

Lunch & Learn: Debate



Each year new students take on the task of writing their Master thesis. For some students, this is not an easy task as they have something extra in their lives to struggle with, for example, a mental health condition, physical challenges, etc. These vulnerable students may be hard to supervise in the same manner as for regular students. Vulnerable or challenged students need to be guided to balance their specific needs for supervision with the professional setting of the supervision purpose.

This short article introduces the role of a supervisor in relation to vulnerable students with mental health conditions. By drawing on Erik Stavnsager Rasmussen's experience, it will shed some light on the subject and give some good advice for those who are supervising or contemplating supervising vulnerable students.

Supervising Vulnerable Students

Whether they are vulnerable due to mental health conditions such as depression or anxiety or physical challenges due to an accident or chronic illness, vulnerable students have different types of challenges when starting the thesis process. Erik's advice in this article is based on personal experience, setting the collegial debate scene.

1. Considerations before saying yes

Before agreeing to supervise a vulnerable student, it is essential to know that these students often require a different approach as they struggle with more things than just the thesis itself. While you will need to be more hands-on in the thesis process, you will also use much energy to help them think positively, build their self-esteem, keep up morale, and sometimes wonder or worry if they are all right.

So first consider, "Am I the right person? Do I have the energy to do this, and if you are not, then it is okay to say no.

2. You are not their psychologist

Always keep in mind that you are their supervisor and not their psychologist or psychiatrist. It is perfectly fine to let them tell you about their challenges without trying to solve them. Vulnerable students have a great need to talk about this to feel understood and free of judgment, but it is crucial as a supervisor to keep in mind that advice and treatment are best left to those specializing in their specific condition. Listen to them, show empathy but keep away from advising on their mental health.

3. Confidence and Motivation

A lot of vulnerable students lack confidence and do not believe that they can succeed. Maybe they have already tried and failed. As a supervisor, you need to be a counterweight to that negative voice by having a positive attitude, encouraging the student, believing in them, and planning the process. This is where motivation comes in. They might not believe in themselves and cannot see a future where they have succeeded. By helping keep the goal

and progress in mind, vulnerable students might realize that they are moving forward towards their goal.

4. The importance of the first meeting

Vulnerable students are anxious about the first meeting with their supervisor. They might think that the supervisor will judge them harshly or not like them or find them unfit to meet the level needed. That is why the first meeting is so important. Consider what you are going to say, ask and do – and be positive. They will notice everything if you look annoyed if you look at your watch, if your tone of voice changes, and might think that you do not have the time to talk, or maybe they are a nuisance.

Erik tries to create a comfortable setting by acknowledging and encouraging them, giving them information about himself. For example, by small talking initially, giving them a bit of himself to calm them down and get them talking. It takes much energy to focus on body language and keep up the positive energy, but it is vital for creating good dialogue.

5. Ensuring progress

Being overwhelmed and lacking confidence can make it hard for vulnerable students to keep a sense of perspective in the overall process of the thesis. It is essential to help them plan it in smaller steps, handling one step at a time, moving forward.

Every vulnerable student has different needs. Some might need help finding relevant literature; others might benefit from a 10-minute call weekly to catch up on where they are or to keep up motivation. Some vulnerable students worry a lot about the thesis, and by being a cheerful voice, the supervisor can help them manage these worries and maybe keep them from being overwhelmed and giving up.

ALWAYS start the meeting with positive comments. The students are typically very sensitive to anything that can be interpreted as unfavorable.

6. Feedback from colleagues and management

Supervisors seeking help with a vulnerable student always have the possibility of talking with colleagues or management. Sometimes discussing specific challenges may give ideas or solutions on managing the supervision or providing an outlet for concern or frustration. In some cases, it might be helpful to talk to SPS (Socialpædagogisk Støtte) or the university psychologist.

Vulnerable students can also contact SPS (sps@sdu.dk or 6550 1800), who helps with applying for dispensation, or the student counselor. If the student is already being counselled by SPS, you can ask their permission to contact and cooperate with their counsellor.

About

Erik Stavnsager Rasmussen, Associate Professor at the Department of Marketing & Management, has shared his experience with being a supervisor for vulnerable students writing their Master thesis.

Erik has been at IMM since 1997. His research interests are primarily within International Entrepreneurship.



Questions to debate:

- How do you find the balance between time and energy that is needed for supervising vulnerable students?
- What is your role?
- When can you say stop? What if the student calls you in the evening or during the weekend
- The supervision will often take more time than you are paid for – should you ask for extra hours?

Contact Info for SDU Counsellors

SPS - Socialpædagogisk Support

sps@sdu.dk
+45 6550 1800

For students

University Psychologist

Pernille Reumert
reumert@sdu.dk

For employees