Having the time of your life, or how to create a good research environment

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Author	Sabine Müller
Author affiliation	Wikimedia Germany
Author bio	Sabine Müller is currently Adviser for Education and Participation in the Digital World at Wikimedia Deutschland. Before, she was a research consultant for humanities and educational research as well as career development at the head office of the Leibniz Association. She holds a DPhil from Oxford University where she also worked as senior subject tutor for German Studies at St John's and Magdalen College as well as affiliate postdoc on embodied cognition and narration.
Author social links	Sabine Müller: LinkedIn
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"Researchers say that their working culture is best when it is collaborative, inclusive, supportive and creative, when researchers are given time to focus on their research priorities, when leadership is transparent and open, and when individuals have a sense of safety and security. But too often research culture is not at its best." ["What researchers think about the culture they work in", Wellcome Trust and Shift Learning (London 2020), p. 3 (subsequently referred to as "What researchers think")] The executive summary of the 2020 Wellcome Trust study on research culture goes on to describe how "many [researchers] are often missing out on critical aspects of good management ... [a]nd worse, many have experienced exploitation, discrimination, harassment and bullying." Notably, members of minority groups more often experience the latter.

These results echo those of previous surveys, such as those conducted by [Advance HE](#) or the journal Nature in the UK – and which illustrate that these issues are on the radar of public debate. (Woolston, 2019) The situation in Germany is hardly any different, though of course data in Germany is scarce and hardly sufficient to make any reliable statements about early career researchers's emotional situation. (Most notably, the German Centre for High Education Research and Science Studies (DZHW) runs a National Academics Panel Study since 2017 which promises to give further data on the condition and well-being of doctoral researchers.) Notably, existing studies are frequently a reaction to incidents that reached public attention (Albott, 2019), or rely on surveys by the concerned group such as by the networks of doctoral researchers of non-university research organisations. Accordingly, the existence of guidelines for managing power abuse or mental health are confined to institutions which have struggled with cases. Otherwise the silence on the topic by reputable research organisations such as the [DFG or the academies is overwhelming](#). The reasons for this gap may be manifold. German academia is not immune to the complex range of problems such as non-transparent leadership, a lack of inclusiveness, harassment or mental health issues which resist a positive research culture. Each of these issues by themselves has numerous causes, but all of them are amplified by a system which lays "an excessive focus on measuring performance" as well as institutional structures such as the accumulation of responsibilities and decision making as well as steep hierarchies. (Shore & Wright, 1999) It is the latter aspects which I would like to focus on as crucial elements required in order to foster a cultural change for a positive research environment, and which, compared to the bigger systemic issues could be rather easily fixed.

As a career development adviser in Germany, I was frequently confronted with the following "argument" during discussions with senior researchers about the working conditions of early career researchers: "It was like this when I did my PhD, so why should that not work nowadays?" I always wondered what exactly this was meant to say? Unpacking this claim to myself it seems to implicitly suggest 1) the person, too, did not attain their PhD in good conditions, 2) but the fact that they succeeded makes them think that it was not so bad after all. Is the rationale behind this that a "rough school" toughens people up to prepare them for academic life? In fact, I often also heard that doctoral researchers today are not only too sensitive but too demanding. But is the consequence that only people who are willing to toughen up stay in academia? Besides the questionable psychological rationale, I wonder whether we really think that this is what academia needs: tough personalities? Putting aside the universe of unconscious biases which is touched by such a question, shouldn't academic work and life not be guided – even more than any other branches of the labour market – by the principle of reason, multiperspectivity, openness, integrity and such, rather than of the dull workings of unconscious bias and self-perpetuation? And should the system not aim to do everything for those qualities to be able to unfold and thrive? Responding to such a statement from my own personal experience, I often felt awkward since I did not share this experience. And this difference in the culture of dealing with issues such as discrimination, mental health, diversity and welfare, as well as power abuse has struck me most notably upon my return to Germany after I had spent eight years at the University of

Oxford taking up a position in career development in a research organisation. My experience during my doctoral and postdoctoral research was a very positive one – in many respects, I had the time of my life - and I felt that encouraging people to create an environment for such a good experience would be crucial. In the following piece, I focus on some landmarks of this positive (!) experience in my academic career in order to point to how a fundamental change of culture needs to be human centered, and attend to individual experience.

I was granted a first memorable insight into a different mind-set before I left for my one year Master's, which led to my doctoral research at the University of Oxford. I was confronted with the choice between 32 colleges. I was inclined to apply at the college to which my future supervisor was affiliated – a thought which very much agreed with the logic of the German system I was socialized in where doctoral researchers are frequently not only naturally affiliated with the "Lehrstuhl" of their supervisors but also seem to enter into a sort of patronship relation expressed in the still prevalent German term "Doktorvater/-mutter". However, my supervisor asked me to consider that in case of disagreement or conflict, it would be advantageous to be able to have an independent college adviser to turn to. The sense of responsibility expressed in this thoughtfulness with respect to providing an environment to my advantage profoundly shaped my own actions along the subsequent years as doctoral and postdoctoral researcher, as senior subject tutor and lecturer at Oxford University and beyond. Supervision training might help, but can only partly address the care at work here. The ambition to promote your doctoral researcher, so that s/he can realise her/his potential is connected to a sense of duty to pay attention to the welfare of your supervisee. This attention is promoted and aided by structural aspects. Beside my supervisor – who I am lucky to say was a most conscious and inspiring researcher with whom I met every other week, and who conscientiously read every essay, chapter or anything else I ever submitted – I was then assigned a college adviser. In my case this person was an *éminence grise* in my field who, as tradition would have it, invited me to a talk at the fireplace and imparted his wisdom to me – and, last but not least, a faculty adviser who was there to offer further opportunities to talk about the programme of my thesis and to whom both my supervisor and I had to submit a progress report by the end of each term. Moreover, the degree at Oxford has a clear milestone system in which supervision and assessment are separated from each other: the vivas for the transfer of status as "Probationer Research Student" to DPhil Candidate after one year into your degree as well as the confirmation of status after two years is taken by two faculty members. The assessment of the submitted final dissertation lies in the hands of an internal and external examiner. This way of organization ensures that the role of the supervisor is focused to act as adviser and to support their supervisee as best as they can. Of course, this means some control for the supervision process: Failure to bring your supervisee to successfully finish their degree will not have consequences for any academic but is not as easily obscured by the possibility to drag the doctoral research on or by marking the thesis accordingly. At the same time, the shared roles opened the opportunity for me, as the supervisee to connect and frankly discuss with other senior academics who took my work seriously.

Thus, the transparency of a clear milestone system, which details what is expected from the student as well as the separation of the roles of supervision, monitoring and assessment, has the potential to minimise the risk of power abuse and lifts the weight from the relation between supervisors from the start. It affords the supervisee the opportunity to discuss her or his work throughout the process with various researchers, to gain more perspectives and develop an independence of thought and a network from the get-go. Combined with the opportunity to frequently share your intellectual thoughts with established experts in your field and beyond made doctoral and postdoctoral research particularly worthwhile.

I would like to add that as a senior subject tutor for German Studies I experienced the advantages of this disentanglement of examination and supervision for myself: the faculty assigns a committee which designs the end of year exams. Marking and assessment were organised anonymously in an annual rotating system of examiners. Both procedures entail multiple advantages: not only do they limit the power of tutor or supervisor but they also relieve both from that burden of power. Not being the examiner, you can truly fulfil the role as adviser, coach and teacher and accompany your students along their development. Reaching out to your tutor or supervisor is easier, if you do not have to fear any repercussion on your performance. In this context, I also learned to appreciate the carefully built college and university community which provided a network to support students and lecturers alike. It ranges from the so-called common rooms with their mentor for freshers and trained peer advisers to college and university counsellors as well support staff for people of various religious and ethnical background on campus. Coming from a German university, this amount of attention and care which unloaded over my head was at first rather overwhelming and I confess I thought it unnecessary. But over the years, I learned to appreciate this culture which aspired to keep people well and enable them to enjoy their time at the university. Especially later, as a senior subject tutor, when my contract stated in no uncertain terms that tasks comprised the welfare of my students, this community recognised the limits of my competencies and acknowledged the need for welfare offers.

Another major landmark remains the handling of admission and application procedures. Perhaps it is worth explaining that student admissions at Oxford is a highly professional and formal process which stretches over two weeks in December after the autumn term. Not only are we dealing with standardised applications which aim to highlight the potential of each candidate. Each applicant invited to interviews has the right to get at least two interviews with different academics to assess their performance. In fact, it is a very intricate system with the objective to select students with high potential, no matter their background. In my first year, I was asked to write the protocol for admission interviews and even for that rather small task, I had to complete an online course on legal liabilities, correct interview methods, harassment, discrimination and the mechanism of unconscious bias. As senior subject tutor responsible for admissions in your subject area, I had to take another, more extensive course with on- and offline elements. These courses were a necessary eye-opener to topics which had never been addressed, even in the student council of my German university. It set my expectations of what I consider to be a

professional application procedure and to this day I find it hard to accept that none of this type of elementary interview training, which raises awareness of everyone's unconscious blind spots concerning bias and awareness, is a required standard at German universities or research organisations. It would be easy to implement part of a structured onboarding for each and every academic at the university and at least make the recruiting procedure a bit fairer.

To sum up, I would like to make clear that I am aware that problems prevail in the UK, as the quoted Wellcome Trust study illustrates. I also want to point out that reason why welfare at Oxford and Cambridge is paid such attention is not entirely altruistic: for a long time, these Universities had to deal with the reproach of higher suicide rates – a critique which cannot be sustained (Hawton et al., 2012). In addition, it is often pointed out that these institutions are only accessible to elites, which, at an undergraduate level, is very true. At the same time, Oxbridge institutions understand that in order to attract the best academics they have to cater to people's wellbeing as human beings in every aspect. So strategic deliberations and monetary concerns are certainly central drivers for the implementation. However, this does not devalue the learnings from such an experience: a collaborative, open, transparent and overall friendly environment relies on the mind-set of the academics who acknowledge the responsibility for their supervisees. This mind-set is supported by structures that foster transparency, independence and exchange by clearly laying out the demands and milestones of a doctoral course (without the need to make people go back to school) by separating the roles of supervision, monitoring and assessment, by carefully building a community with low-threshold support structures catering to various backgrounds as well as training to raise awareness to biases, harassment, stress symptoms etc. None of these suggestions are new but maybe not enough people have experienced how powerful they can be in their small workings and, thus, not enough people can or want to pass on this kind of experience.

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