

A heterogeneous group of curious people



By Birgit Bonefeld

The Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Aarhus has more than 300 PhD students. A substantial part of the research being performed at the Faculty is carried out by these PhD students, during a period of typically three years of employment. However, no two PhD projects are easily compared.

The research carried out at the Faculty represents a wide range of scientific disciplines, spanning from computer programming and epidemiologic statistics to qualitative questioning of study populations. Research topics range from nano-technology to epidemiological examinations. This heterogeneity is naturally represented in the very different topics of the PhD projects. This diversity is also seen in the educational background of the PhD students, e.g. medicine, natural sciences, dentistry, nursing, psychology, engineering, and

political sciences, to name a few. About one-third of the enrolled students have a different background than a medical master's degree. Additionally, the PhD students are recruited from many different nationalities; approximately 20% of the enrolled students have an academic degree from another country than Denmark.

A PhD degree does not come cheap, since it requires salary- and running-costs for a period of at least three years. The financing of a PhD study also varies; some of the PhD students

receive a fellowship stipend from the Faculty of Health Sciences, while some others have clinical or scientific positions in addition to their PhD studies. The majority, however, receive their salary- and running-costs from private funds and EU projects obtained by either the student or the supervisor(s). Often, the task of providing sufficient finances for the PhD project is ongoing throughout the PhD period.

With all these differences, what are then the similarities between the Faculty of Health Sciences' many PhD

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students? Firstly, all of us have an academic degree, and all of us have written an accepted PhD application in order to become a PhD student. We are all governed by local and national regulations, e.g. the Danish Research Council, the University of Aarhus, the Faculty of Health Sciences and maybe the institute, department or the private company where the project is physically carried out. All of us have at least two, but often more, supervisors and most of us work with people from different professions in an active and dynamic research environment.

As a common driving force, we share a large interest in the fields of health sciences, as well as the very best and most ambitious aims of making good research. We will all become familiar with the ups and downs of research with the difficult and continuous task of adjusting expectations, accepting compromises and limitations, practically or methodologically. When carrying out the project, some of us will take the direct path, whereas others will progress in various tempi. Often, a substantial part of the scientific results are obtained in the last period of the study.

Being enrolled as a PhD student you need to strike the fine balance between being a student and being employed and paid as a scientist, in relation to the Head of Department and supervisor(s), as well as to the other students and employees at the department. Your supervisor will expect you to generate results and take the responsibility for

planning and carrying out the scientific work, whereas other employees will regard you as inexperienced and without authority (which maybe even you yourself will do). Without having been through the process before, you will face the challenge of overseeing and planning the three year period. You may face hard decisions, even on a daily basis, such as choosing between "trying just a little more" on the original plan, before potentially quitting it and selecting an altogether new one. With a compulsory half-year evaluation constantly looming and your time-limited enrolment period, you do not have the time or flexibility to make too many mistakes.

The field of science is extremely dynamic, and when you conduct research that borders established knowledge and unexplored phenomena it may be difficult to predict the outcome of your effort. As you obtain ever increasing experience and knowledge in your research field, you may end up realising that the original plan is not satisfactory or even possible to carry out. Some of us will therefore have to re-evaluate the whole project midway due to unexpected development of the scientific work.

When facing these challenges it is of highest importance that you have the possibility to discuss small as well as fundamental issues. It is often very valuable to communicate with people carrying out a PhD project themselves, or who have recently completed it. The

importance of maintaining a network for trouble-shooting cannot be emphasized enough. Coffee breaks, institute seminars, journal clubs, and the annual PhD Day are fine places to enrich your network.

A PhD Association has been established, in which all PhD students are members. This is an excellent place to make new contacts, and to discuss problems and find ways of tackling them. Taking active part in the work of the PhD Association will additionally allow you to influence the formalities in the PhD educations e.g. the courses.

To carry out a PhD project is without doubt an intellectual and personal challenge. However, ending up after three years of intensive work with the final written thesis in hand will most likely make the memory of a sometimes troublesome period fade, to be replaced by the feeling of having succeeded.

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