

Report on activities as academic liaison at the Bielefeld Graduate School of History and Sociology (BGHS) for the period from 01 April 2012 through 30 June 2014

1. The intent to establish the position of an academic liaison for the members of the BGHS is stated in the BGHS's application of the BGHS for the second funding period (2011). Following the approval of the application, the Graduate School Executive Board of the BGHS created this position. I took on this function beginning 01 April 2012 at the request of the Executive Board.

2. The doctoral researchers were informed about the role and the functions of the academic liaison by the bodies of the BGHS; the BGHS website states: "An academic liaison is available to support all BGHS members in cases of conflict in the supervisory relationship." The academic liaison acts as an ombudsperson for the members of the BGHS in all matters relating to the BGHS. He advises members and assists them in solving problems that arise in the everyday routine of the BGHS.

3. Over the past two years, approx. 20 members of BGHS – all of them doctoral researchers – have turned to the academic liaison. Most of them established contact by e-mail, in some cases following advice received from the BGHS office. All conversations were treated as confidential.

4. One group of problems giving rise to contacting the academic liaison is caused by inadequate or unsuitable "footing" between the doctoral researcher and his/her supervisor. Doctoral researchers evidently often have trouble adjusting to their new roles as doctoral researchers after completing their diplomas or master's degrees; they frequently do not know what is expected of them and therefore take their experiences while studying and completing their studies as their starting point. In contrast, professors generally consider the doctoral researchers they advise as junior researchers and young colleagues, expect them to be independent, and act on the basis of a kind of fiction of equality. In most cases, these difficulties in adjusting are overcome in the initial months of the relationship between supervisor and doctoral researcher: doctoral researchers learn how to adapt to their new roles and also to the individual styles of their supervisors in the colloquia and from the other doctoral researchers with the same supervisor. In some cases, however, the diverging expectations remain into the 3rd or 4th semester of the doctoral period: for example, the doctoral researcher understands suggestions coming from his/her supervisor to be "work assignments" and completes them; in the eyes of the supervisor, this is a sign of a lack of independence and originality.

→ Although it is true that such difficulties in defining the relationship between supervisor and doctoral researcher could be clarified and remedied relatively easily in a three-way conversation with the parties involved, it is advisable to inform doctoral researchers more clearly and more decisively about their new roles and their supervisors' styles from the beginning in order to avoid or minimize such misunderstandings.

5. A second group of problems with which I was concerned as the academic liaison includes cases in which doctoral researchers sought to change to a different primary supervisor, or conversely, the primary supervisor resigned from that role, referring, e.g., to a loss of trust. The reasons for changing supervisors are extremely heterogeneous; they may have substantive reasons (e.g., the line of argument in the dissertation has developed in a direction with which the supervisor cannot agree), but they may also include problems in the personal relationship. Even if changing supervisors was smooth and conflict-free in a few cases, it generally does take up a lot of time, attention, and energy in most cases, particularly as both parties involved must overcome experiencing disappointment.

→ The possibility to change supervisors easily during the first 12 months, provided in the BGHS guidelines, is appropriate and important. After this period, changing supervisors should be the exception. Doctoral researchers should not avoid conflicts with their supervisors by changing supervisors; supervisors should not make things all too difficult for doctoral researchers they have supervised if they change supervisors. Since a change in supervisors is often motivated by a combination of substantive and personal reasons, it is reasonable to bring in the academic liaison.

6. Doctoral researchers who prepare their dissertations in the context of a research project are confronted with the problem which topics and data they can claim for their dissertations and which belong to the project and are used in publications of the research project. These are serious problems for which guidelines on the part of the funding organizations exist. As academic liaison, I was also concerned with cases of this kind; however, the opportunities for an academic liaison to take action in such cases are very limited.

→ If a dissertation is to be prepared within the context of a project with third-party funding, everyone involved is urgently advised to lay down in writing, before work on the dissertation begins, which rights a doctoral researcher has regarding the topics and data of the project.

7. Several times, I was contacted as academic liaison by doctoral researchers who were disappointed by the grades given their dissertations. In some cases, they contacted me after the defence, in others while they were still writing their dissertations or during the grading phase. The fact that the grade given the thesis does not always correspond to the doctoral researchers' expectations and hopes is actually trivial. Yet it emerged from the doctoral researchers' accounts that their expectations regarding the grading of their work were nourished by the signals they received from their supervisors when discussing individual parts of their dissertations. In some cases, the discrepancy between their expectations and the grade given was caused by the fact that the doctoral researchers still had time to revise their dissertations (and had informed their supervisors of this), but that the supervisor had recommended submitting the dissertation in its present version. It was not unusual in this context for the doctoral researchers to complain that feedback from their supervisors had been too infrequent and not sufficiently specific. The doctoral

researchers believed their dissertations were progressing well and were taken by complete surprise when the assessment and grade were much worse than they had been led to expect.

→ The problem described here presumably has various reasons. For one thing, the switch of roles from supervisor to evaluator at the end of the dissertation often does not proceed entirely smoothly. For another, the supervisors place a level of trust in their doctoral researchers – especially those who have gone through a highly selective application procedure for their scholarships – that, in combination with the social proximity that develops over the course of supervising the dissertation, reinforces the doctoral researchers' beliefs that everything about their dissertations is just fine. Against this background, it is advisable that supervisors give more specific feedback, not shy away from conflicts in the process, and not keep the doctoral researchers in the dark if they have significant qualitative objections to their work.

8. A further group of problems because of which doctoral researchers turned to me concerned questions that go beyond the scope of an academic liaison's functions. Some were problems belonging in the realm of counselling or psychotherapy. Others were cases involving questions of labour law and thus also were outside an academic liaison's area of responsibility. Nonetheless, a kind of solution-oriented conflict counselling was conducted in these cases as well, providing referrals to other guidance and counselling services.

→ It might be advisable to form a more systematic network among the proliferation of various counselling services at the university (academic liaison of the university, BGHS, the German Research Foundation, various other foundations, psychological counselling centre, Legal Services of the university, staff representation, etc.) in order to coordinate their work and to make the system more transparent to doctoral researchers.

07 July 2014

signed, Jörg Bergmann