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Academic Socialization and Supervision as Professional Practice

Dr Marc Torka
Research Group Science Policy Studies
WZB Berlin Social Science Center

The research project Professional PhD Supervision compares socialization and supervision practices in two different disciplines (physics and social sciences) and diverse organisational contexts in the German academic system. Socialization is the process by which students become colleagues and supervision is a relationship to support this transition. In Germany, this process was a highly internal and individual affair between the candidate and the academic mentor in a specific disciplinary context. Since 1985, this traditional apprenticeship model was supplemented by formally structured doctoral programs, such as graduate schools. In consequence the socialization and supervision process is structured by expectations of the academic profession and the formal organisation. This projects aims to get an understanding of this development from the perspective of the sociology of professions. Is the academic socialization and supervision process (still) a professional practice? (How) do new organisational structures impact on this practice?

Drawing on observations, focus groups, qualitative interviews with doctoral students and supervisors, as well as recorded interactions of the face-to-face supervisory meetings, I discuss four dimensions as to why supervision is a specific professional practice. Firstly, the production of independent researchers and new knowledge implies a structural strain towards autonomy; secondly, a preference for intellectual crisis rather than routine work; thirdly, self-learning in practice; and lastly, a working alliance which has similarities and differences with those of other professions. In conclusion, I will argue that new organisational structures impact on the academic socialisation and supervision practices but cannot change their nature.