG PhD programmes and, in turn, to commit to supervising a PhD student (for further details please see the HSG research web). PhD agreements are widely acknowledged as a valuable instrument for discussing and agreeing on mutual expectations. They frame the PhD process, provide guidance and foster open communication about possible challenges. As such, they also help prevent potential interpersonal and structural tensions. As PhD processes hinge on multiple factors, using PhD agreements also requires individually configuring, discussing and regularly updating agreements.

Being sensitive to critical developments and student well-being

International studies report high PhD dropout rates across all disciplines. [6] The reasons are manifold and include significantly higher than normal stress levels, related psychological and psychosomatic symptoms as well as low work satisfaction. [7]

These potential factors require supervisors to be sensitive to problematic developments. Being mindful of a candidate's well-being can make a significant difference in the candidate's life by providing early and preventive support. It is thus essential to track issues that are likely to cause poor performance or chaotic processes. Importantly, when high stress levels produce symptoms, encouraging PhD students to seek social or professional support is vital to help them reactivate their personal resources.

We also suggest keeping in mind that PhD students have different preconditions. Some may have specific physical or psychological needs and others may have more family responsibilities than their peers. You can support these students by considering their specific circumstances.

[6] Levecque, K., Anseel, F., De Beuckelaer, A., Van der Heyden, J., & Gisle, L. (2017). Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy, 46* (4), 868-879.

[7] Litalien, D., & Guay, F. (2015). Dropout intentions in PhD studies: A comprehensive model based on interpersonal relationships and motivational resources. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 41,* 218-231.

Giving regular feedback

Regular supervision is essential for any PhD project.

Besides individual conversations, other good feedback opportunities include attending candidate presentations at conferences or research colloquia and offering written comments on drafts. Regardless of the format, it is important to make PhD students aware of their responsibilities. This includes preparing for feedback sessions in advance and summarizing their insights and learnings to ensure well-documented processes.

Scheduling regular meetings

A seemingly simple but very important method for guiding PhD students during their journey is to arrange regular meetings. Helping PhD students map a favourable course of action and deal with unforeseen challenges is as important as engaging with their research content. A first meeting should take place within the first three months. It should clarify the basic aspects of working together and orient PhD students towards the various stages of the PhD process, including expectations about thesis content and quality.

After the initial meeting, regular process reviews are a good instrument for making timely adjustments and helping prevent disorientation or unnecessary detours. Importantly, candidates are responsible for preparing these reviews. These should cover their overall workload and their PhD project schedule.

We strongly encourage PhD supervisors to take a proactive role when they sense critical developments and consider scheduling review meetings outside the arranged meeting schedule.

Discussing work issues separately

PhD supervisors should also meet regularly with PhD students employed at their institute or chair to discuss and document all relevant work issues. To avoid role conflicts, making clear transitions or separating these meetings from meetings about the PhD project can be helpful. We recommend holding such a meeting during the first few work weeks.

Untangling multiple roles

It is essential to establish clear boundaries based on the following questions:

– What may be expected of PhD students?

– What may they expect of their supervisor?
  Answering these questions is often complicated by the fact that supervisors are usually required to perform multiple roles regarding the PhD candidates, with each role linked to specific tasks and duties. Role accumulation may create strong dependency since supervisors also become mentors, colleagues, evaluators or co-authors (see Table 1).

Role conflicts often occur whenever incompatible demands are made across different roles. To avoid role conflicts, PhD supervisors should consider the following preventive measures:

– Establish clear boundaries between roles, e.g. by arranging separate appointments for different issues or by taking short breaks before discussing issues concerning another role.

– Anticipate and discuss potential role conflicts with the PhD student.

– Define the different roles and their respective duties and responsibilities.

– Be aware that multiple roles may create multiple dependencies, which may lead to considerable insecurity in PhD students; also, be aware that even incidental remarks or behaviours may intimidate PhD students.

– When in doubt about how to deal with a role conflict, we recommend to consult a colleague or seek support from one of the University's specialised counselling services.

– Since PhD students depend on their supervisors, blurring private and professional boundaries may be inappropriate and intimidating. Be sensitive to grooming behaviour and, in all instances, avoid sexist as well as inappropriate, sexualised remarks and behaviour towards PhD candidates. Refrain from engaging in romantic relationships with PhD students.

Table 1 | Roles and possible role conflicts

Roles of PhD students	Main responsibility of the role	What can PhD supervisors expect?	What can PhD supervisors expect?
PhD student	Organise, develop and execute thesis	Interest, time and effort to build academic skills as well as actively develop their thesis. Regular progress updates and discussion of critical issues. Organise well- prepared supervision meetings. Respect supervisor's time and agreed deadlines.	Finding the right balance between working independently on the PhD and asking for support / sharing developments.
Employee	Deliver quality non-PhD work tasks	Take responsibility for assigned tasks and fulfil these as best as possible. Signal limits, challenges, and paths for development as early as possible to enable one's superior to organise appropriate action.	If the candidate is expected to demonstrate both academic and non-academic performance, and if time is scarce, confusion over priorities may arise. Professional short-term goals may also conflict with the long-term goal of completing the PhD.
Co-author	Publish and learn to publish	Authors will be mentioned in a sequence that fairly reflects their contribution. Learning how to manage publication processes and understanding the publishing business.	Candidates may feel they have no choice other than to add their supervisor as a co-author to gain support for their PhD or to avoid conflict, even though the supervisor made no substantial contribution to the paper.
Examination candidate	Meet quality requirements of project proposal and PhD thesis	Candidate is familiar with the assessment criteria. Takes feedback on thesis development and the supervisor's grading decision seriously.	The candidate's performance in non-PhD roles may lead to (fears of) biased thesis assessment.

Feedback: The heart of the PhD process

Feedback is crucial and omnipresent in academic life. Nevertheless, giving and receiving feedback poses a significant challenge, even for the most experienced supervisor. The following feedback guidance may help you improve both how you give and how you receive feedback.

Table 2 | Giving helpful feedback

Fitting	To be helpful, feedback needs to acknowledge the recipient's situation. It thus needs to be formulated comprehensibly and acceptably. When giving feedback, please ask yourself "Which kind of feedback might help this particular person in this particular situation."
Be precise	The more precise and concrete your feedback is, the better your counterpart can learn from you. Therefore, share your observations in detail before interpreting or assessing your counterpart's performance or before giving instructions. Moreover, substantiate your interpretations and avoid general evaluations (i.e. assessment not based on concrete observation or generalised characterisations of the person concerned).
Be personal	Use the first person singular ("I"), not the voice of general truth ("one" or "you"). Indicate that your feedback is based on your (well-informed, yet subjective) perspective. Emphasise that you are not claiming to speak for the general public.

Table 3 | Actively receiving feedback

Fitting	Please remember that feedback is subjective opinion, not the ultimate truth. Carefully consider what is helpful and right for you and select those aspects you find important.
Be precise	Be prepared and, if possible, tell the person offering feedback which kind of feedback would be helpful at this point in time.
Be personal	Encourage your counterpart to share feedback by showing you are interested (i.e. adopt positive body language). Avoid defining and justifying yourself. If anything is unclear, seek clarification. At the end of the feedback, summarise the key points in your own words.

As Table 4 illustrates, there are various kinds of feedback. Each may fulfil a different function in the PhD process. While each form of feedback is important, evaluative feedback will tend to override other forms of feedback when given together.

Table 4 | Three kinds of feedback (inspired by [8])

|	Appreciative feedback	Developmental feedback	Evaluative feedback
Function / Aims	This form of feedback aims to encourage, motivate and empower the recipient by strengthening developmental trajectories and by emphasising existing strengths.	This form of feedback helps identify areas of development and helps the recipient best allocate their attention and energy.	This form of feedback aims to help the recipient align expectations, make informed decisions and orient themselves both towards others and towards norms and conventions.
Example	"Your presentation was very well prepared and executed; the progress in your project is becoming more and more visible."	"An important next step will be to make the argument in your literature section more coherent."	"Considering the journal's standards, I believe your manuscript will be rejected in its present shape and form."

Consider asking yourself:

– Which kind of feedback will help this particular PhD candidate most in the current phase of their PhD?
– How can I tell the recipient which kind of feedback might benefit them most at a particular time?

[8] Stone, D., & Heen, S. (2014). Thanks for the feedback: The science and art of receiving feedback well (even when it is off base, unfair, poorly delivered, and frankly, you're not in the mood). *Viking.*
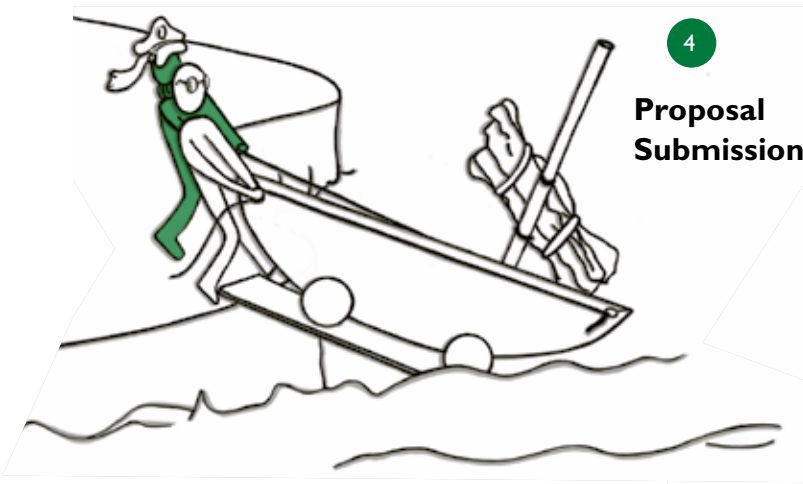
The shared PhD journey

PhD students and their supervisors share a common journey until a PhD thesis is published. This journey often involves overcoming numerous challenges and uncertainties.
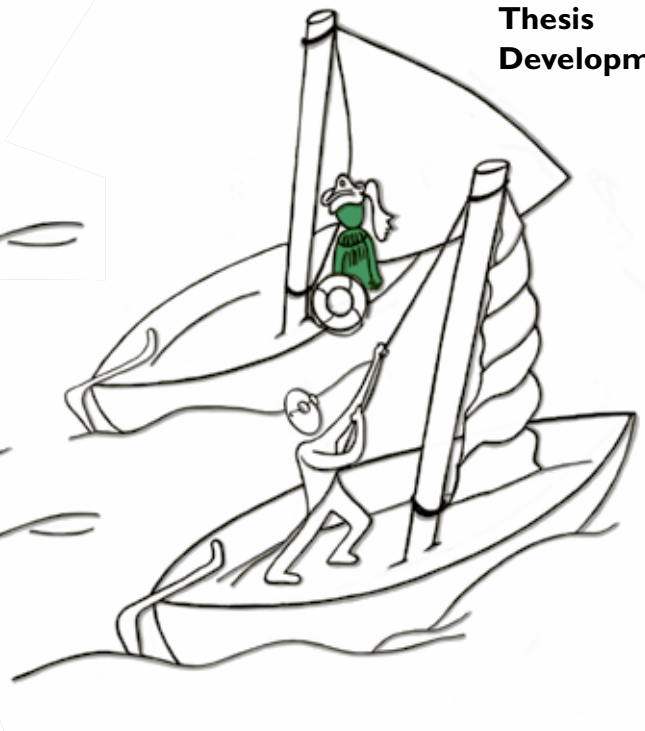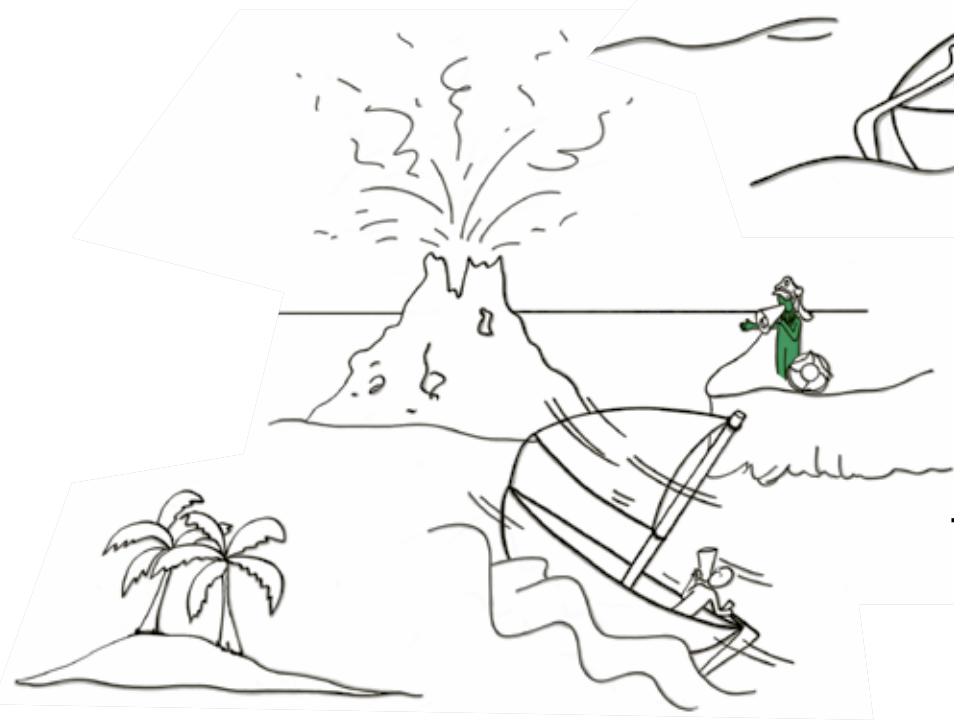
3 **Coursework**

1 **Orientation**

2 **Enrolment**
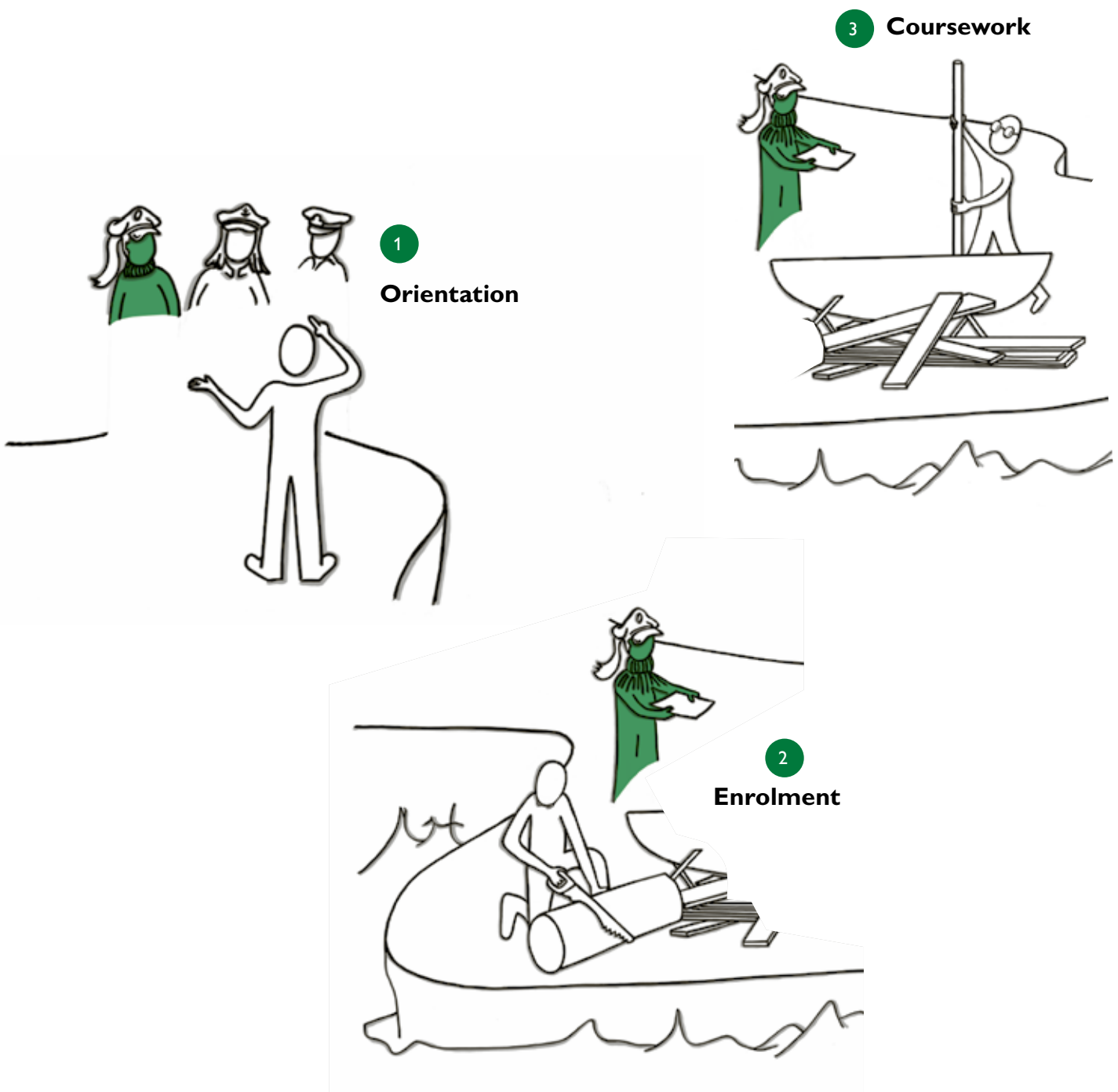
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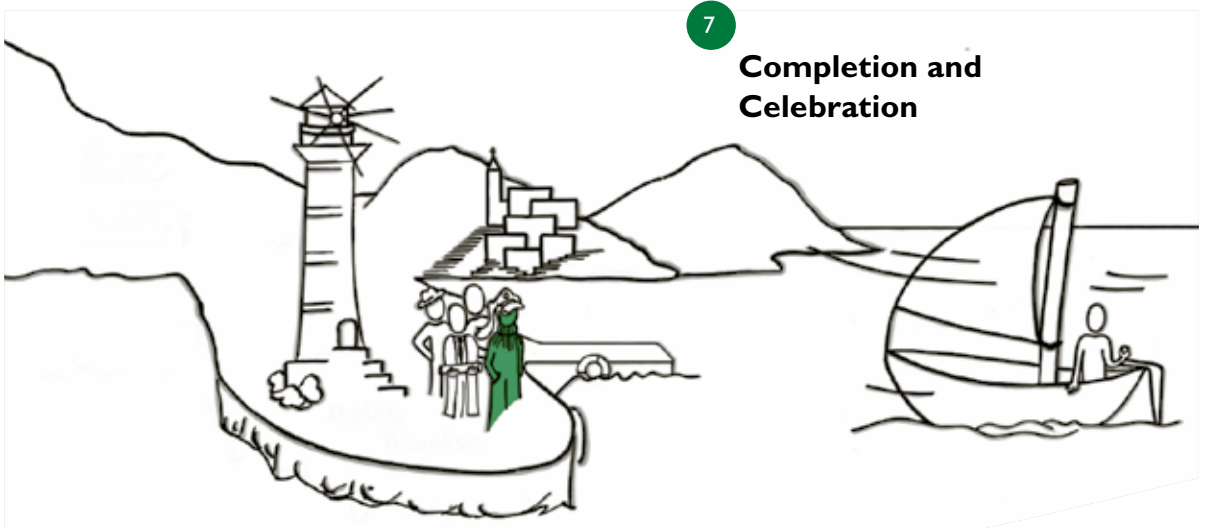**Proposal Submission**

5

Thesis Development

6

Thesis Submission

7

Completion and Celebration

15

Orientation Phase

Ensuring necessary resources

For PhD supervisors, accepting a new PhD student involves a long-term commitment. This includes providing a number of resources. Deciding whether to take on a new PhD student requires carefully considering whether the necessary resources are available.

– **Motivation** | Am I able and willing to support this PhD student for the next three to five years?

– **Time** | How much time is needed to adequately supervise a new PhD student? Am I able and willing to invest this time for the entire PhD process?

– **Funding** | Am I able to adequately fund an internal PhD student for the next few years so that they will have enough time to complete their project?

– **Space** | Am I able to provide the PhD student with adequate workspace and professional conditions?

– **Possible bias** | How diverse is my team? Am I subconsciously choosing PhD candidates based on gender or ethnicity? Would it be helpful to find PhD students with a different background to gain new perspectives?
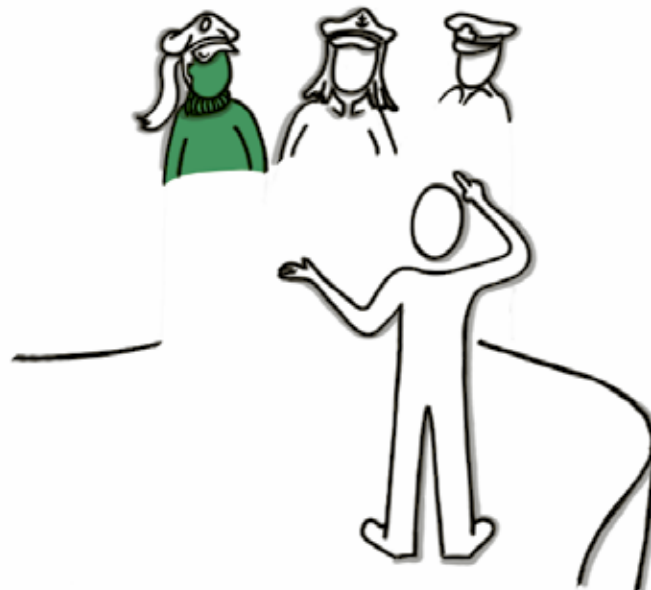
Defining the PhD position

When hiring a PhD student or taking on an external PhD student, supervisors are advised to define their expectations about the PhD project and the PhD position prior to initiating the recruitment process. Expectations should be clearly stated in the corresponding job advertisement. Clear expectations also help potential PhD students make an informed decision about applying for a vacancy.

Expectations about the PhD project
– Is the project focused on building skills for an academic or a practitioner career?
– How much autonomy does the PhD candidate have in reshaping the project?
– What are the project's expected academic outcomes?

Expectations about internal PhD positions
– Which tasks are PhD students expected to fulfil as part of their job contract?
– Which tasks are considered part of work time? And which not?
– How much annual work time (approximately) is earmarked for each task?
– What is the balance between working on the PhD and on other tasks?

Considerations about external PhD positions
– What are the risks of accepting external (freelance) PhD students?
– How much time will the PhD student be able to dedicate to doctoral work?
– How might an external PhD student be regularly integrated into the internal research network?

Enrolment Phase

Besides finding the most suitable candidate, the recruitment process also serves (and needs) to establish how likely appointees will be able to complete their PhD. Carefully selecting PhD candidates is one of the most important instruments available to PhD supervisors to ensure a good fit between candidates and vacant positions. Sincere and critical appraisal of a candidate's aptitude early on is crucial to preventing failure.

Questions to consider in the job interview
– How has the candidate dealt with previous writing projects?
– To what extent does the candidate need to acquire additional knowledge and skills before developing a viable PhD project?
– Which coping resources will the candidate be able to activate during difficult phases? How good is he or she at asking for support?

Work samples
Inviting candidates to discuss a text, prepare a short presentation, or share a writing sample to gauge how they approach and perform academic tasks helps with the substantiated assessment of the candidate.

Project outline
During recruitment, the specific academic requirements and steps for completing a doctorate should be specified. If the topic of the PhD project is predefined, it is important to make candidates aware of their academic autonomy.

Project proposal
Supervisors should openly communicate their expectations about the intermediary steps needed to complete a PhD process already in the recruitment phase. Such open communication allows for establishing structures capable of identifying challenges early in the process. This may require building additional skills or even lead to early withdrawal.

Confirmation of supervision
Confirmation of supervision is not a mere formality. It represents an obligation towards the University and towards the PhD student. Withdrawing from this commitment requires giving essential reasons.

Discussing mutual expectations at an early stage, if possible, before signing a job contract helps avoid disappointment and conflict. Explicitly discussing expectations is key to building good supervisor-student rapport.

What to clarify before signing a job contract

– What is considered work time?
– How will overtime be compensated?
– What does the contractually stipulated workload (e.g. 50%) mean in practice?
– How far is the position oriented towards basic or applied research?
– How much paid time may candidates devote to their PhD?
– What tasks are considered as research time?
– How is the protected research time handled?
– How are tasked handled that are not immediately related to the research project, but contribute to it?
– What kind of support will the PhD supervisor provide?

Coursework Phase

Early orientation and academic socialisation are crucial to the overall PhD process. A structured and in-depth induction to their role and responsibilities enables PhD students to understand which skills they will need to develop to successfully pursue their PhD thesis and adhere to their project plan. Early orientation can prevent unnecessary frustration and maladjustments. By the end of the coursework phase, candidates ought to know what they need to achieve to complete their PhD studies successfully.

A lack of clarity may lead to heightened anxiety, perfectionism and the inability to see the project through to completion.

Considering the following aspects:
– Outlining a developmental plan, including specific intermediary steps and milestones;
– Discussing which skills and competencies PhD candidates need to develop during the PhD process;
– Introducing candidates to the scientific community relevant to their project and motivating them to establish their own peer network.

The last point seems especially important as it holds the possibility other academics provide feedback to the candidates progressing work.

Proposal Submission Phase

The research proposal aims to demonstrate the feasibility of the envisaged research. It also provides a project roadmap and thus marks an important milestone in the PhD process. Preparing a research proposal is an important step in socialising PhD students. This stage helps them understand how and under which conditions they can best complete the PhD process. It is, therefore, advisable to discuss the criteria for reviewing research proposals early on. PhD supervisors should communicate the criteria for assessing student progression and project feasibility.

Various questions and issues requiring agreement between PhD students and their supervisors need to be addressed:
– Which concrete assessment criteria exist in the discipline? What are the minimum standards and best practices for research proposals and PhD theses?
– It is important to provide relevant examples of good research proposals in the discipline (e.g. content and structural requirements, quality criteria, etc.).
– Will the envisaged outcome be a monograph or a cumulative thesis? Which publication requirements exist (e.g. preferred outlets)?
– Which criteria apply to co-authored publications?

– Discuss the process for appointing a co-supervisor or a committee of supervisors. Request co-supervisors to explain how they wish to be involved in the process.

The primary purpose of the research proposal is to further structure the thesis. By accepting the research proposal, the supervisor indicates that he or she believes the thesis will succeed. Should the PhD advisor have substantial doubts about the successful completion of the PhD, these doubts should be raised explicitly during this phase. Specifically, the supervisor may return the research proposals for review or reject the PhD project definitively.
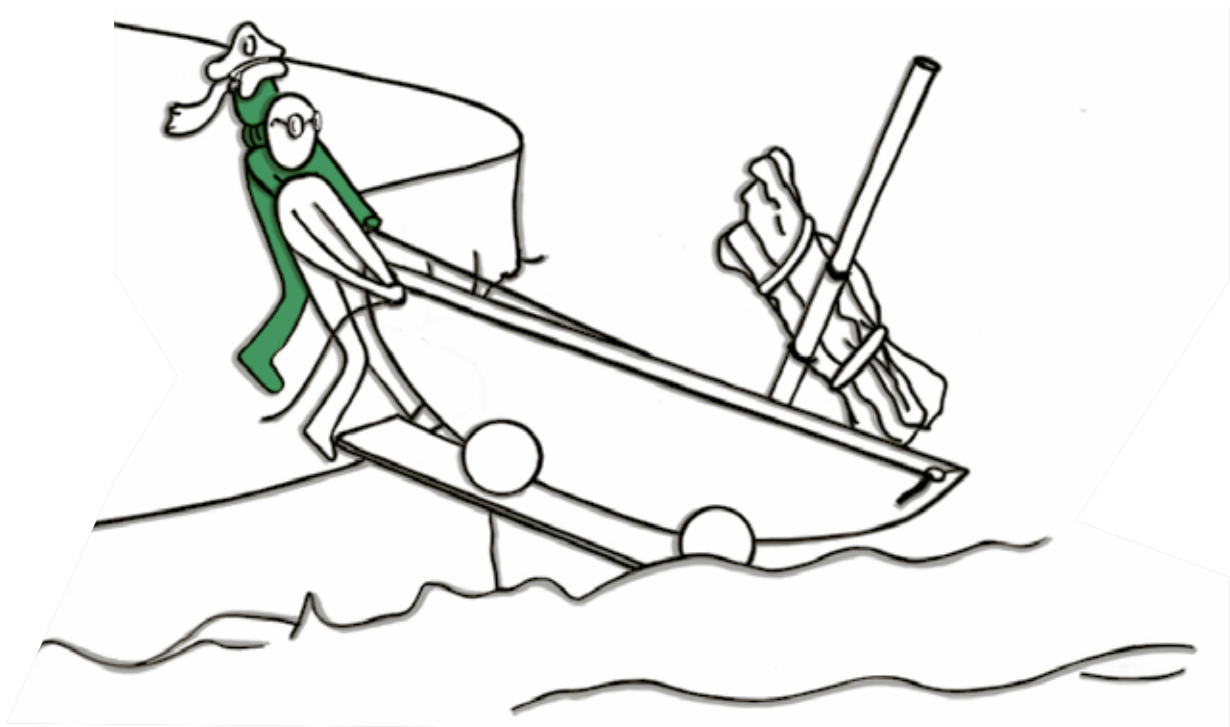
Thesis Development Phase

Defending the research proposal marks the transition to a more autonomous phase of the PhD process. In this stage, candidates need to deepen their research interests, collect and analyse data, and develop their own perspectives and expertise.

One of the common challenges facing candidates in the thesis phase is to transpose their ideas, insights and contributions into coherent writing and test their ideas beyond institutional confines. As a rule, this means that supervisors will now follow rather than guide candidates on their further journey. While PhD candidates may now need less orientation than in earlier stages of the process, this does not mean that supervision becomes superfluous. On the contrary, many PhD students struggle with the complexity of their field and with the many decisions they need to make along the way. Thus, supervisors should be readily accessible in this phase to help candidates consider their decisions, make sense of and organise their insights and overcome unforeseen obstacles and struggles.

Generally, supervisors may encourage PhD candidates to use PhD colloquia, where they will receive feedback on their analysis or written work.

Other methods that help candidates structure their work include preparing commented outlines of their thesis, drafting executive summaries or giving elevator pitches about their contributions to research. Establishing supervisor-candidate interaction, best described as "freedom within boundaries", is thus an important step in this phase of the PhD process.

Critical processes in the Thesis Development Phase

Stagnation

Concerns that a candidate is struggling to progress their project should be addressed sooner rather than later. While the fear of further demotivating candidates may impede discussion, voicing one's concerns is often the better option. It enables supervisors and candidates to jointly develop a problem-solving strategy and to implement corrective measures in a timely manner. When procrastination endangers thesis development, a precise and fine-grained plan, including manageable deadlines and professional counselling, may help reassure candidates of the feasibility of their project.

Moreover, if improvements are not sufficiently evident over a more extended period, terminating the project may prevent a drawn-out struggle with unsatisfactory outcomes.

Perfectionism and over-ambition

Perfectionism and overambition in PhD students may deteriorate resources and lead to frustration. Supervisors may help candidates counter and overcome such negative developments by adopting a pragmatic approach, giving developmental rather than evaluative feedback (see Table 2, page 13) and fostering a culture of sharing drafts and preliminary versions in a sheltered atmosphere.

Insufficiently incorporating feedback

Even when delivered in the most appreciative way, feedback may be hard to accept and trigger strong defensiveness. As feedback is paramount to academic socialisation, it may jeopardise project development. In such cases, PhD supervisors should consider discussing with candidates how best to share critical feedback, i.e. for the benefit of further progress. It may also be important to underline the importance of learning to cope with critical or poorly delivered feedback from others, which PhD students may receive during conferences or journal reviews.

Isolation and unresponsiveness

While things may seem to be going well, not hearing from candidates for a sustained period of time may suggest difficulties. A candidate may be struggling emotionally, going through a difficult time, having writer's block or facing an impasse — reasons enough to feel ashamed or, even worse, not to seek help. Encouraging PhD students to activate their social networks and to seek support in such situations is key to promoting well-being in academic life.

Counselling

The University offers various counselling services. These provide students and supervisors with expert support in difficult situations. In case of doubt, it is important to access these services as resources — sooner rather than later.

Thesis Submission Phase

PhD students often experience the final stage of their project as requiring considerable energy for writing, reworking and editing their thesis.

As a PhD supervisor, consider supporting candidates in the following ways:

Help find time to write
Finalising a PhD requires building momentum and focus. One important prerequisite is to give PhD students enough time and space to immerse themselves in this final stage. Supervisors may ease the burden on candidates, for instance, by renegotiating workloads or by temporarily relieving them of certain duties.

Help see the big picture
Another common problem for PhD students at this stage is recognising the value of their contributions. This sometimes proves difficult as they have already been involved in the project for a considerable time. When giving feedback, highlighting contributions rather than focusing on developmental issues may help candidates once again establish an external perspective on their thesis.

Help see the end
Given the scope of PhD projects, candidates may struggle to realise when their thesis is ready for submission. Crucial support at this stage involves providing "ready-to-submit" criteria and helping candidates identify parts or sections of their thesis that may be safely omitted.

Help understand the editing process
Finally, planning the final steps may require supervisors to provide appropriate guidance. It helps candidates greatly if supervisors clearly establish if, how and when they are willing to read and comment on draft chapters. It is also important to tell candidates how long this will likely take.

Being clear about official procedures and deadlines is equally crucial.
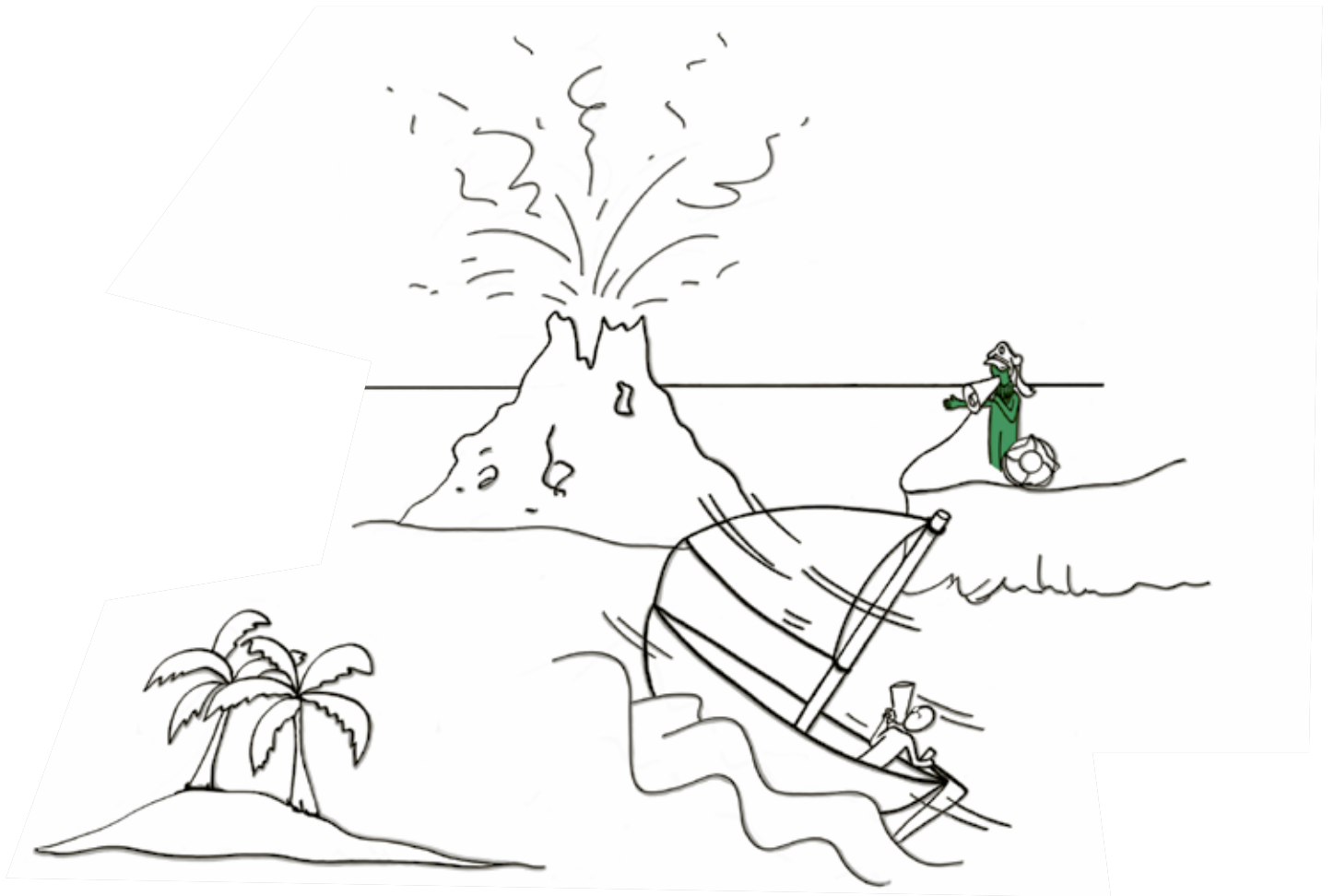
Completion and Celebration Phase

When candidates submit their thesis, supervisors face a new challenge: They need to step out of their supervisory role and transition into their role as examiners. This may prove challenging after a long process of supervision, leadership, (in some cases) co-authorship, and the development of personal familiarity. Following the defined institutional process for thesis evaluation and PhD colloquia helps formalise this phase and facilitates candidate examination and grading.

Assessing the PhD

When one has followed the PhD journey from beginning to end and has substantially supported its development through all phases, it may be initially hard to grade and assess the written PhD thesis in an balanced manner. Here, the PhD committee plays a crucial role in reaching a fair evaluation and composing the formal assessment note. Consider also adding developmental and affirmative feedback to the PhD assessment and sharing these with the PhD candidate, as these offer a great chance for additional personal learning.

Similarly, it is important to shape the PhD defence in a constructive manner. At the official defence, candidates demonstrate their command of their subject. While the PhD defence accounts for 25% of the overall PhD grade and thus requires a formal assessment, it is also a chance to shape a positive episode in the candidate's academic life. For example, taking after the defence the possibility to underline some of the achievements in a short laudation in front of the whole team and/or a short bilateral feedback will likely be fondly remembered by the PhD candidate.

Reflecting on the PhD journey

In the completion phase, PhD students often need to consider their next career steps. In this stage, thoughtful acknowledgement of one's former PhD student's academic potential and professional skills may be greatly appreciated, and it may prove crucial for a graduate's further decision process.

Moreover, the journey's conclusion allows both supervisors and candidates to reflect on the process. Providing excellent PhD supervision is challenging, so supervisors may consider asking candidates about their experience and for feedback on their supervisory style. Given the complex nature of PhD supervision, learning and improving one's capacity to support PhD processes will be a continuous undertaking throughout a supervisor's academic career.

Celebrating the PhD journey

Finally, and maybe most importantly, a completed PhD is a reason for celebration. Earning a PhD is often strenuous, so organising and participating in celebrations or festivities emphasises the value of a positive and appreciative organisational culture based on mutual trust and respect. Completing a shared journey spanning several years deserves celebratory acknowledgement. Supporting a PhD thesis to completion requires a lot of effort from PhD supervisors and is an accomplishment. Celebrating the PhD degree can, therefore, also serve as an opportunity for you, as a supervisor, to take joy and pride in having supported candidates in their scientific and personal development and having allowed the creation of insights with impact.

From insight to impact.