

Supervisory Collaboration

Introduction

What is the key factor that contributes to a PhD student's ultimate success? A good research idea, adequate financial support, or perhaps the quality of supervisory collaboration? Researchers have focused on the latter. Results from a global survey conducted by Nature in 2025 among over 3,700 PhD students indicate that supervisors who consciously strive to support and mentor their PhD students have more satisfied mentees¹. As indicated in Polish doctrine, a supervisor should simultaneously fulfill the roles of a mentor, expert, liaison, and navigator.²

According to Article 190(1) of the Act on Higher Education and Science (hereinafter: PSWiN), scientific supervision over the preparation of a doctoral dissertation is provided by the supervisor or supervisors, or by a supervisor and an auxiliary supervisor. A supervisor must hold at least a habilitation degree (dr hab.), while an auxiliary supervisor must hold at least a doctoral degree (PhD). A person who does not meet these requirements may serve as a supervisor if they are an employee of a foreign university or scientific institution and the relevant authority recognizes that the person has significant achievements in the scientific field relevant to the dissertation. At the same time, a person cannot become a supervisor if, in the last five years, they have 1) supervised four PhD students who were removed from the doctoral program due to a negative mid-term evaluation, or 2) supervised at least two PhD candidates whose dissertations did not receive positive reviews as required by law.

The legislator has not defined many specific obligations for supervisors in the PSWiN. A PhD student, in consultation with their supervisor or supervisors, develops an individual research plan, which includes, in particular, a schedule for preparing the doctoral dissertation, and submits it to the institution running the doctoral school within 12 months from the start of studies. If an auxiliary supervisor is appointed, the plan is submitted after being reviewed by that supervisor (Article 202(1) PSWiN). Doctoral training concludes with the submission of the dissertation accompanied by a positive opinion from the supervisor or supervisors (Article 204(1) PSWiN). From this, it can be inferred that the main task of the supervisor is to support the planning and subsequent execution of research up to the submission of the doctoral dissertation.

¹ What makes PhD students happy? Good supervision, Nature, nature.com/articles/d41586-025-03416-7 (accessed: 02.12.2025).

² J. Szczepkowski, Supervisory Care, in: W. Kiełbasiński, M. Dorochowicz (eds.), The Status of PhD Students in Act 2.0, Toruń 2022, p. 27.



As P. Mroczkowski rightly notes, “this list of duties is far from complete. In reality, the tasks and roles of a supervisor are shaped by established academic customs and internal regulations in the given doctoral institution. The manner in which a supervisor performs their duties is also significantly influenced by the specifics of the scientific (or artistic) discipline.”³

Analysis of doctoral school regulations shows that in many cases, supervisors have additional obligations that do not directly result from the law. This stems from the autonomy of the institution running the doctoral school, which allows expanding the supervisor’s responsibilities according to the needs of a particular unit.

For example, at the Doctoral School of the University of Life Sciences in Poznań⁴, the supervisor’s duties are very broadly defined. These include, in particular: 1) providing scientific supervision over the PhD student in the context of preparing the doctoral dissertation, 2) ensuring funding for research and optimal conditions for preparing the dissertation, 3) supporting the student in developing the individual research plan and its schedule, 4) assisting the student in research and teaching work, 5) organizing and supporting the student both substantively and methodologically in completing professional practice (e.g., conducting teaching activities), 6) assessing progress in the student’s research and teaching work in the semester report, 7) reviewing mid-term and final reports on the implementation of the individual research plan, 8) participating in the mid-term evaluation, 9) cooperating with the director of the doctoral school, in particular informing them about significant issues affecting the implementation of the dissertation, including those impacting the submission deadline, and 10) reviewing documents submitted by the PhD student.

At the Doctoral School of Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw⁵, the supervisor’s duties specifically include: 1) providing scientific supervision over the preparation of the doctoral dissertation, including offering the PhD student necessary substantive and methodological support in their research, 2) ensuring that the PhD student has appropriate working conditions and resources for conducting research, 3) assisting the student in developing the individual research plan (IPB), 4) reviewing the student’s applications and requests submitted during the course of their studies, 5) periodically evaluating the student’s progress in research, particularly the implementation of the IPB, in the form of an opinion for the student’s annual report, 6) cooperating with the

³ P. Mroczkowski, in: W. K. Kiełbasiński, B. Pietrzyk-Tobiasz, M. W. Kuliński (eds.), *Law on Higher Education and Science. Commentary [in:] Law on Higher Education and Science for Students and PhD Candidates – Practical Commentary*, 1st ed., 2024, comment on art. 190, Legalis.

⁴ §19 of the Annex to Resolution No. 33/2025 of the Senate of the Poznań University of Life Sciences dated April 23, 2025, *Regulations of the Doctoral School of the Poznań University of Life Sciences*.

⁵ §18 of Annex No. 2 to Resolution No. 444 of the Senate of the University of Warsaw dated June 26, 2019, concerning the adoption of the Doctoral Schools’ Regulations at the University of Warsaw, *Regulations of the Doctoral School of Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw*.



director of the doctoral school to monitor the student's progress, and 7) cooperating with the auxiliary or co-supervisor if one has been appointed.

An important aspect is monitoring the fulfillment of supervisors' duties. Increasingly, doctoral schools are introducing evaluations of supervisors' work (for example, during the PhD student's mid-term evaluation). This approach is applied at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, where the Committee, during the mid-term evaluation, assesses the scientific supervision provided by the supervisor or supervisors, or the supervisor and auxiliary supervisor, taking into account the rules for supervisory care defined by the director of the doctoral school after consulting the school council. This regulation is then approved by the Rector. Many institutions also implement documents such as a supervisory care plan or agreements signed by both the PhD student and the supervisor.

The importance of supervisory care is also recognized in the evaluation of doctoral schools. One of the criteria is the quality of scientific or artistic supervision and support in conducting research. Detailed criteria include: 1) the method and criteria for appointing or changing a supervisor, co-supervisor, or auxiliary supervisor, 2) methods for ensuring high-quality collaboration between PhD students and their supervisors, including resolving conflicts between the student and the supervisor(s), 3) methods for providing PhD students, including those with disabilities or who are parents, with proper conditions and support for implementing the study program and individual research plans, as well as preparing dissertations, including access to necessary infrastructure, 4) the extent to which outstanding specialists employed outside the institution are involved in activities supporting PhD students in conducting research, including providing scientific or artistic supervision, and 5) thorough verification and evaluation of the work of supervisors and auxiliary supervisors, as well as institutional actions aimed at improving the quality of their work.

This analysis shows that more and more institutions recognize the crucial role of the supervisor during doctoral training. Ultimately, the supervisor—through their competence, engagement, and working style—proves to be one of the most important factors influencing the satisfaction and eventual success of PhD students. Implementing transparent rules, clearly defined duties, and tools for evaluating supervisory work is therefore not merely a formal requirement but a key element for ensuring high-quality doctoral education and the well-being of PhD students.

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