

# **INTRODUCTION FOR INTERNATIONAL PHD STUDENTS**

**- A BRIEF GUIDE TO PREPARE YOU  
FOR A NEW WORKING ENVIRONMENT**



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



AALBORG UNIVERSITY

Aalborg Centre for Problem Based Learning  
in Engineering Science and Sustainability  
under the auspices of UNESCO



# WELCOME TO AALBORG UNIVERSITY

**THIS BROCHURE IS AN INTRODUCTION FOR INTERNATIONAL PHD STUDENTS AT AALBORG UNIVERSITY.**

**IT AIMS TO INTRODUCE THE MOST COMMON ISSUES AND CHALLENGES WHEN COMMENCING AS AN INTERNATIONAL PHD. IT IS A STARTING POINT FOR SUCCESSFULLY ADAPTING TO A NEW WORKING ENVIRONMENT. IT IS ALSO A USEFUL RESOURCE FOR WHERE TO GET FURTHER INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE.**

Starting a new position is always an exciting and energy consuming affair. A lot of new things have to be digested and it takes time to take it all in. If you also have to move to a new country, and leave your relatives and friends behind, perhaps even close family, the transition is even bigger and more challenging. We hope this brochure will provide you with an entry point to your new working environment and enable you to identify what to take into consideration when starting out in your new working life.

## **YOU MAY EXPERIENCE CULTURE SHOCK**

One of the well-established experiences of moving abroad is that you may experience culture shock during the first few months of your stay. Culture shock is a psychological response to living in a new environment in which everything is unfamiliar, from food to rules of social interaction to the way one engages in the professional activities of writing and discussing. You experience a lot of uncertainty about how to behave, while at the same time lacking your usual social support network. Symptoms may vary, but some of them can be fatigue, homesickness, loneliness, lack of interest in trying new things, inability to work efficiently, sleep and food disturbances, irritability, an exaggerated need for cleanliness

## LEARNING THE NEW WAYS – MIXING THE SOCIAL NETWORK:

**“I THINK THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS THAT YOU NEED TO ACCEPT REALITY, AND YOU NEED TO CHALLENGE YOURSELF AND LEARN FROM OTHERS. I STAYED WITH MY OWN COMMUNITY, WHEN I GOT HERE, BUT THEN I MOVED OUT TO THE INTERNATIONAL RESIDENCE HALL – TO BROADEN MY PERSPECTIVE.”**



or unexplainable aches and pains. It tends to be worst around three months after arrival, and again six months after arrival.

### THE FIRST HALF YEAR

Good advice for getting through this in the best way is not to be too ambitious in the first period of time. Remember to make an effort to establish a social network and to balance spending time with co-nationals and Danes and other types of international students. Learning and adapting will be easier if you make sure to expose yourself to the new cultural habits on a regular basis. Other good advice is to make sure to align expectations with your colleagues. A clear and manageable plan of what you are expected to do – agreeable to you and your co-workers – is a good solution to discouragement. Alignment of expectations may need to be done more than once as the project develops. You may also want to think thoroughly about a strategy for balancing the different elements of the PhD – the projects, the courses and any teaching you may need to carry out – in order to ensure that time is well-planned. And last but not least, do take advantage of the experience of the ‘older’ PhD students – they have already travelled part of the journey. They are the ones who know most about what you are getting into.

### PUTTING TOGETHER A COURSE PROGRAM:

**“IN THE STATES YOU GET A COURSE PLAN FOR THE ENTIRE SEMESTER. HERE YOU HAVE TO PUT IT TOGETHER BY YOURSELF. I ARRIVED LATE, BECAUSE OF PROBLEMS WITH MY VISA, SO WHEN I CHECKED OUT THE COURSES, EVERYTHING WAS BOOKED. I GOT SO PANICKED, BUT MY SUPERVISOR HELPED ME. BUT IT IS VERY IMPORTANT AS A NEW STUDENT TO ASK, IF YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND. WHEN I REALIZED IT WAS NOT THE SAME SYSTEM, I STARTED TO ASK A LOT OF QUESTIONS.”**

### CULTURE SHOCK:

**“MOST OF THE TIME I FEEL VERY MUCH ALONE, AND I AM HESITANT TO DISCUSS MY PROJECT WITH ANYONE. I AM FEELING MORE RESTRICTED HERE – WHAT I CAN DO AND WHAT RULES I MIGHT BREAK. I WAS MORE RELAXED BACK HOME”**

# SUPERVISION AT AALBORG UNIVERSITY

## **ADDRESSING THE PROFESSORS:**

**“HERE WE CALL THE PROFESSORS BY NAME AND WE ARE COLLEAGUES. I HAD TO ADJUST TO THIS NEW SYSTEM. IN THE BEGINNING I WAS AFRAID TO ASK THE PROFESSOR. NOW I REALLY APPRECIATE THIS WAY OF LIVING AND WORKING.”**

## **ABOUT SELF-DETERMINATION:**

**“THERE IS A LOT OF SELF-MOTIVATION HERE. I DON'T THINK IT WAS VERY EXPLICIT FROM THE START. JUST, WHEN YOU GO TO A MEETING, YOU QUICKLY FIND OUT THAT OTHERS EXPECT YOU TO SAY SOMETHING. I GOT IT IN THE TACIT WAY AND ADAPTED. I LEARNED IT ALSO BY OBSERVING AND HEARING WHAT OTHERS SAID. WHEN I TEACH TODAY I SAY TO INTERNATIONALS, YOU NEED TO HAVE SELF-DETERMINATION.”**

You are enrolled in a Doctoral Program at the Doctoral School. Each program has a range of supervisors, and you will be assigned one of these. You may be assigned more than one supervisor, in which case one of them will be your main supervisor and the rest will be co-supervisors. Most often you will be placed in the research group of your main supervisor in his or her department. Workwise, you belong to this department, but in terms of your PhD obligations you answer to the PhD school, mainly through your supervisor. The PhD school is the body that governs the ten PhD programs.

## **THE HIERARCHICAL SYSTEM AT AALBORG UNIVERSITY IS VERY INFORMAL**

The hierarchical system is very informal at Aalborg University and usually very different from what most international students are familiar with back home. You are considered academic staff equal to the rest of the academic staff. As such you are treated as a colleague and an employee. On the micro-level, this means that high ranking academics like professors will address you in an informal way, and most of them will appreciate and expect you to call them by their first names. They will ask for your professional opinion and expect you to be rather frank about it.

## **YOU ARE OFTEN EXPECTED TO TAKE THE INITIATIVE**

In line with this you are often expected to take the initiative. Many international students find this quite surprising at first since they are more used to waiting for the initiative and guidance of the supervisor. At Aalborg University you are expected to form your own opinion about a lot of things related to the PhD, voice it and push for it. You will most certainly need to develop self-determination and initiative.



This type of conduct usually implies a lot of freedom of choice in your PhD. However, it also implies a lot of responsibility on your part, and you may not get as much help as you are used to. Each PhD student responds differently to this new conduct, and there should be a balance between the old and new. Discuss with your supervisor how to acquire new habits in a way and at a pace that are suitable for you. Questions and comments are much appreciated.

### SUPERVISORS HAVE DIFFERENT STYLES

Supervision at Aalborg University is not homogeneous. Like the community of international students, the community of PhD supervisors consists of different people. They will perceive their task as supervisor differently due to personal traits, the professional goals and practices of the field they belong to, their general background and the specific PhD project. The way they perceive their task may also change along the way. This is important for you to know because it will greatly affect your PhD project.

Knowledge production in the form of a PhD project can be viewed from different perspectives. In the following table, the goals and practices of PhD supervision are identified from three perspectives in line with the different roles of a modern university. Supervisors may of course be inspired by all three perspectives. The three perspectives are deduced from an interview study with twelve supervisors at the faculty.

What this all means to you, is that you will benefit from aligning your expectations with the kind of expectations your specific supervisor(s) has/have for you. The alignment is usually done in connection with the preparation of 'the 2 month plan' - an obligatory working plan for the entire PhD period that you have to prepare in conjunction with your supervisor(s) within the first 2 months. Again, you are encouraged to discuss these issues with your supervisors as they will affect the framework of your work.

<b>KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION</b>	<b>AN ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE</b>	<b>A MARKET PERSPECTIVE</b>	<b>A CHANGING SOCIETY PERSPECTIVE</b>
<b>GOAL OF SUPERVISION</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic contribution</li> <li>• A passionate professional</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Production of articles, phds and patents</li> <li>• Collaboration with industry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Global outreach</li> <li>• Educating academics to act as change agents</li> </ul>
<b>PRACTICE AS SUPERVISOR</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional sparring partner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project leader</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All round facilitator</li> </ul>

### CO-OPERATION WITH YOUR SUPERVISOR:

**“IT IS VERY IMPORTANT WITH COMMUNICATION. YOU SHOULD ALWAYS HAVE REFLECTIONS ON WHETHER THE THINGS ARE GOING RIGHT, FOR SUPERVISOR AS WELL AS STUDENT. THE STUDENT HAS TO BE MORE FOCUSED; YOU ARE ACTUALLY THE LEADING ONE IN THE PHD PROCESS. THE SUPERVISOR SHOULD MOTIVATE AND CRITICIZE BECAUSE NOBODY IS PERFECT. I WOULD SAY THAT THE COMMUNICATION AND THE ALIGNMENT OF MUTUAL EXPECTATIONS ARE MOST IMPORTANT.”**

# WORK CULTURE

## **BEING CRITICAL AND INDEPENDENT:**

**“I LIKE VERY MUCH THAT WE IN DENMARK HAVE A LOT OF DISCUSSIONS, AND ALSO THE GROUP WORK. THE TEACHER ENCOURAGES STUDENTS TO BE CRITICAL, AND THAT LEADS TO CREATIVITY, INDEPENDENCE AND THE LIKE.”**

## **HOW DO PEOPLE INTERACT PROFESSIONALLY**

In line with the very informal hierarchical system, you will probably find that people in general are very casual. Denmark is a low power distance culture, which means that status and power will be downplayed. Watching academics interact in a Danish setting, you will see a dialogue open to ideas and critiques from everyone regardless of their professional status. Professors will be willing to admit mistakes based on academic reasoning and questions are genuinely seen as sign of interest. Contributions of original ideas are very welcomed and in fact expected. The expectation to be original in one's research and to be able to critique the work of others is a trademark of research ethics at Aalborg University. This will certainly be a new habit for some international PhD students and can pose quite a challenge. The way to overcome it is to ask about it, watch it being done and practice it on your own; accept the fact that new habits take time to incorporate in a meaningful way.

Even on a very practical level you may notice the implications of having a low power distance culture. You will find that many academics find it quite normal and acceptable to discuss project issues in the coffee room, while fetching a new cup of coffee – intertwined with more social issues. They will attend some meetings and skip others due to their own planning and goals. They will work at home or stay at their offices as it fits their professional needs. However, every rule or norm is flexible. Some meetings are more obligatory than others, and people are expected to be on time for a meeting with a well-prepared agenda. Use your supervisor, your research group or other PhD students to find out how to navigate in the new jungle of norms and expectations.

## **COMMUNICATION STYLE AND SOCIAL INTERACTION**

The way of communication in Danish is very direct to the extent that the speaker or the writer is expected to make sure that the message is clear and understood. The listener or the reader should not have to guess or imply from the context what is being said or written. This has consequences both in terms of speaking with people and writing academic papers. When local people speak up, they will tend to be very open, and to the point early on in the conversation, they will usually not tiptoe around the subject or give small hints. In this sense Danish culture is a low context culture. Indirect or tacit communication via body

language or vague allusion will not necessarily be understood. If you come from a more high context culture, where the responsibility to understand the intended meaning rests on the listener or reader, implying that you are used to picking up on the context of what is being said, you may find it challenging both to cope with the directness and to get your message across to others. Particularly with writing, you may experience your supervisor pointing out that you are unclear or that you have to get to the point more quickly.

At the same time, however, you should not expect that Danes will speak up about everything in a social setting, unless it concerns them personally. Denmark is a 'neutral culture' where it is less common to express being upset at work. Thus, many Danes will tend not to speak up, if you or anyone else makes mistakes in social behavior. An easy way around this is to ask for feedback and invite it on a regular basis. With an invitation, most colleagues will welcome your request and help you understand Danish culture norms and expectations.

Many international students find it a bit of a challenge to get involved with Danes on a more social level. They experience that Danes can be rather reserved and keep to themselves. This may reflect the fact that Danish working life is more often separate from social life. In general, people tend to have many social relationships outside the sphere of work, and only socialize with a few of their colleagues. You can find out how it works in your research group by simply asking about social routines and get-togethers.

### THE ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

Even between academic and administrative staff there is the same expectation for politeness, acceptance and respect as there is between high-ranking academics and junior colleagues. Administrative staff plays an important role in the department and will be of great assistance and support to you as PhD student. Apart from assisting you with secretarial aid, they often have a coordinating role in the life at the department and at the Doctoral School, and will be able to guide you in the right direction in various situations. On a more overall level, the International Staff Office will be able to provide you with general and practical information on life at Aalborg University. See the contact information on the last page.



#### APPROACHING THE DANES:

**"I FIND THAT THE PERSONALITY OF THE DANES IS A LITTLE BIT RESERVED OR COLD WHEN YOU INITIALLY MEET THEM. AT FIRST THEY WERE NOT FRIENDLY, BUT THEN I GOT TO KNOW THE DANISH CULTURE AND THE DANES, AND FOUND THAT THEY ARE REALLY WARM."**

# A PHD IS NOT JUST A PHD AT AALBORG UNIVERSITY

Many things shape how your PhD project is put together and that is why there is a great variety of PhD studies at Aalborg University. Some of the characteristic differences are examined here.

## **GOAL OF PHD CAN VARY**

The goal of your PhD project may be linked to a bigger project in your research group or it may be linked entirely to your own agenda. In the latter, you will have a lot of freedom to mold the project as you wish and fewer obligations towards others. In the former, your project will be shaped by the overall goal of the bigger project and you will have a variety of collaborators. Likewise, if your PhD project is linked to an industrial firm, you have the benefit of real issues to work on, but you also have to pay attention to both an academic and an industrial agenda. This will not be the case with a purely academic PhD. Some PhD projects are very attuned to practice, emphasizing the development of you as a change agent, whereas others tend to be more focused on your theoretical contribution or the possibility of creating a patent.

## **INSTITUTIONAL SET UP CAN VARY**

To a certain extent the goal of your PhD is linked to the way you are funded. Some PhD students are funded by Aalborg University and some are not. Often, PhD students have mixed funding, such that other research bodies, agencies or firms participate in the funding – in Denmark or abroad. This typically affects the goals, the conditions

and the length of your engagement. For instance, some international PhD projects are funded by the home university, in which case the international PhD student is a visitor here and the employment rules of the home country apply. A very noticeable effect of different funding is that some PhD students have an obligation to teach during the project while others do not.

## **OUTPUT OF PHD CAN VARY**

Depending on your field, your PhD will involve a variety of activities such as laboratory work, computer simulations, action research, interview studies or theoretical contemplation. Many different types of output can result. One big difference across fields is the extent to which you are expected to produce a monography or a collection of papers. Different fields have different traditions. What you should do is frequently discussed between you and your supervisor in connection with the preparation of the 2-month and the 11-month plans that you prepare in conjunction with your supervisor.

These two plans make up the framework for your entire PhD project, and as the names indicate, they are made after 2 and 11 months. The 11-month plan is a revision of the initial 2-month plan and should be considered the final agreement about your PhD project. Your supervisor will tell you more about this, but please do not hesitate to ask about it. As you may understand from this brochure, being proactive and taking initiative is much appreciated at this university.





# WHERE TO GET INFORMATION, INSPIRATION AND GUIDANCE

## PHD NETWORKS

Being enrolled as a PhD student at the Faculty of Engineering and Science also means that you automatically become a member of PAU, the PhD association and network for all PhD students Aalborg University. PAU stands for "PhD Network of Aalborg University". More information about the network may be retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/groups/PAUNetwork/>

Some departments also have their own networks – ask at the department level.

## INTERNATIONAL ACCOMMODATION OFFICE

The International Accommodation Office (IAO) at Aalborg University helps to accommodate international guest lecturers and PhD students (staff). There are many practical matters related to accommodation, such as signing a tenancy agreement, allocation, rent, deposit, furniture, conditions for repayment of deposit, etc. The IAO is part of International office, which is a more general office primarily directed towards master's students. You may find relevant information here:

<https://www.en.aau.dk/education/international-accomodation-office/>

## THE HR DEPARTMENT (HUMAN RESOURCES)

The HR department at AAU is an administrative body for the entire university. The HR department handles personnel administration service for main areas and other parts of the university with regard to work environment, personnel policy, management and organizational development. They may help you with the various administrative tasks related to your employment:


[www.en.hr.aau.dk/](http://www.en.hr.aau.dk/)

## THE DOCTORAL SCHOOLS

Each faculty at Aalborg University has a Doctoral School with corresponding Doctoral Programs. The aim of the Doctoral Schools is to develop the Faculty's PhD studies and ensure their quality.

Read more about the Doctoral School here:

<https://www.en.aau.dk/research/phd/doctoral-schools>.



Information and quotations in this booklet come from an interview study amongst supervisors and their international PhD students at two Doctoral Programs at the Faculty for Engineering and Science at Aalborg University in 2012. The quotations are modified to ease the language. The study is financed by SCK (Statens Center for Kompetenceudvikling). It is supplemented by information from the booklet: Dimitrov, Nanda (2009). "Western Guide to Mentoring Graduate Students Across Cultures", the University of Western Ontario Teaching Support Centre, Canada. More information can be found there. This booklet is written by Pia Bøgelund, a member of the Aalborg Centre for Problem Based Learning in Engineering Science and Sustainability under the auspices of UNESCO. Contact: pb@plan.aau.dk Layout by Esben Clemens 2014

