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Introducing new Doctoral students to the wonders of Biology

Background: Biology at Karlstad University has been a research education subject since 2000. In the years thereafter, the subject experienced times with few and times with more doctoral students, which affects the introduction of the doctoral student. Previous research have demonstrated the importance of a structured and inclusive environment and the need of mentoring and networking as a part of the induction program¹. To ease and improve the doctoral student introduction the supervisors at the department have developed a guide, The Biology PhD student handbook - Introducing new Doctoral students to the wonders of Biology. The handbook contains 10 pages of informative text and provide some basic information to help the doctoral students to get a good start from a social, a professional and a practical point of view. Recently, newly admitted doctoral students further developed the handbook. The supervisors at the department also initiated a mentor system where each new doctoral student were introduced to an older doctoral student to be a "buddy" for the new student to get comfortable in his/her new role as a doctoral student.

Aim:

As the need of both the handbook and "buddy" system varies over time, partly depending on the number of admitted students, our aim was to investigate if the doctoral students have found the handbook and "buddy" system valuable. Our aim was also to capture whether the handbook and the "buddy" is introduced equally among the doctoral students arriving, and if the continuous work with the

handbook and the introduction of the "buddy" system need to be improved and how this can be made.

Method:

An anonymous survey was sent to 15 doctoral students of the subject asking the following question: Are you a PhD student in biology didactics or a PhD students in biology? Do you find the PhD handbook valuable? Do you find the "buddy system" valuable? The idea is that the handbook should be a living document, which is adjusted continuously by both supervisors and PhD students. How well do you think this process works? There were also free space to write additional thoughts and suggestions of improvements.

The results of the survey were followed up with inviting all doctoral students to a joint discussion.

Result and discussion:

According to the doctoral students, the continuous work with the handbook did not work so well, due to lack of time and unclear division of responsibility. There was also some differences between how the biology and biology didactic students were introduced to the handbook and the "buddy" system. For those who were introduced to the handbook and the "buddy" system the experience was that it gave good support especially in the beginning of the doctoral studies contributing in a positive way to their well being and management of their doctoral studies. The response rate of

1) Holmström, O. (2018). Ensamarbetande doktoranders perspektiv på forskarutbildning och doktorandtillvaro: Ämnesmässig ensamhet, den informella socialisationens kraft och erkännandets betydelse. *Högre utbildning*, 8(1), 14-29.

the survey and the number of doctoral students participating in the discussion was low, about 30% making the result less reliable. However, the result of our study was in line with previous research demonstration that establishing a solid foundation early in the doctoral journey is very important since it contribute to doctoral student success and timely program completion ². Based on the results of our study three suggestions for future improvement were generated:

1. Before arriving the newly recruited doctoral student will receive a welcoming letter sent from the department and main-supervisor, the letter will include not only the usual information but also introduce the handbook and inform that upon arrival their own “buddy” will be introduced to them.
2. The subject representative will be responsible for choosing a “buddy”.
3. The graduate student representative will collect input for revisions of the handbook in the doctoral student group and communicate this to the subject representative. The subject representative will be responsible for revising the handbook at least once a year.

2) Stevens, D.D., Caskey, M.M. (2023). Building a Foundation for a Successful Doctoral Student Journey: A Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Investigation. *Innov High Educ* 48(3), 433-455. doi: 10.1007/s10755- 022-09624-7.