Supervisory dilemmas

Dilemma 1

In the following I want to describe a common theme in a few troublesome situations that I had previously with Master students. I can well imagine that a similar problem will also emerge in the future during doctoral supervision. When giving feedback to a student there are sometimes situations when you have to be critical with students and you have to ask them to proceed in a way that differs from the path they have chosen so far. I have no problems in giving feedback to students when it is on matters which are directly related to the content of the thesis (for example, pointing out a mathematical error and giving a hint how to fix it), but sometimes one encounters a more general problem. One such example could be scheduling and working effort, if I get the impression that the student does not spend enough time on writing the thesis, the process slows down and the overall project schedule might become endangered. Another problem, which I sometimes encounter, is that students are not critical enough with their own writing and send me texts to read which contain errors that in my opinion the student could have easily spotted him- or herself, or if I get the impression that the student has simply not tried hard enough to solve a problem him- or herself. Finally, I can get upset when I mark errors in texts, together with suggestions on how to correct, and I re-encounter the same error in the next version of the text (at least if this happens several times in a row). All of these situations would call for an open and frank discussion of the problem in which I should explain to the student why I think that the particular circumstance causes a problem and ask him or her to change it.

I have however experienced that I find this kind of discussion very troublesome. I feel that the topic of the conversation is on a more personal level and that it is more a criticism on the student’s personality than on his or her work, and that makes it hard for me to phrase my concerns, since I do not want to be impolite or offending. I have experienced quite a few situations where I had an agenda of things that I wanted to say (“You have to hurry up, if you want to finish before the summer”, “I feel that you haven’t tried hard enough yourself to solve this problem”), and then I was afraid that I wouldn’t hit the right note and avoided the topic during our meeting or was surely too vague about it (and for example I hear myself saying things like “I see that this part was in fact a bit tricky”, when I do not really think this was the case).

I assume that this general kind of problem is common among supervisors, but I think that it has come to a point where I would say it seriously affects my overall supervision abilities, especially since I am so unsatisfied with myself about how I handle these kind of problems. I should perhaps add that I am in general a person who enjoys social harmony, avoids conflicts and I think I deal in general rather poorly myself with critique, even if it is constructive. I very much want to change this, but it seems difficult to find the right starting point and technique. In particular, I think that the relationship with a student to supervise is a rather delicate thing and I am very much afraid of spoiling the mutual trust with a comment that is understood in the wrong way.
Dilemma 2

What do you do when a doctorate doesn’t take steps towards independent research? Or, gets stuck to a point where continuing the doctorate seems unfeasible?

A student was accepted at X University and she asked if I could co-supervise her thesis, which I accepted. Her main supervisor was at X University, not at my University. In the beginning all went well; she passed mandatory courses and the introductory memorandum (about 1 year after beginning the doctorate) was accepted (problem formulation, research question, general plan for the thesis). Problems arose when the doctorate, who planned to write a compilation thesis, started to write her own articles. Her department at X allowed two co-authored articles out of four. I offered to co-author one, and she had already co-authored another article with others that she included. After that, she was on her own, but sadly enough, not even one of the remaining articles have been submitted to a journal as of yet.

At X the supervisor didn’t care so much about when the dissertation was due; I on the other hand was supervising on a distance. The doctorate worked very hard for weeks, months and even years, but whatever she sent to the main supervisor and me looked more like a letter to us than an article. The “letters” were full of good ideas and interesting findings, but a far cry from an article ready to submit anywhere. The first (part of the) dilemma can be formulated such as how do I as a co-supervisor balance the tasks of alleviating and creating pressure in a situation where the doctorate has two rather absent masters? The second is perhaps more intriguing: what do I do when I suspect that the doctorate does not have what it takes to take independent steps to finalize the thesis?
Dilemma 3

For this assignment I describe a situation I experienced during the supervision of a master student three years ago. This master student was very capable and proactive, and cared a lot about his project and producing good quality results for his thesis. He was working long hours and was quite independent in the laboratory. The relationship between us was overall good. However, I experienced continuous interruptions from his side, preventing me from getting my work done sometime. He was very eager to finish his thesis on time, and kept asking me questions or help in the laboratory when something was not working. As I wanted him to do the best possible work, and I felt responsible for the results of his experiments, I ended up spending too long time on his project. Especially during his last month before the thesis submission, I have probably spent more time on his project than on mine, sometime even dedicating hours rephrasing his thesis. At the end of the training, he was able to include very nice data in his thesis, and thanked me a lot for having so much care of him during the time he spent in our laboratory. From my side, I was very happy he considered me a good supervisor, but I also felt very much stressed as my work kept getting postponed and I didn’t earned any publication from his project. I was happy we did some good work together, but I felt I applied too much of the “open-door approach”. Ideally, I would like to become the “enabler” type of supervisor, and I think I try to apply most of the approaches described in this type of supervision profile. However, sometime, I still end up feeling too much ownership on the student’s project, and I probably leave my door open too often. How can I be a supportive, enabling supervisor, but still protecting my boundaries so that I can also do my own work?
Dilemma 4

I am co-supervisor of a PhD student, whom I’ll call J. Around 60% of J’s research happens within an H2020 project which I happen to coordinate. Therefore, to J I am both a co-supervisor and a project manager.

This is my first experience as an official co-supervisor, but I have had the chance to help out many PhD students before and I have observed the development of many PhD students in different institutions. My first impressions came from the university where I myself graduated PhD: a University in Italy. There, PhD research is mostly desk-research, studying, carrying out massive amounts of literature review and coming up with novel research ideas. Novel independent thinking is indeed stimulated, but a gap seems to emerge between the students and the rest of the world. The students risk not being able to communicate their research to different and diverse audiences, to pitch it to decision-makers, to make it relevant in real life situations, to procure funding which allow the research to be carried on. It almost seems at times what is produced is research for the sake of research, which ends up in a dissertation to be stored on a shelf. Is this the purpose of highest-level research? Or is there any kind of social outcome we seek? Does it depend on the discipline? If so, what is the trade-off we would like to pursue for engineering sciences?

At KTH, I confronted myself with similar ideas. I was told quite bitterly by experienced Professors in my Department that KTH is an educational institution, and, as such, our only aim should be to provide education to PhD students and allow them to study. Skills as teachers and managers shall be developed after the PhD is obtained. I am new and may be biased, but I tend to disagree. If a PhD student graduates after having done nothing else than pure research, she/he will spend the entire PostDoc time trying to learn how to manage, pitch research results, procure funding, supervise, relate to the real world, its issues and its complexity. While she/he should successfully do this all throughout the PostDoc, not learn how to.

My bias comes from the fact that my division is quite unusual in this sense: our research is carried out mostly in the frame of consultancy contracts by Governments and the UN, to understand how national x systems may be planned and how investments may be distributed. There’s a lot of space for research in the field and we more or less cover it. Yet, we must always keep a component of strong interrelation with policy-making. We all need to learn the above and we need to be exposed in order to learn (e.g. talk at high-level policy fora, present in front of diverse audiences and adjust our speech accordingly, teach and so gain deep understanding of what we do, micro-manage our tasks and slowly start managing other people, procure funding within our expert domain). Poor J seems to be caught in between these two different approaches. One mainstream institutional approach towards a traditional researcher paradigm and one more ‘external-world-driven’ approach. This creates confusion for him, as he feels pulled from both directions. He ends up not understanding the scope of his PhD, nor his rights and duties. And I am probably too biased to be able to clearly explain to him. The confusion has created tension for him, for me and between the two of us.