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“Mind the gap” - supporting early academics in the transition from research studies to research careers

With few exceptions, the literature on academic socialization tends to focus on graduate studies and supervision practices. Graduate students' definition of a good supervisor refers to the reliability, confidence in the student, encouragement, knowledge, and sharing of information (Denicolo, 2004). Listening skills, encouragement and debate, continuous feedback and support, enthusiasm, warmth and understanding are also defining ingredients of a good supervisor. Good supervision also includes supportiveness, high levels of communication, accessibility, frequent informal interactions, helping students on time (Lovitts, 2001), and treating the student as a junior colleague (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988). Satisfactory professional collaboration between graduate students and supervisors is also essential for successful doctoral training (Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007).

In the emerging scholarship around early academics (a category which in Swedish higher education includes post-docs and associate senior lecturers), however, academic socialization is often discussed in relation to mentoring (Ambler et al, 2016; Denart et al, 2015). Research on mentoring early academics suggests that while some need more support than others and while there are disciplinary differences, early academics share a common need for professional development support (Denart et al, 2015; Nästesjö, 2024). Self-reports from mentoring programmes also show that there are differences in mentoring preferences that influence programme participation and demographics may have a substantial significance. Given its function as a “status passage” in contemporary academia there is a need to further investigate the need for professional development support for early academics and how this support could be organized.

In this paper we address this need for early professional development support by interviewing 15 early academics within three years after completing their PhD:s at three Swedish higher education institutes: Blekinge Institute of Technology, Mälardalen University and Halmstad University. The aim is to gain a deeper understanding of early academics' experiences of scaffolding, including supervision and mentoring, in the early stages of their academic careers and to inquire how this scaffolding may be developed further. What scaffolding is needed to fill the gap between research studies and research careers?

Keywords: Academic socialization, Early academics, Post-doc, Associate senior lecturers, Supervision.

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