



# TO BE A SUPERVISOR

Cramérsällskapet  
November 20, 2020

# Aila Särkkä, Mathematical sciences, Chalmers and GU

- Ph.D. in Statistics, 1994, University of Jyväskylä, Finland
- Teacher, researcher, supervisor
- Have supervised 7 Ph.D. students and co-supervised 5
- Currently the main supervisor for 1 and co-supervisor for 1 Ph.D. student.
- Deputy head of the department (responsible for Ph.D. studies)

# Supervisor's role

**Task:** To help with the transition from a student into a researcher who participates in the discovery, interpretation, and communication of new knowledge.

- To help to plan the studies (both research and courses).
- To be a support person and discussion partner.
- To have regular meetings with the Ph.D. student.
- May not be needed if everything is going well but should be there when needed.

The Ph.D. student bears the primary responsibility for attaining the doctoral degree.

# It is important to get a good start

- Agree on how to work together, how often to meet, and discuss what is expected from the Ph.D. student (and the supervisor).
- We have started to use a "tool" that is intended to help the supervisor and Ph.D. student to agree on how they see their collaboration during the Ph.D. studies.
- Should first be filled in by both parties independently and then discussed together.
- Can be repeated.

# Expectation "tool"

1 It is the supervisor's responsibility to select a research topic

1 2 3 4 5

The student is responsible for selecting his/her own topic

2 It is the supervisor who decides which theoretical framework or methodology is most appropriate

1 2 3 4 5

The student should decide on the theoretical framework or methodology they wish to use

... (12 statements total)

# Individual study plan (ISP)

- As its best it is a living document
- Important for the Ph.D. student, for the supervisor, and for the department
- Follow-up meetings

# Common difficulties

- Difficulty to write
  - *Quite common especially in the beginning of the Ph.D. period*
  - *Encourage the Ph.D. student to write down something, not necessarily complete sections or paragraphs or even sentences.*
- Lack of communication
  - *Most conflict situations between Ph.D. students and supervisors are due to lack of explicit communication.*
  - *Talk and talk, and involve others early on*

# Feedback

- Giving feedback is important, both positive and negative.
- If things are going well, say that, but don't say so if things are not going well. Don't give incorrect feedback.
- Give feedback after a seminar, talk, poster presentation etc.
- Don't wait too long to give feedback on a text.

# How to give feedback?

- Think about why (motive), when (be timely, often), and how (be specific).
- Some Ph.D. students like to get very straightforward comments, with others you may have to be more careful.
- Weak and strong students, or 1st and 3rd year students, may need different kind of feedback.
- Encourage the Ph.D. students to give feedback to you.

# A good supervisor (colleague)

- has time, has “the door open”.
- knocks on the Ph.D. student’s door every now and then.
- comes to meetings on time.
- is quick to answering emails and commenting on manuscripts.
- communicates early if she/he is away/not available.
- is reliable.
- cares about the Ph.D. student.

# A good supervisor (in every day work)

- given an initial research framework, gives freedom to the Ph.D. student and leaves more and more space for the Ph.D. student to develop and implement his/her own ideas.
- takes the student seriously and listens to his/her opinion.
- lets the student try his/her own ability but still follows the student carefully along the way.
- helps the student to keep focused.
- is friendly but at the same time professional.
- works WITH the Ph.D. student.

# A good supervisor (networking and career planning)

- pushes the Ph.D. student to go to conferences and workshops to present his/her research.
- involves the Ph.D. student in her/his (international) scientific network and helps him/her to build his/her own.
- towards the end of the Ph.D. studies gives input on planning the future career.

# It is not always easy...

- One has to be
  - *teacher*
  - *researcher*
  - *support person*
  - *role model*
- Supervisor – Ph.D. student relationship is a very special relationship.
- Every supervisor – Ph.D. student pair is different.

## Finally, a quote from a parent

”Before I had any children, I had four theories how to raise a child. Now, I have four children and no theories.”