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# A pedagogical mentorship model for doctoral students

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## **Abstract**

In Sweden, the pedagogical training of doctoral students varies significantly across universities. While most institutions include at least one mandatory course in higher education teaching and learning, some programs lack this requirement entirely. Whether doctoral students are encouraged or even allowed to take multiple pedagogical courses also varies greatly. This paper explores the benefits of formal pedagogical mentorship as part of 21st-century doctoral education. It outlines a mentorship model developed and piloted at the English Unit at the Centre for Languages and Literature at Lund University and discusses its potential extension to other subjects. Doctoral students also share their perspectives on how a structured mentorship model can support them during their doctoral studies as well as help prepare them for their future academic careers.

## **Introduction**

In Sweden, the pedagogical training of doctoral students varies quite substantially. At most universities, doctoral education usually contains at least one obligatory course in higher education teaching and learning, but there are also programmes without this requirement. There is also variation as to whether students are encouraged, or even allowed, to include more than one course dealing with pedagogical matters in their education. Doctoral students may also be offered opportunities to teach, but these appointments are seldom based on carefully thought-through plans that address the students' individual competencies and needs. The links between theory and practice – what pedagogical courses cover and what teaching conventions are applied in their home departments – may also be unclear.

Addressing such issues, this paper discusses the benefits of formal pedagogical mentorship as an integrated part of modern doctoral education in Sweden and presents a mentorship model that has been developed and piloted at the English Unit at Lund University.<sup>1</sup> The model aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice and provide doctoral students with the full set of skills that are required in today's academic job market. The model was piloted by the authors of this paper, a team of university teachers and doctoral students. We tell our story primarily from the perspective of the teachers initiating the model in sections 2, 3, and 4, and primarily from the perspective of the doctoral students in section 5. In section 6, we bring the two perspectives together in our joint outlook on possible future implementation of our model.

### **Why pedagogical mentorship is needed: the current situation**

The need for pedagogical mentorship can be placed in the context of a general broadening of foci in doctoral education, both in Sweden and internationally. In a specifically Swedish context, Brodin & Sonesson (2022) have identified a shift in approaching doctoral education purely as education to approaching it also from the viewpoint of students' future employability and societal needs, and, reviewing international research on doctoral education, Xia et al (2025) talk about a push for a more "rounded" doctoral education (Xia et al., 2025). In both contexts, doctoral education has increasingly become a collective endeavor, as opposed to earlier times when it built almost exclusively on a tight expert-apprentice relationship between one supervisor and their student (see e.g., Kempe et al., 2022). In Sweden, we see this in the requirement for a formally appointed co-supervisor, as well as in the installation of a board of supervisors where doctoral students' progression and overall situation can be discussed in various more or less formalised ways. Also, doctoral students increasingly co-author articles as part of their education, particularly in Scandinavia (Solli & Nygaard, 2023).

In this changing landscape, a more structured approach to the pedagogical training of doctoral students is arguably a natural next step, especially considering the rising status

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that pedagogy is receiving in many universities, evidenced both in the introduction of pedagogical merit schemes that recognise teaching as more on a par with traditional research related activities as well as in the increased focus on pedagogical competencies in academic appointments. Calls for such development are also being voiced. For example, various quality assessment reports from Swedish universities request pedagogical practice and mentorship as part of doctoral education (Björnermark et al., 2023), and in the latest quality dialogue reports from our own programme at the Joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology at Lund University (2023, 2024), the doctoral students point to pedagogical competencies as crucial for their future employability and request more opportunities for pedagogical courses and mentoring.

Calls for a more structured approach to pedagogical training have also been made in research on higher education, and here mentorship is often placed at the heart of the matter (Kruse et al., 2023; Xia et al., 2025). An early example is Silverman (2003), who argued that doctoral students need to be prepared for their teaching obligations by combining three domains – coursework, practica, and mentoring. According to Silverman, doctoral education should train future university teachers in lifting their gaze beyond their immediate classrooms and reflect on matters like syllabi, curricula, and the dominant teaching philosophies in their field, and for this, a mentor is crucial. We can add that ability to reflect is a skill that doctoral students need to demonstrate in their teaching portfolios as well (Winka & Ryegård 2024). The value of pedagogical mentorship is also recognized in a recent review of studies on doctoral education (Xia et al., 2025), in which the authors outline a model based on Silverman’s three domains but add a formalized faculty mentor for each doctoral student. Formalised mentorship, they argue, will help address the various challenges raised in the articles in their review, including unequal teaching opportunities across institutions, difficulties in transitioning into local teaching and learning cultures, and the types of biases regarding e.g. age, gender or ethnicity that doctoral students may face in the classroom (Xia et al., 2025).

It is clear, then, that we are not alone arguing for formal pedagogical mentorship to become part of modern doctoral education. Below, we present our views on what such a model could look like and what role the pedagogical mentor should have. The model has been developed at the English Unit at Lund University and piloted with four doctoral students who were, at the beginning of the project, in their first years of their doctoral education. Our approach to pedagogical mentoring is very much in line with recent research on the implementation of pedagogical development schemes and the

idea that “everyone involved benefits when mentoring interactions start from shared understandings” (Frueh, 2024). The motivation for involving doctoral students in the development work has been that they are best placed to provide bottom-up views of their own situation. Another motivation was that, as active participants in the planning and testing of ideas, they were contributing to their own pedagogical competency development, a fact that is also listable in their pedagogical portfolios.

## **Pedagogical mentorship model**

Our model emerged from observations about how the pedagogical training of doctoral students was approached on the local level in our unit: doctoral students have traditionally been assigned to teach various courses, mainly on the first- and second-term levels in English Studies, but there has been a lack of a systematic approach in facilitating this entry into university teaching. The subject’s staffing needs have also had priority over careful thinking about which teaching and learning activities might be a good fit for the doctoral students’ development as teachers. Most doctoral students take an obligatory introductory course to higher education pedagogy, offered by the Lund University Division for Higher Education Development (AHU), either before or at the same time as they conduct their first teaching. This course provides grounding in pedagogical theories and approaches, but we saw a gap between the course and what it means to teach in a discipline-specific context in a real-world classroom. There has also been a lack of opportunities for doctoral students to participate in peer observations of courses and in discussions of discipline-specific practices and teaching philosophies beyond the guidance of their thesis supervisor – something that our faculty’s quality dialogue reports show can vary greatly from supervisor to supervisor.

In response to this situation, we wanted to create a forum where doctoral students can translate their theoretical understanding of pedagogy into the context of our discipline – English Studies – and reflect on aspects of teaching and learning, both among themselves and with pedagogically experienced teachers. This is a much broader perspective than what can be offered in the context of a single course where doctoral students may be assigned to co-teach with more experienced colleagues. Despite being more experienced, the colleagues may not have attended pedagogical training in recent years, they may not have an interest in pedagogical questions, or they may simply lack the time to reflect on pedagogical practices with junior colleagues.

Our idea is simple: when a doctoral student enters the programme, they should be assigned an academic thesis supervisor (and 1-2 co-supervisors, as required by our faculty) as well as a pedagogical mentor. In the same way as the main thesis supervisor must be at the associate professor level, the pedagogical mentor should be a qualified or excellent teaching practitioner (i.e., have the qualifications recently introduced by our faculty). This will help ensure that, besides being experienced teachers themselves, the mentors have a grounding in recent pedagogical developments and thinking, a reflective approach, and a network of conversational partners (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009) and belong to the sort of academic microculture (Roxå, 2014) that benefit the doctoral student. By separating thesis supervision from pedagogical mentorship, we also hope to ensure that the thesis supervisors can focus on their main task: supervision of doctoral students' thesis projects. The mentors' task is, in turn, to help plan for the students' pedagogical competency development: when should they take the obligatory course offered by AHU? Does the student need/want to undergo additional pedagogical training? What courses should the student audit before they start teaching, and how does the auditing prepare them for their first teaching? Further, what courses should the student be assigned to teach as part of their education, so that they can build a teaching portfolio that shows breadth, depth and progression and makes them competitive in today's academic job market?

During the pilot stages of our mentorship model, we have drafted the general time-plan shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Prospective timeline for pedagogical mentoring.

In year 1, the doctoral student and their mentor will identify the student's needs and create, in dialogue with the thesis supervisor/s, a plan for their pedagogical development. This includes deciding on the coursework and identifying the courses and teaching where the student should do auditing. The mentor meetings provide students with opportunities for both reflection and significant conversions (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009) on matters such as linking pedagogical theory to the various disciplinary and

institutional conventions. During years 1 and 2, the mentor helps the doctoral student, in dialogue with the thesis supervisor/s and the subject's director of studies, to pick the courses where they should do their first teaching. Experience has shown that this will call for compromise between the subject's staffing needs and the doctoral student's needs; the mentor's role is to offer support and act as mediator in these negotiations. While the director of studies' main priority is, understandably, staffing, the mentor will be able to see, and communicate to the director of studies, why the doctoral student should be assigned to teach specific types of courses at a specific point in time.

During year 3, our model offers doctoral students an opportunity to co-supervise a Bachelor's degree project with an experienced supervisor in the subject. We know, from having acted as external experts for academic positions in Swedish universities, that supervision experience is a strong merit in an applicant's portfolio. As part of an earlier initiative (Lindskog, Manninen & Wadsö Lecaros 2024a), we have therefore created a model for Bachelor's thesis co-supervision, including an electronic Canvas resource that is aimed at supervisors (Lindskog, Manninen & Wadsö Lecaros, 2024b) and a term-plan listing activities and points that doctoral students and senior supervisors follow, when they co-supervise theses. This initiative was piloted in 2023 with doctoral students who were at the time in the final stages of their education. It has been implemented in our subject, with more doctoral students, in 2024 and 2025. The Canvas resource and the term-plan have been designed so that they allow any experienced supervisor to be paired with a doctoral student. The doctoral student will have an opportunity to both observe and practice providing feedback, as well as receive feedback on their performance, every step of the way. This is but one example of how we have built progression into our model: doctoral students need to have taught and practiced providing formative feedback on short course papers on lower-level courses, before they can act as co-supervisors of Bachelor's theses.

In years 4 and 5, when doctoral students must prioritize their thesis projects, the pedagogical mentor's role, as shown in Figure 1, is mainly to help them compile a pedagogical portfolio. As all students in the pilot round of our model expressed an interest in attending a specific portfolio course, offered by AHU, the mentor's role could be to help students translate the generic guidelines to a discipline-specific setting and conventions. In other words, their role is once again to support, not replace, the work of teaching and learning professionals.

## **Doctoral students' views**

Our participation in the pedagogical mentorship programme has provided us with both time and resources dedicated towards our early-career pedagogical development as university teachers. We view the pedagogical mentorship programme, which efficiently bridges the gap between theory and practice, as an essential complementary component to formal pedagogical courses offered at LU.

We feel that one of the most significant benefits of the programme has been the opportunity to translate theoretical knowledge into practical classroom experience, observation, and reflection. Being paired with experienced colleagues (mentors) allowed us to reflect on and critically discuss teaching approaches and philosophies in a supportive environment geared towards continuous development and peer learning. Here, observing the teaching practices of experienced colleagues served as a keystone in building awareness of different teaching styles and types of teaching (seminars, lectures, workshops, etc.) and in fostering a transparent, conversational space between early-career and senior staff around teaching practices. We experienced that our colleagues (besides our mentors) were happy to share, explain, reflect, and assist us in our development as early-career university teachers. Our mentors supported us in approaching and suggesting colleagues whose teaching we could observe; they also helped in planning both the observation and the post-observation reflection sessions. Another emergent benefit of the programme was that we, the doctoral students, gained a better understanding of how our unit was structured, what the reasoning behind the courses offered at both BA- and MA-level was, and which teachers usually taught these courses. This was something that strengthened our sense of belonging within our unit.

Although we all entered the pilot programme with subject-specific expertise, our prior teaching experience and pedagogical training from before starting the Ph.D varied. Early on, we discussed our varying levels of experience with our mentors to determine how they could provide us with personalised guidance, ensuring that we all benefited equally from the programme. One of the most rewarding aspects of the programme was the social community between us doctoral students. Through the programme, we had the opportunity to share experiences, exchange ideas, and support one another in our teaching development. The programme gave us all a communal goal to grow as teachers and a shared sense of investment beyond individual mentorship.

Throughout the pilot programme, the importance of compiling material for our pedagogical portfolios has been emphasised. The mentorship programme could be

further strengthened by adopting an even more systematic approach to documenting teaching qualifications in a pedagogical portfolio and preparing doctoral students for this aspect of the academic job market. A more systematic approach could mean designated time for reflective writing and advice on how to use pedagogical essays, projects, and other assessment productions as part of the portfolio.

As part of the programme, we doctoral students had the opportunity to present at the 2024 Lund University Teaching and Learning Conference with our mentors. Such opportunities to enhance our professional credentials are valuable in our early career stage and were therefore highly appreciated. We believe that a potential future mentorship programme should continue focusing on helping mentees build a strong, well-documented teaching profile for future academic careers.

### **Implementing the model in other subjects**

The mentorship model described above was developed at an institution that has sizeable undergraduate enrollment and where several colleagues have an interest in pedagogical questions. With some adjustments, the model is applicable in institutions where there are fewer teaching opportunities, or where no one is able to act as mentor.

The first requirement for a functional pedagogical mentorship programme that benefits all doctoral students is that a higher instance, such as the faculty, keep an up-to-date list of staff members across institutional and subject boundaries who are qualified to act as mentors. If a doctoral student's own department is unable to assign them a mentor, someone from another unit could step in. Although the external mentor might not be knowledgeable about all the subject-specific teaching practices and conventions, they would still be able to offer other guidance: they could help the student plan for pedagogical coursework, identify courses – either in the student's own subject or other subjects – where they can do auditing, and act as the student's conversational partners (Roxå & Mårtensson 2009). If pedagogical mentors are qualified or excellent teaching practitioners, they will be able to discuss matters like course syllabi, curricula, methods of examination, and how to deal with possible problems in the classroom in a wider context than their own discipline. Through their significant networks (Roxå & Mårtensson 2009), they will also be able to identify courses in other subjects where the doctoral student can get at least *some* practice in teaching, if their own institution or subject is unable to offer them such opportunities. The mentor and the doctoral student could also investigate if the university's teacher mobility programmes could allow

doctoral students to teach classes in their subjects and fields of expertise in a partner university. With some adjustments, even the Bachelor's thesis co-supervision initiative could be open to doctoral students from other subjects. Although the doctoral student will not be an expert in the field and may therefore not be able to provide all the necessary feedback on the thesis students' text drafts, they will still benefit from being able to observe and have structured discussions with the senior supervisor about their practices and the regulations that apply across disciplinary boundaries at our faculty.

## **Concluding discussion**

One question is unavoidable: where can faculties and departments find the funds for a formalized pedagogical mentorship programme for all doctoral students? Our position is that the funding and the hours for pedagogical mentoring must not be deducted from the supervision hours, as those hours are already limited. During the pilot year, it has become clear that the work we have described above – the regular meetings and all the other work that the mentor does to integrate the doctoral student into their networks and microcultures – will require approximately 40 hours across the student's entire education. This means that each doctoral student would “cost” the faculty approximately 7-10 hours more per year, beyond the existing supervision hours. It should be noted that the hours for Bachelor's thesis co-supervision should always be compensated separately; at our own institution, doctoral students are allotted 40 hours each year that they can use for extra courses and activities. Their participation in the co-supervision initiative could therefore be “paid” by some of these hours: our estimate is that they would need about 15 hours for that purpose, while the senior co-supervisor, who is the responsible supervisor for the Bachelor's thesis, should get the “usual” hours for the supervision work.

For the doctoral students, the hours spent on the auditing and on the meetings and discussions with mentors and other senior colleagues could possibly come from the hours allocated for course work. While this is not without problems – there are doctoral students who need those hours for courses that benefit their thesis projects – there are also (many) doctoral students who would like to earn more credits in pedagogical coursework than is currently possible. Another point that needs to be made in this connection is that doctoral students who teach their first courses tend to spend much more time on preparing their teaching than they get compensation for. With the help of a pedagogical mentor, the time it takes to prepare the teaching can hopefully be reduced to a reasonable level.

The ultimate question that universities and programmes will need to answer is, then, whether 40 more hours per doctoral student is too high a price to pay, in view of the benefits that a formalized mentorship programme will bring. In our view, the price is low. It is after all an asset to a university and programme to educate future academics who are not only qualified researchers but also highly competent teachers who have a wide set of skills and competencies that they can make use of in the classroom.

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