

Supporting doctoral candidates establish Dissertation Writing Groups

Introduction

Doctoral candidates often spend a lot of time working alone and miss the exchange with fellow researchers. Especially at the University of Vienna we have the feeling that doctoral candidates often are only loosely connected to their faculty and do not feel integrated into the everyday university life. We from the Center for Doctoral Studies strongly believe that early stage researchers need to be integrated into their community to be able to do good research. This notion is backed by current research on existing Dissertation Writing Groups which has shown that its members profit in various ways from the regular meetings. Writing Groups offer:

- emotional support during the research and writing process
- positive group pressure in order to meet self-set time and work deadlines
- continuous feedback on one's own work
- strengthening analytical and social competences by giving feedback
- the possibility for further scientific cooperation and exchange.

In summary, the Hume Writing Center of the Stanford University notes: "Dissertation Writing Groups help advanced graduate students complete their work by providing a supportive environment for the exchange of critical feedback." (Lee/Golde, Starting an Effective Dissertation Writing Group, p. 2)

The Center for Doctoral Studies supports doctoral candidates establish Dissertation Writing Groups which can help counteract many problems resulting from isolation.

Getting started

According to our experience, Dissertation Writing Groups, which consist of 4 to 5 doctoral candidates of similar disciplines and stages, are the most stable ones and good to manage. The groups we started so far (since 2011 all in all 28 groups) are very diverse. The main principle of each Dissertation Writing Group is self-organisation: it is up to the group itself to decide when, where, how often and for which topics it will meet. The group decides individually what "material" it will work on. This material ranges from (drafts of) chapters of the dissertation to abstracts or presentations for scientific conferences to empirical data.

The Center for Doctoral Studies supports interested doctoral candidates to start an effectively working Dissertation Writing Group by:

- organising the first meeting
- giving input on the work and organisation of Writing Groups
- helping the group to clarify its expectations
- providing rooms for meetings (if available)
- providing information on the topic feedback and what they need to pay particular attention to when giving feedback.

Interested PhD candidates who wish to be part of a Dissertation Writing Group and meet regularly with fellow colleagues can contact the Center for Doctoral Studies. They need to provide us with information on their discipline/field of study, the stage of their doctoral thesis project and if they wish to be part of an interdisciplinary or disciplinary writing group. This is important for the matching of the groups. We collect messages from interested persons and try to match them to others. Once we have assembled a group we invite these PhD candidates to a first meeting at the Center for Doctoral Studies. At this first meeting they can meet the other doctoral candidates and decide if the group fits their needs and wishes. After this first meeting, which is moderated by us, the groups organize themselves. One or two months later we contact them again and ask them how they are doing. In case of problems we offer them another moderated meeting suited to their needs.

Challenges and recommendations

One of our main challenges is reaching enough PhD candidates. We try to match the groups according to disciplines, but sometimes we only have one person from a discipline and it takes quite a while until another person of this discipline signs up for a group. This creates quite long waiting times for people of some disciplines.

Another challenge is the high break-up rates. We normally start with 5 people per group. Usually it only takes a few months and the first two people have left the groups for various reasons. We have invested more energy in trying to match the groups better, but this does not really lead to a positive result, as break-up reasons usually are more personal reasons. Sometimes the PhD candidates fail to inform us that they are about to leave the country. So far, our monitoring has not been systematic. The groups that manage to prevail are perceived as a real support group by the members.

„The Dissertation Writing Group is really helping me in bringing my work forward. The good ideas, the atmosphere and the ambitions of my colleagues are really contagious. The group helps me phrase my thoughts in a way, that I am better understood, also by colleagues who are not familiar with my topic”, says a Phd candidate who shortly joined a Dissertation Writing Group. In future, we would like to closer monitor the groups and regularly contact them so that we can better understand needs and problems of Dissertation Writing Groups.

Literature tips

Lee, S. and Golde, C. Starting an Effective Dissertation Writing Group, Hume Writing Center Graduate Student Workshop, Stanford University (can be downloaded at the Website of the Graduate Resource Center of the University of New Mexico: <http://unmgrc.unm.edu/writing-groups/>)

Wegener, C., Meier, N., & Ingerslev, K. (2014). Borrowing brainpower–sharing insecurities. Lessons learned from a doctoral peer writing group. *Studies in Higher Education*, (ahead-of-print), 1-14.

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