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Doctors in the Making: Overcoming the Challenges of Transition

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The PhD journey is, for many students, formative training into the world of academia. It is here that scholars gain a deeper understanding of the technical as well as the social aspects of their discipline, and where they gain the knowledge required to conduct sound research (Golde, 1998; Golde and Dore, 2001; Meschitti and Carassa, 2014). This pivotal educational phase is quite distinct from other stages in higher education. One of the main challenges at this level is the individualistic narrative of the PhD (McAlpine *et al.*, 2012). Doctoral candidates often feel isolated as they navigate their new role as doctoral *student* and academic *professional* (Golde, 1998; Meschitti and Carassa, 2014). In order to promote successful socialisation, we advocate here for student-led transition support that is facilitated by the Higher Education Institution (HEI). Such an initiative should function not as formal induction, but as a peer-learning social space that fosters the development of Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1999, 2010).

Transition to Researcher: Challenges and solutions

In conversations with our peers, it became increasingly clear that the cohort of doctoral students in our department experienced a general lack of support to transition from being traditionally taught students to autonomous learners and researchers (Gardner, 2008; Orrell and Curtis, 2016). A few among us had a research-oriented master's degree, affording some skills to facilitate a relatively smooth transition, but others with different backgrounds struggled with the change in educational context. At the heart of this problematique

was the heterogeneous and individualistic nature of doctoral students, projects, and supervisors. In this environment, responsibility for these students' transition is often disproportionally placed on supervisors who shape their learning trajectory. While the individualised student-supervisor relationship brings key benefits (Guerin, Kerr and Green, 2015; Reguero *et al.*, 2017), it also has drawbacks. Most notably, supervisory teams vary greatly in terms of time, pedagogical skill and knowledge of the relevant methods for the project, as well as the expectations they place on diverse students.

Narratives that reinforce individualistic practices still prevail in some parts of academia (Burman, 2003; Cotterall, 2013). The hardships associated with the PhD might be defended as a necessary rite of passage, and the often implicit notion of meritocracy can incentivise the continuation of problematic practices. As Burman (2003, pp. 113–114) notes, academic identities are often forged on the narrative of "the lone pioneer, the discoverer of uncharted territories, that has its own imperialism and machismo, and certainly (whether as cause or effect) isolation". Naturally, the strength of such narratives vary depending on context. Within our department, we found mixed views about the PhD journey, some of which included such narratives of (necessary) hardship and isolation.

Having in mind the challenges of transition identified above, we designed an introductory programme for doctoral students that would function as a starting point in their transition. In its simplest form, the DTW model is a structured week of events, primarily for new PhD students, situated at the beginning of their doctoral journey. It offered an opportunity for them to get to know the rest of the PhD cohort and other research staff, and to gain a basic introduction into (social) scientific methods and the academic profession more generally. It is important to note at this point that transition is viewed here as a non-linear process. The DTW is an important, but by no means exclusive, way to help students navigate their new social, professional, and academic environment.

Doctoral Training Week

The first iteration of the DTW took place in 2018, and featured 23 sessions, which were delivered as a mixture of workshops, seminars, panel discussions, and informal meetups. Relevant sessions were identified in consultation with our peer group. The sessions were then divided into different types, with a focus on a rounded programme for the rounded researcher, both in terms of

paradigms, methods, and professional skills. The academic sessions were intended to introduce or remind students of the foundations of social research, starting with philosophies of science, building on to research design and increasingly specialised sessions on specific methods. The format of seminars and workshops, many of which were delivered by other PhD students, allowed for peer learning and fostered collaboration with different attendees (see table 1).

Alongside the academically driven workshops and seminars, we also prepared short morning sessions that focused on non-academic issues related to transition. These provided practical guidance, primarily for international students. While such topics are traditionally covered by the institution during formal induction days, the DTW offered an opportunity for current PhD students, who themselves had previously navigated the same issues, to share their knowledge. The break-out room with coffee and biscuits throughout the week provided a physical and social space for participants to interact with each other and with staff; peer learning and group work encouraged students to learn from each other; and a reception and pub quiz marked the end of the training week, allowing attendees to socialise in a more informal manner.

The initiative was student-led, though executed with the assistance of faculty. A bottom-up approach meant students felt empowered to shape their own PhD journey and to complement their supervisory guidance with a wider range of perspectives, both academically (to acquire the necessary skills to conduct their projects) and professionally (to help navigate their new role). Moreover, to ensure the DTW was inclusive for all, participants were able to select and attend those sessions of relevance to them without the need to attend the entire week of training. We also made audio-visual recordings of the sessions and printed material available online through a dedicated DTW website.

A key component of what became the over-arching DTW Project was setting up a reliable feedback process to ensure an adequate and acceptable fit with the university as an evolving, learning organisation. The sessions were planned for 20 attendees, with most sessions reaching full capacity or above. A questionnaire was distributed after each session. The questionnaire contained 3 quantitative and 3 qualitative questions. The gathered data, including a headcount, would allow us and our successors to make informed decisions about what sessions to repeat, and what changes to make, as we would move ahead with planning for

the next iteration.

The satisfaction levels and attendance was high, and participants expressed both praise for the sessions, the initiative, and the idea of institutionalising it at our university. In terms of expectation management, it is important to note that these sessions were perceived as an unexpected positive, which all other things being equal can be assumed to provide a certain novelty effect, making the self-reported satisfaction higher than it might have been for a thoroughly institutionalised programme. The satisfaction as reported on a 5-point Likert scale from -2 (Poor) to +2 (Good) was consistently above 1 (Alright), and averaged on 1.75 for the individual sessions, and 1.85 for the overall week. While we are conscious of said novelty effect, the very positive image reported does correspond with both verbal and written feedback in formal and informal discussions with delegates and attendees.

The DTW was reported to have created a safe, social space that inspired and guided the start of doctoral students' fledgling research whilst simultaneously introducing them to other students and staff. It fostered a sense of welcoming and belonging, ensuring that new students could more adequately identify their particular training needs and critically assess the choices they are expected to make. The DTW was student-led and student-inspired, informed by the organisers' personal experiences. Importantly, it imparted a unique experience to those who attended and to those who planned it.

Conclusion

This article has explored the transition into the life of a doctoral student. It has emphasised how this transition is unique, as it features starkly different life situations that students transition from, as well as a clearly demarcated (albeit heterogeneous) role the doctoral student transitions into. We have reviewed literature on this transition, and argued that many barriers are still in place, preserving sometimes unnecessary hardships in the doctoral journey. In order to address the issues of transition, we designed and implemented the Doctoral Training Week initiative at our University.

All in all, the DTW emerges as a sound concept that has the potential to be imitated in any institution that offers doctoral training. Challenges remain and, as all things worthwhile, it takes investment and work to ensure its continuing success. We hope that in sharing our process and results we have laid a common

groundwork making it easier for others to emulate and for the betterment of all. Over time it will be interesting to document potentially measurable effects for institutions adopting the DTW model, such as higher completion rates, higher quality of research (if such can be quantified) and higher student satisfaction. These outcomes, however, are outside the scope of the current paper. If we as doctoral students have learned anything so far, it is to be wary of drifting outside our scope.

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