Strong working communities in the universities

A guide for better collaboration and academic feedback for research and teaching groups

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Foreword

Universities are high performance communities, populated with specialised, creative personnel who focus on doing their very best. A working life can be dynamic and include lengthy tough stretches on your own. But focusing more on collaborating can boost wellbeing and the quality of core tasking.

In this magazine, we make recommendations for how. It starts with management and the collaboration forums where the frameworks for collaboration are established and discussed. And it continues with groups of individual researchers or teaching staff where specific forms of collaboration and academic feedback can be reviewed and strengthened.

Our thanks for consulting on the content of the magazine go to Mikael Vetner, Head of Department, Aalborg University, and working life researchers Einar Baldursson, Aalborg University, Janne Gleerup and Klaus T. Nielsen, Roskilde University, Janne Skakon , University of Copenhagen and Ole Henning Sørensen, a consultant and working life researcher at Aalborg University.

And thanks for feedback on the design of the magazine go to the network of OHS professionals at the Universities of Aarhus, Aalborg, Copenhagen, Southern Denmark, Roskilde and the Technical University of Denmark.

Enjoy the read!

Sincerely,
The Danish Sector Working Environment Council, Welfare & Public Administration

Checklist: Who does what to ensure strong working communities?

Management:
- Decide how you aim to provide the structural and cultural frameworks for strong working communities.

Collaboration forums:
- Discuss the process of creating the right framework for collaboration in teaching and research groups.

OHS forums:
- Take local initiatives and communicate objectives, policies and methods to management, collaboration forums and relevant groups.

Read more on page 6

Research and teaching groups:
- Discuss how successful your collaboration is and how you can boost quality and wellbeing.
- Gain inspiration from the methods in the magazine or draw on the university's teaching communities.

Read more on pages 10 and 18

Introduction: Strong working communities boost quality and wellbeing

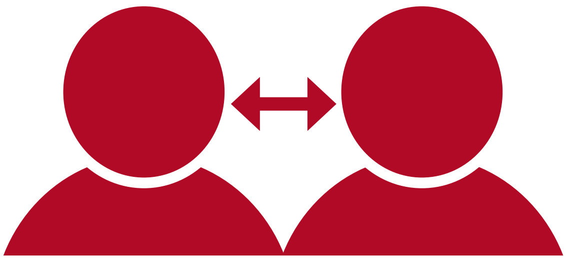
Researchers and teaching staff can achieve a high level of meaningfulness and a great deal of influence on their work. But if employees are mostly left to themselves in striving for academic merits and research funding, it can impact on their wellbeing and the quality of their core tasking. The way forward can be for management, collaboration forums and research and teaching groups to focus more on working together.

Even though the Danish universities and their departments are very different, working conditions for researchers and teaching staff reflect the fundamental conditions and cultures that characterise universities worldwide: scientific performance, competition for jobs and funding and striving for academic merits are just part of university workplaces. This is crucial for individual researchers' and teaching staff's wellbeing and careers and it also affects the wellbeing of the technical and administrative personnel who work closely with them.

Well-being and collaboration in universities
Fundamental conditions may turn out to be opposing forces that individual researchers and teaching staff need to bear in mind:

- Should I spend time on ensuring my own productivity and quality rather than the research team's?
- Should I especially focus on my own career or on contributing to a strong department?
- Should I put my own working environment before contributing to that of my colleagues, the team or the department?
- Should I make the effort to get funding for my own research at the expense of funding for joint research?

Such contradictions can make their mark on the working environment. A survey of researchers in 2011 indicated that an unfriendly working environment is one of the most important reasons why researchers consider changing jobs.



- 44% stated that it was either decisive or a very important reason.
- One of the other explanations was lack of academic goals which 35% indicated as either a decisive or very important reason.

And in 2014, *communities* and *relations* were indicated as a significant action area for wellbeing at universities, alongside mutually trustful management and focus on career pathways. This was at a conference in which managers, union representatives, experts and researchers and representatives of organisations and employers met to discuss the special challenges facing university working environments. The conference was arranged in conjunction with the Danish Agency for Higher Education and the Danish Confederation of Academic Associations.

***For more details** see 'FOKUS: Inspiration catalogue focusing on the mental working environment and dialogue for universities and researchers' (2014), Danish Confederation of Academic Associations and the Danish Agency for Higher Education.*

> The most prestigious universities such as Stanford and Berkeley are characterised by the way they establish strong academic communities.
>
> ***Thomas Bjørnholm, ProRector, University of Copenhagen***

Resources and challenges
In 2016, the National Research Centre for the Working Environment investigated the working environment of university personnel in a nationwide survey on universities' resources and challenges compared to national averages.

Resources:

- More often a high level of meaningful work
- More often a high level of influence on how to carry out work

Challenges:

- More often high volumes of work
- More often work/life conflicts
- More seldom good working relations
- More seldom good management
- More often stress

***Read more** about the Arbejdsmiljø and Helbred 2016 (Working Environment and Health 2016) survey at www.arbejdsmiljoidanmark.nfa.dk*

Three chapters in this report provide inspiration for how quality and wellbeing can be strengthened by way of organisational focus on collaboration in research and teaching groups.

Research shows collaboration pays

Working environment research in recent years has also focused on the benefits of good working relations and shows that good relations across sector boundaries are closely related to being able to provide high quality in core tasking, effective work processes and wellbeing for individuals. Danish and international studies show connections between:

Good collaboration and productivity

- Better organisational quality: Fewer bottlenecks, less waiting time
- More knowledge-sharing by personnel
- More systematic innovation
- Greater motivation and engagement amongst employees

Good collaboration and quality

- Higher quality for goods and services
- Organisation quality: You avoid wasting resources
- Professional quality: You achieve what you aim at through the job that is being done
- Quality experience for citizens or recipients

Good collaboration and wellbeing

- Job satisfaction and wellbeing in the workplace are positively influenced by good working relations.

Good collaboration and health

- The absence of good working relations increases the risk of mental problems.

Good collaboration, absenteeism and staff turnover

- Sick leave and staff turnover decline when working relations are good

In these surveys, good collaboration is determined as 'social capital' in the workplace. The surveys were systematically reviewed in 2009 by Prof Tage Søndergaard Kristensen, formerly of the National Research Centre for the Working Environment: 'Wellbeing and productivity' and in 2015: "Social Capital in the Workplace: A route to better wellbeing, quality and greater public satisfaction?'

Social capital in the workplace is measured as the level of trust and fairness experienced in each other and management by personnel in working together on core tasking.

1. Management and collaboration forums set the framework

Management and collaborating bodies play an important role in creating a healthy environment for strong collaboration communities. They do so by discussing and determining the overall frameworks and by taking the lead themselves. In this chapter, we present specific recommendations and researchers' thinking on important focus points.

For management and key collaboration bodies, supporting collaboration is a structural and cultural issue.

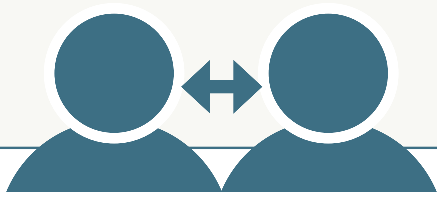
- **The structural aspect** is in ensuring that work is organised so that research and teaching are done in collaboration communities. Most people prioritise whatever they are being benchmarked against. The way research and teaching is organised and benchmarked has implications for whether individual personnel feel they are obliged to work together or to primarily feel responsible for themselves, their own performance and their own career.

- **The cultural task** is to establish the cultural norms that influence the degree of obligation for each other and degree of trust in the group. This is something for managers and collaboration bodies to address in conjunction with informal authoritative individuals in making collaboration work. Excessive self-serving conduct can rapidly set back an otherwise budding relationship if it is not dealt with.

Structure, frameworks and collaboration culture
Day-to-day priorities and action by management, departmental councils and groups are crucial for whether the culture and mental working environment develop in a positive way.

Individual managers and groups can work specifically on developing collaboration cultures and day-to-day wellbeing. But this is done within the framework and practice imposed by management, the Ministry and the political system. The specific challenge for management is to create and maintain the structures, principles and processes that make it possible for collaboration cultures to thrive.

> Our department is organized into 15 knowledge groups for scientific staff. These groups are the key to building up day-to-day academic and collegial communities focusing on research, teaching and knowledge-sharing. As part of supporting these communities, groups have their own funding and the ability to propose their own managers. The group leader and I have regular expectation management discussions on working together and how we carry out our roles and so routine management of groups has a great deal of trust on my part.
>
> ***Mikael Vetner, Head of Department, Aalborg University***



Four recommendations for management and collaboration forums

1. Take a strategic decision to develop collaboration.

- *Establish a clear direction for collaboration between teaching and research groups:* What is the purpose and what tasks have to be tackled? How should collaboration be benchmarked? Are there special considerations for junior researchers and researchers from abroad?
- *Support the essential priorities that make collaboration possible:* What should take lower priority when time and energy have to be spent on developing collaboration?
- *Think three years ahead:* Overall how could work be organised to give the best possible basis for developing a strong collaboration community with quality, productivity and wellbeing.

2. Create the right framework for collegiality and collaboration.

- *Review your framework and reward structures:* People and organisations do whatever they are benchmarked on and recognised for. How do your reward structures and frameworks support good academic collaboration?
- *Adopt guidelines for feedback and criticism.* How will you ensure that these are constructive and learning-oriented?
- *Have clear procedures for collaboration when relations become strained.* Be aware of the distance between senior management and individual personnel and the informal hierarchies in research teams.

3. Take the cultural lead: reward good collaboration.

- *Reward collegial conduct:* Emphasise collegial initiatives and consider introducing incentives for them. In your department, how can giving feedback and being a good colleague be made attractive?
- *Consistently tackle individuals who make collegiality and working together difficult.* How can you ensure respectful relations between different academic groups?
- *Be especially alert to the conduct of colleagues with high status and reputation.* For example, do top reseachers' way of acting, priorities or communication style support good collegial relations?

4. Take the lead yourself.

- *Communicate your values and expectations from collaboration.* How do you take into account the fact that international researchers and managers may have other expectations and attitudes to cooperation, way of speaking to each other, authority and work culture?
- *Take the lead:* How management and others in authority speak and act in practice is important, as are personal conviction and authenticity. Are you ready to take the lead?
- *Take a look at yourself:* Are you ready to insist on positive working relationships and to support a culture in which everybody works together and strives for shared learning? Are you equipped for the job?

Three focus points from researchers

Support junior researchers' career paths

"Junior researchers are especially exposed to uncertainty about their employment and future careers. Only a few PhD students and postdocs can expect permanent university employment. Management and collaboration committees should discuss how to make this pivotal for the work done by research teams in supporting junior researchers' career development. There are two objectives here:

- To prevent stress in junior researchers since we know that when people see that there are long-term objectives and meaning in what they are in the process of doing, it gives them ballast in their present circumstances.
- When the research group focuses on supporting career development, it rubs off on working relations in the group itself and can more generally help in developing a constructive feedback culture."

Einar Baldursson, Working Life Researcher, Aalborg University

Realistic expectations and demands

"In many cases, formal departmental management is a very long way from employees and from being able to act as their 'line manager'. However, they do play a major role in collaboration and the feedback culture since they create the frameworks that enable research teams to prioritise collaboration and good collegiality.

When management imposes more work or expectations on the organisation without also saying what should take lower priority, this naturally puts additional pressure on employees. In fact, management is under pressure from above and outside but they are still responsible for not creating unrealistic expectations and demands."

Klaus T. Nielsen, Working Life Researcher, Roskilde University

Create protected space

"Establish the structural conditions for ensuring 'protected space' for collaboration where there is the time, framework and security to create shared professional development in research and teaching groups. Discuss in the departmental council and academic committees how you can ensure you have the frameworks for developing good, strong academic communities locally, rather than individual competition. And in the collaboration committee, discuss how you can prevent and deal with any conflicts that arise.

Some professional communities book a week in everybody's diaries in which they set aside time for sparring and improving applications for research funding. These weeks can form a good basis for doing more work on feedback and sparring."

Janne Gleerup, Working Life Researcher, Roskilde University

Be aware of cultural differences

Foreign researchers and teaching staff often have problems with formal structures and social interaction in Danish workplaces. Flat hierarchies, extensive self-organization in teams and expectations for mutual trust can be surprising and difficult to get used to.

Can you really contradict a manager? Should I accept challenges to my authority? Is a PDR really a development interview and not a surreptitious exam? What is the social significance of chatting over lunch, humour and irony?

Coming across the sometimes direct, Danish way of speaking to each other can also be difficult for some people to deal with.

In the process of developing collaboration in the group and a feedback culture, it is important to consider how to involve foreign researchers. Both to ensure that they understand and accept what is happening and to make use of their own experience and ideas arising from their 'international view'.

Example: Manual for knowledge-group collaboration

The Department of Communication & Psychology, Aalborg University, has developed a manual for collaboration in knowledge groups. This describes the composition and tasking of individual groups and discusses the value base for collaboration. The core values in their collaboration are:

- **Proximity**, meaning that decision-making should be done close to the individuals and environments that will be dealing with assignments so as to promote co-ownership of tasking, results, decisions and future plans.
- **The group**, meaning that individual assignments also represent rights and obligations for the group. This de-individualises responsibility for creating solidarity and collegiality.
- **Knowledge**, when it is specified that increasing knowledge is the very basis of the department's existence which is why collaborating on knowledge is crucial for individual professional development.
- **Trust**, when it is specified that trust is a precondition for collaboration between the group and management. This trust is generated by way of appropriate, open and relevant exchanges of information, points of view and opinions.

There is also a description of what the group should do if conflicts arise.

Remember part-time staff and administrative staff

In the process of developing relations and a feedback culture, there may be the risk of overlooking part-time scientific staff who may in many places only have a loose association with the research and teaching groups.

Structural framework conditions often tend to work against inclusion. For example, loosely associated teaching staff are seldom granted paid time to attend relevant group meetings but have to do so in their own time.

For example, administrative staff who are closely associated with research (lab staff, technicians or project managers) can be just as exposed as scientists to the mental loads that are especially associated with the universities, including job security, work-life balance and stress.

It is important to keep an eye on administrative staff and their role and contribution to collaboration, both when they are part of a research group and when they provide important administrative support in enabling teaching and research to be carried out.

Individual research and teaching groups should discuss the best way to achieve successful collaborations and the university should have an overall strategy for including part-time scientific and administrative staff in working together in research and teaching groups.

2. Developing **collaboration in groups**

Research and teaching groups are pivotal for academic and collegial collaboration in universities. This chapter provides inspiration for what groups can do for themselves and in conjunction with management. We suggest three methods for clarifying the group's situation, on the basis of its objectives and tasking, for formulating common principles for collaboration and boosting group performance.

The dual task of the academic working community
Any group whose members work together on a shared objective fundamentally have a dual task: The group has to tackle the job it has been tasked with, and to do so in a way that enables it in time to develop its capacity to deal with tasks. In practice this means that group members need to consider how it deals with a task and its results, as well as the opportunity for the living and development space created by working together; i.e. that people display task reflexivity and social reflexivity.

> Good working relations in strong academic communities can generate mutual trust and prevent crises amongst research staff. It is in the academic communities that deliver core services, that communities are to be created and tasking allocated.
>
> ***Thomas Bjørnholm, ProRector, University of Copenhagen***

Task reflexivity in group collaboration
The tasks given to the group basically depend on what the group has been organised to do, and one important issue for management is to ensure that the group has a clear direction and is aware of its purpose and objectives on the basis of strategic research-related or teaching priorities.

> The way collaboration is organised plays a key role for well-being and achieving results. It is important to focus on how academic communities function and support each other.
>
> As the head of a large department, it is impossible for you to have day-to-day contact with all personnel. Which is why we are organised into small groups with delegated responsibilities, own strategies, etc. For example, knowledge group leaders are responsible for PDR interviews and for ensuring the group meets regularly.
>
> Employees in knowledge groups also have the opportunity to help each other in supporting proper tasking priorities. Senior colleagues can often communicate their routines in organizing the working day most appropriately and can act as mentors for junior assistant professors or PhDs so that the various tasks do not all get mixed up.
>
> ***Mikael Vetner, Head of Department, Aalborg University***

> Formally speaking, research group hierarchies may typically be flat but in practice, when it comes to status, hierarchies may be very deep. This means that a professor or a PhD supervisor would de facto be regarded as a leader. They may seldom have decision-making power but they do have great influence. And they play a very important role in the expectations according to which people further down the hierarchy in some intangible way experience and react. It may be relevant to discuss this, especially for new employees.
>
> ***Klaus T. Nielsen, Working Life Researcher, Roskilde University***

The group is similarly responsible for ensuring that it 'takes on the task': that its members understand its purpose and goals and engage in the discussion of what to do to achieve them and how the group can succeed in so doing. It also includes clarifying both the formal management and the informal structures in the groups, as well as how work is coordinated with departmental management or other bodies to which the group reports.

Social reflexivity in the group

Social reflexivity indicates how successful a group is in together dealing with its academic tasking. When groups manage to create motivational and trusting working relations, their members experience security and fundamental acceptance, making it easier for them to learn from mistakes, perform better and to be more generally satisfied with their working life.

When social reflexivity is well established in a group, its members are aware that:

- The mental climate in the group is important for the academic results it can achieve.
- Communication and the way the group speak to each other internally have a major impact on relations and for what can be said and done in the group.
- Conflicts and disagreements are regarded as opportunities for learning and for adjusting relations for the common good.
- Latent competition for grants, the content of research and jobs does not get in a way of essential collaboration.

The five methods presented in this document aim to provide inspiration to strengthen group tasking and social reflexivity within the group's framework.

Group leadership: Matching expectations

Some departments choose to have a formal agreement to harmonise relations between the head of department and group leader. This could for example specify that the group leader is responsible for the group's strategy, day-to-day HR management and skills development for group members. The group's local financial issues for travel and conferences could also be included together with space allocation and overall academic responsibility for the group's tasking in research, education and collaboration.

Other tasks could be arranged between the head of department and group leader such as prioritising roles in the group, job and sick-leave interviews or for focusing on creating a good working environment.

These kinds of formalised obligations are often set out in individual universities' delegation instructions. They can be good to know about and contain useful information, also for local management.

Method 1: Five dimensions in collaboration. **Clarifying opportunities in collaboration**

What? The method can be used to create clarity over the level of collaboration required for the group to do its work and could form the basis for discussions in the group and with management on the best way to organize work and how to promote greater collaboration.

Why? Many jobs can be tackled individually or by way of various levels of collaboration. Dialogue about the opportunities in collaboration can help navigate dilemmas between individual interests and the community when it comes to competition for jobs and research funding.

When? Use the model when a new group is to be established, when its objectives or tasking change or when it is uncertain or disagrees about collaboration, roles and priorities in the group.

Teaching - a shared task?

In some departments, there is a great deal of coordination and interconnection in teaching with highly active module coordinators whilst teaching in other departments is primarily organised on the basis of the subject being taught by individual staff during the semester concerned. It is important for management to be aware of how teaching should be organized and implemented, both as individual performance and as collegial performance.

Overleaf you will find a dialogue method structured around five dimensions and a scale.

To the left of the scale there is a group characterised as a loosely connected network. Key members see themselves as 'independent agents' using their own academic networks for academic sparring rather than the group. This is why group meetings take low priority. The group does not actually share goals or action areas and its members each have their own field of research. Members may find that group meetings are mostly a formal activity and do not provide much value for their own or colleagues' research practice.

Just how content group members are with this may vary: some miss the collegiality, help and support whereas others value the opportunities for independence and their own relations. This type of group is not 'less good' than other types of group and can be extremely effective and keep its members very happy.

To the right of the scale there are groups where members collaborate more on research or teaching. For example, in the research groups that are placed here, the research done by every individual colleague is an important part of the group's overall research ambitions. The group collaborates on applications and the whole group shares satisfaction and pride when a colleague succeeds in getting research funding for the group.

Group members embrace collaboration in ways that create good results and make each other more skilful. For example, supporting career opportunities for junior researchers and integrating part-time personnel in their collaboration could be a stated part of the team's tasking. The group considers academic performance and quality as well as motivation, career development and the wellbeing of its members, thus making each other ever smarter.

Roadmap: Identifying opportunities in collaboration

On the basis of the five dimensions, group members can match expectations for collaboration. Do consider involving administrative staff in the process.

Try to understand each other's reasons even if you do not agree. PhDs or postdocs may have different preferences and needs than permanent scientific staff.

Step 1

Hand round the sheet with the five dimensions.

- *Individual:* Start by everybody placing the group in the five dimensions, set a cross on every line. Note the key words for your assessment.
- *In the group:* Share your placement for the group and listen to each other's reasons.

Step 2

- *Individual:* Now imagine that the group works optimally according to its purpose. Then note the group location for the five dimensions and the right key words for what this would require.
- *In the group:* Share where you have placed the group and listen to each other's reasons.
- Discuss the similarities and differences in your locations. What is your understanding of the reasons for the differences?

Step 3

In the group, discuss the issues that dialogue has given rise to and write the conclusions on the flipover.

- New activities or new ways of working in the group?
- Purposes and tasking clearly agreed?
- Sharper focus on promoting collaboration on sub-tasking?

You will often come across needs that could appear difficult to resolve at the same time. Be really curious about and check out needs and preferences that differ from your own. Think creatively about the way you work: Could you have smaller groups working closer together on special tasks or could a different level of collaboration deal with the same task? Consider who could support you and agree what you should do from now on.

The five dimensions in group relations:

Low ⟷ **High**

Degree of common objectives

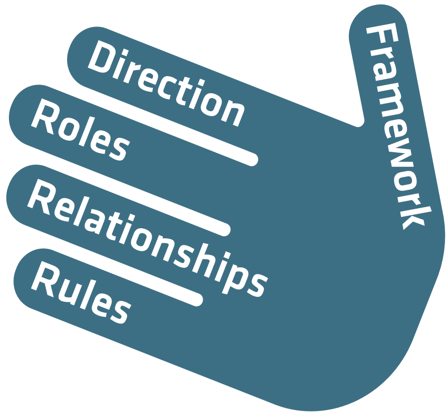
Degree of common commitment to collaboration

Degree of shared tasks

Degree of shared rewards

Degree of interconnection in task solving

Method 2: Anchoring groups.
A Handshake on collaboration principles



What? The Handshake is a simple method for ensuring that you match expectations for each other in the group and have clear reciprocal agreements on the five fingers of your collaboration: Your framework, direction, roles, relations and rules. The method is inspired by organisational consultant Camilla Raymond's book: Arbejdsrelationer and relationsarbejde (Working relations and relationship work, 2013).

Why? Good collaboration is based on people having a shared understanding of what they want to do together and how they should do so.

When? You can especially use the Handshake when the group is being set up, reorganised and gets new tasking but especially when you run into problems.

The basic idea of the Handshake is to discuss all five fingers of your relationship, on the basis for example of the questions below:

- **Framework:** *What physical, organisational and resource-related frameworks are we subject to? What are our deadlines? How much time has been allocated to the group's work?* The Framework finger is important for having a realistic shared picture of the terms and conditions for work that are fixed and which frameworks can be influenced or expanded by the group itself.

- **Direction:** *Which direction should we go and do we agree on where it will take us? How should we ensure that we are all heading in the same direction and what should we do if we discover one day that we are all going our own ways.* The Direction finger helps you focus on objectives and outcomes. Be aware that there could be several sub-objectives and that objectives may change along the way.

- **Roles:** *How should we distribute roles amongst us? How can we ensure that all roles are filled? What demands do we impose on each other in the roles we take on? What special expectations are there for the role of group leader or coordinator?* The Role finger helps you manage what you expect of each other and indicates the best way for you to turn your differences into strengths for the group.

- **Relationships:** *How do we want social and working relations to develop between us? What could we do to make this happen? What should we avoid? What experience do we have from previous processes that could help us now?* The Relationship finger is key because you can practically always notice in your relationships that something is wrong on one of the other fingers.

- **Rules:** *What rules will apply to our group? How should we make them usable and avoid them getting in the way of our freedom of action. What usable experience from other group collaborations do we have with our rules of engagement?* The Rules finger points to the fact it is important to tell each other about expectations. What may seem obvious to one person may not be obvious to everyone.

Roadmap: How to do the Handshake

1. Make sure that you know about the framework and direction of the group from management so as to be able to carry out the exercise on a proper basis.

2. Agree who should be the moderator of the exercise and who should take notes.

3. Review all five fingers together. For example, use the questions on the left. Distribute the questions to members of the group and give them a few minutes for thought. Meanwhile the minute-taker writes up the themes of the five fingers.

4. Then get participants to take turns to address one finger at a time. Note down members' input in keyword format and as precisely as possible in the minutes.

5. Take a break. The minute-taker should use the break to write up a brief agreement document on the basis of what you have achieved so far, insofar as possible using the exact expressions used by members themselves.

6. Print and circulate the agreement to all participants. Ask for their comments: Is there anything that has been misunderstood or different than they imagined? Conclude the meeting.

7. After the meeting, incorporate all comments in the original agreement document and circulate the approved version to members.

8. Keep an eye on whether the group sticks to the agreement. Consult it regularly and check whether you are still complying with your joint principles for collaboration or whether the agreement or your practice need to be adjusted. Repeat the process if there are significant changes in your expectations or conditions.

Colleagues and competitors in the Handshake

Intrinsic to the conditions under which university researchers and teachers work is that colleagues are in fact also competitors when it comes to employment and grants. This cannot be changed. However, when competition overshadows the fact that you are also colleagues, you risk seeing the working environment and academic performance suffer.

In the Handshake, both these aspects should be addressed and you should actively and openly consider the importance they should have for the rules of engagement, relations and roles.

An example: a management group in competition for the same senior management role agreed that to avoid splitting the group, they would continue to work together as usual until a specific date before the application deadline. After which they were free to 'fire at will' and wished each other: 'may the best woman/man win'. They were aware that an uncontrolled competitive approach would adversely impact on their respective roles and harm the work of the whole management team.

Method 3: Group Performance & Development Review (GPDR).
Boosting group performance

What? Group Performance Development Review (GPDR) is a formal session used by the group to assess and revise their collaboration practice and processes.

Why? All groups need to occasionally think about their practice and processes. Groups can be significantly smarter when they take a common approach to what they specifically do when working together to create good results or a high level of wellbeing.

When? It is a good idea to use GPDRs as a regular annual review of collaboration in the group.

This GPDR is based on a resource-focused approach in which the group mainly focuses on what they can achieve when things are going well. This often creates an increased sense of belonging in the group and provides the opportunity for making the adjustments required for collaboration to improve further. Ensure that all relevant personnel are included in the session.

The GPDR fundamentally investigates the question: How successful are we currently in being a working community, based on our goals and agreements?

Specifically, the session divides into four focus areas:

- **Results:** How successful are we in achieving what we are here to do? What results are we best at achieving and what is not going quite so well?
- **Processes:** What do we quite specifically do when we achieve good results?
- **Wellbeing:** How well is each of us thriving? And what are we doing when we create wellbeing for the individual?
- **Improvement:** What would it be a good idea for us to change in future so as to create better outcomes, processes and wellbeing?

Roadmap: GPDR (Group Performance & Development Review)

1. Choose a moderator to control the process and ensure that everybody gets the chance to speak. The moderator could act as an interviewer if there is a great difference in how much members' speak.
2. Set a fixed timeframe depending on the size of the group so that discussions do not get too hurried and also not too anecdotal or detailed.
3. Discuss the four focus areas in the above order so as to complete discussing an item before starting on the next.
4. Remember to take breaks from time to time so that everyone gets the chance to speak.
5. Summarise your session and discuss and decide what should be done: what will we keep on doing, what will we stop and what should we start doing? Who should do what? What can you do by yourselves and what requires management involvement?
6. End by agreeing when you will follow-up.

Quick: **Mini-GPDR**

What? GPDRs can be carried out as a quick version, a mini GPDR. It can be done in 20 minutes. This method is inspired by the review method in agile project management.

Why? The group can use frequent evaluation and adjustment meetings with each other to ensure that everyone in the group steadily improves how they work together. Conflicts and dissatisfaction will also be nipped in the bud.

When? Mini Group PDRs are held once a month.

Roadmap: Mini-GPDRs

1. Each person gets three green and three red post-its. Write something on each green post-it that you were pleased to have seen over the past month. On each red post-it write something you think should be improved in group collaboration over the coming month.

2. Everyone briefly presents their notes (max 1 min per person) by reading them out aloud and pinning them to a board divided into two: 'Things to continue with' and ''Needs improvement.' During the process, place the notes dealing with the same issue close to each other.

3. Then the whole group should pause for reflection. Some things cannot be changed, others can be changed quickly and easily whilst others again need work, sometimes in dialogue with management. Things that are quick and easy to fix should naturally be dealt with. Considering the things that need some work, one or more individuals should be made responsible for progressing them.

4. It is essential that the mini-check leads to quick adjustments so as to quickly give collaboration the best possible conditions.

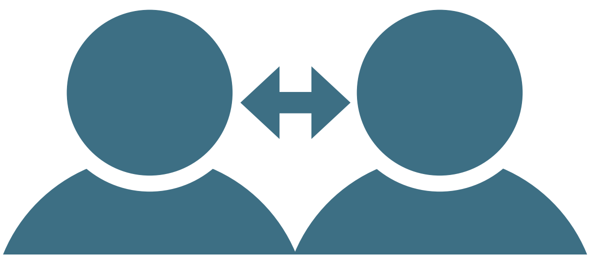
3. Feedback as a method
for strengthening collaboration and academic criticism

Academic feedback is a natural part of collaboration for research and teaching that the group can use consciously to develop communication, interaction and professionalism. In this chapter, we present the principles underlying academic feedback and two specific methods for using it in the group and in day-to-day collaboration.

Providing academic criticism and benchmarking colleagues' work against academic and scientific standards are essential parts of academic practice. This applies regardless of whether it is done in one's own working community or as part of peer reviews of scientific articles.

Research shows that well thought-through and constructive feedback encourages learning and job satisfaction for individuals as well as improving the quality of academic work, also in high performance/ competitive communities such as universities and research institutes (see page 22).

Developing the quality and format of academic feedback could therefore be an appropriate and uncontroversial place to focus on collaboration in research and teaching groups.



> It could be a good idea for there to be a fixed framework for academic feedback and for focusing on learning and development, thus making feedback primarily associated with core tasking and scientific work, with an improved mental working environment as a positive side effect. If feedback is presented as being directed at the working environment, there is the risk that will be considered as less relevant and in practice given lower priority.
>
> ***Janne Skakon, researcher in mental and organisational working environments, University of Copenhagen***

Two dimensions in academic feedback

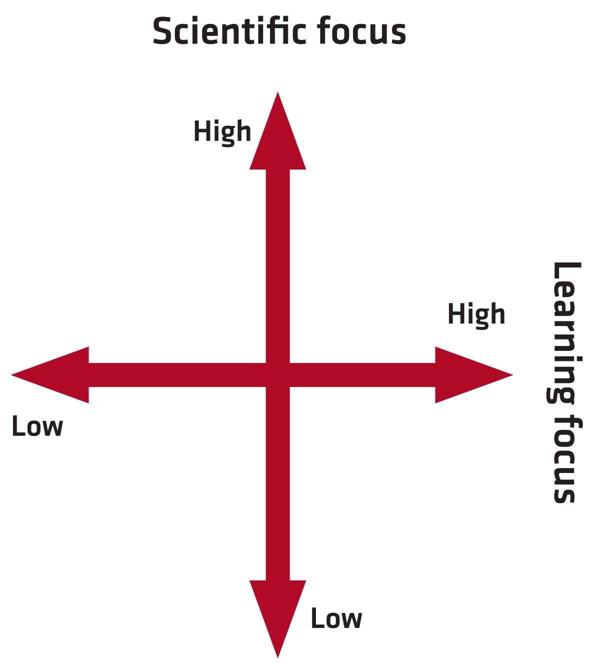
When academics provide peer feedback on colleagues' work, there are two important focus points:

- The focus on **the feedback recipient's learning** and professional development.
- **The scientific focus** where the feedback-giver communicates the scientific standards against which the recipient will ultimately be benchmarked to ensure that these standards are achieved competently.

Mistake or potential?
Two other important aspects are whether feedback aims to identify mistakes and deficiencies or whether it is directed at opportunities and potential.

Ensuring that both of these are taken into account requires the awareness of the feedback-giver and the recipient. Having colleagues to 'think for' your project can be just as useful as asking them to 'think against' it.

If you just ask for feedback in a general, unspecific way, you often get various statements that indicate deficiencies and weaknesses. Pointing out weaknesses in a project, design or text can be helpful and necessary. But it can be just as useful to have potential opportunities and strengths pointed out or to hear how enthusiastic other people are or about the possibilities they can see. Asking for the latter form of feedback often requires more conviction and trust.



The two dimensions in academic feedback. Where on the two scales does feedback typically happen? Where should it be ideally? Does the difference depend on where the recipient is in his/her career pathway?

Framework for academic feedback

Research and experience from many kinds of workplace indicate that feedback depends on several issues which are addressed in the models and tools described below. Just a few key pointers need to be emphasised here.

- **Feedback should be constructive.** People learn better from specific, positive, acknowledging feedback rather than general criticism. This can run counter to the established culture in many research communities where feedback pivots around faults and deficiencies being identified. If feedback means getting tough and possibly also personal criticism, it can also result in people being generally reluctant to ask for it.

- **Feedback requires a secure space.** Exposing yourself and your work to the critical gaze of colleagues can require a great deal of trust and self-confidence. At times when you may especially need help such as when you have lost your way or have ground to a halt, it may feel like the last thing you need. So it is important to develop trust among colleagues and this is where regular collegial feedback can be the way to go.

- **The purpose of feedback must be clear.** A request for feedback should be as specific and definite as possible so that the feedback-giver can provide detailed, well thought-through and considered feedback. Is it about a professional assessment of the scientific quality? Or about ideas for next steps? About other points of view or questions?

- **Feedback terms must be respected in the process.** The recipient defines the issue and terms for feedback. Even though feedback-givers might not share a recipient's scientific paradigms, they will relate to them on the basis of their own experience.

Definition: What is academic feedback?

Academic feedback may be defined as a dynamic communication process between two or more individuals who exchange information on the basis of a feedback-recipient's performance or development. The aim is to generate learning, skills development or develop methods to improve work processes or the performance of the person concerned.

When feedback is given or received in an appropriate way, it benefits the recipient whilst also enhancing internal working relations. Good academic feedback can boost motivation in the group and help the community learn and develop. So feedback is an important way of improving collaboration and improving wellbeing at work. Like good teaching, good feedback requires time, training and preparation.

However, feedback can also be given in an inappropriate way with directly negative outcomes. Unconstructive or insensitive feedback can kill off motivation, self-confidence and engagement in work and the academic community.

Good advice for giving and receiving academic feedback

Tips to the feedback-giver
Research shows that good feedback must be detailed and fully explained. Feedback that is unspecific or too brief is no good to anyone. So when undertaking to provide feedback, you need to set aside time and give it enough attention for your feedback to be well thought-through and well considered. Providing well-qualified academic feedback on an issue that is at the edge of or outside your own field of research can be a challenge.

At the same time, academic feedback should be given when it is relevant for the recipient's work processes so that they are motivated and receptive. This can be ensured by having the feedback recipient request feedback.

The relationship between the giver and recipient of feedback is key and should be based on trust and human equity but not necessarily academic equality. It is important for the feedback recipient to have confidence in the feedback giver and to trust their intention to be helpful. So when providing feedback, try to keep internal competition, power struggles and status issues out of the room. This can be the best achieved by adopting very strict rules for how feedback is provided (cf. model on page 24)

Finally, communication form is important: Body language and tone can be important for whether feedback is regarded as constructive and useful or negative and useless. Read more about non-verbal communication on page 26.

Opponent and proponent

Some research communities try to ensure a balance between teaching and scientific feedback by supplementing the well-known 'opponent' function with a 'proponent' function. Where the first focuses on providing academic criticism based on scientific and academic standards, the role of the proponent is solely to focus on the successful aspects of the feedback-recipient's work.

With respect to the recipient's learning process, it may be an advantage for the proponent to start by providing feedback before the opponent starts on scientific criticism. The model was developed by Pia Bramming, Associate Professor at DPU (Danish School of Education, Aarhus University) and has been used successfully by NFA (The Danish National Research Centre for the Working Environment).

Use tentative language
Tentative, enquiring language is often more helpful in the feedback process than absolute, authoritative, definitive language. Tentative language generally tends to stimulate the focus person's own thought processes and reflection and hence the learning outcome whereas authoritative language may lead to a defensive response.
So it may be a good idea to avoid saying: *'You should'*, *'the only right thing to do…'*.or *'it is stupid…'*

Try instead to use terms such as *'maybe…'*, *'I wonder'*, *'consider…'* and *'what about…'*

Advice for feedback recipients
The recipient of feedback shares responsibility for ensuring the experience is good and instructive, especially by listening carefully and openly to what the person giving feedback has to say. When we listen to each other, we often listen out for confirmation of our own attitudes or thoughts or to what we think is right or wrong or what we disagree with. We often go on the defensive when our performance is being assessed and immediately start thinking up counterarguments even while the other person is still talking.

In the feedback process, you should be careful to listen and understand. Listen out for what is useful to you, to what has not been said before. You do not need to agree. Try to get as much out of your colleagues as possible by endeavouring to understand their perspectives and then later on, you can decide whether you agree.

What the research on academic feedback says

Academic feedback has been used in teaching and learning situations and institutions for many decades. So feedback is a tried and tested - and well-documented - tool for supporting learning and development.

Research indicates that organisations that use feedback achieve greater competitive advantage, which also makes the method attractive in university cultures, affected as they are by demands for high performance and a high level of competition (Perrault et al., 2013). People work better and faster in situations where quality feedback is available to them (Northcraft, Schmidt and Ashford, 2011). The literature also points to the fact that it can be a good idea to use feedback as a method for upskilling. One particular study found that new employees learnt faster than the control group that did not get feedback (Harris, Boswell and Xie, 2011).

Many companies and institutions have systematic schemes or meetings characterised by some kind of feedback. Until recently, the focus was mainly on individual feedback, such as coaching or supervision. However, in many organisations they have started to take a wider view of feedback, with learning, development and mutual trust being important elements in a feedback-friendly culture (Perrault et al., 2013).

There is documentation from research showing that people learn better from positive, acknowledging feedback rather than just getting criticism. This research shows that nobody, regardless of their objectives, likes to get negative feedback. It also shows that people are not inspired by criticism, neither do they regard it as the basis for growth (Culbertson et al 2013).

Method 4: Structured **academic feedback in groups**

What? This method is aimed at academic feedback in research or teaching teams. The method is structured so that one group member requests feedback on a specific product, problem or doubt/issue. The group then gives feedback in a structured, managed way and the recipient listens.

Why? High quality feedback is essential for academic development but experience has shown that group feedback can be difficult when it becomes personal, too critical or general, or when the same people always do the talking. The method is a controlled process that ensures that everybody gets to speak, that the focus remains on professional issues and that feedback is specific and matches the recipient's needs.

When? The method can be used for providing academic feedback in any research group.

Compared to one-to-one feedback (see overleaf), group feedback has advantages as well as disadvantages.

The advantages of group feedback include the fact that the research group also provides quality assurance on the work done by the others present when they are all working together on reviewing the work done by a colleague. Group feedback also allows different academic perspectives to be raised whereas one-to-one feedback naturally only provides one individual's perspective.

The group could use the method every time academic feedback is being given. Research teams find that time for such feedback gets taken up by administrative discussions. So we recommend insisting on time being set aside for academic feedback at every meeting.

If a research group is large with 6-8 or more members, we recommend splitting it into smaller groups to work in parallel, each in their own room so that two colleagues get feedback at the same time.

The time required depends especially on three things: the number of feedback providers, how well people are prepared and the complexity of the request.

Roadmap: Academic group feedback

Start by choosing a moderator. The moderator's task is to keep an eye on the time, ensure that the request is clear and understood and that the group focuses on what it is being asked to provide. The moderator should also ensure that the person in focus does get feedback from colleagues.

The actual feedback process is as follows:

1. Request: The feedback recipient makes a request as specific and definite as possible to the group.

- I had a problem with this and want some clarity. What I should like to get from you is…
- I have this academic problem and need…
- I have made this draft and would like feedback on…

If feedback on a text is involved, the group should have read it in advance. Circulate the text to the group with the focus person's request attached.

2. Explanation: The feedback-recipient then explains the problem for up to 10 mins. Brief exploratory questions may be asked but keep them to a minimum.

3. Feedback: The moderator repeats the request made by the feedback recipient.

The group addresses the request - and only that. Preferably take turns and allow for example 5 minutes per person, and use a format in which the group talk to each other rather than directly to the feedback recipient. The group should not discuss or agree on a joint sentiment. Different perspectives are definitely welcome.

While the group is working, the feedback recipient listens and notes down the things that are helpful and the new thoughts this might induce, while not emphasizing anything that appears irrelevant or peripheral.

4. Acknowledgement: The feedback recipient rounds off the session by explaining where he or she is now with respect to the original request.

The feedback session is then over. The session could then be repeated for another colleague or the meeting could finish.

NB. We know from experience that it is important to stick to the framework and its phases. It is important for equality in the group and trust that all members get more or less the same amount of feedback over the year. If somebody never asks for feedback, deal with it.

Variant: Academic feedback 1-to-1

Much academic feedback is done one-to-one, for example with a specialist co-worker from another university or when researchers are co-authoring articles and provide each other with feedback. This format may be preferable if someone's need for feedback is not met by research group meetings, perhaps for example because more frequent feedback is required or it needs to come from someone else than members of the research team.

Academic feedback between two individuals follows the same steps as for the group: Request, explanation, feedback and acknowledgement.

Method 5: Dialogue tool: **Routine feedback in relationship building**

What? This method is aimed at academic feedback in research or teaching teams. The method is structured so that one group member requests feedback on a specific product, problem or doubt/issue. The group then gives feedback in a structured, managed way and the recipient listens.

Why? High quality feedback is essential for academic development but experience has shown that group feedback can be difficult when it becomes personal, too critical or general, or when the same people always do the talking. The method is a controlled process that ensures that everybody gets to speak, that the focus remains on professional issues and that feedback is specific and matches the recipient's needs.

When? The method can be used for providing academic feedback in any research group.

It is a good idea for the group to try to create an atmosphere in which people can address whatever it is that has caused working relations in the group to be in imbalance. The group needs to remind itself that they have a good place to work. And this requires them to address and tackle the conflicts that inevitably arise when people work together and depend on each other.

Good working communities require ongoing adjustments, modifications and reviews and so it is absolutely key that colleagues can talk about how their views on collaboration.

Intervene when communication gets derailed

In academic communities, there may be people who are reluctant to talk about what happens between group members.

One employee at Roskilde University took a hooter along to meetings and then used it when it was felt that the 'ego roulette was running', ie when positioning and self-promotion was taking over the agenda, other people's points of view were being distorted or selfish views were overshadowing the whole purpose of the meeting.

Feedback on collaboration
The principles underlying ongoing feedback on development of collegial relations are:

- **Acknowledge positive issues:** Appreciate specific collegial actions which are important for you, such as an encouraging glance in a difficult situation or an energetic and productive meeting and good questions that have got thoughts going. And make sure in so doing that your colleagues are aware of it. This kind of a positive feedback to colleagues can have a colossal impact on the mental working environment in the group because it boosts awareness of the way working together in practice should be.

- **Tackle tension, unpleasantness and upsets**, as well as problems and friction in collaboration. Failure to do so could result in non-verbal conduct. Non-verbal communication in the group can be very powerful and difficult to deal with if it becomes an accepted way for people to express themselves. When tensions in relationships are reflected in language, it may help make the group wiser about how to work together, which could make them do things differently and better.

More often than most people assume, tensions in teams are not about 'chemistry' or 'personalities' but more an expression of organisational tensions or lack of clarity. If people can talk about their confusion, unrealised expectations or the feeling of disagreement in a way that lets groups relate to it, it can give rise to important conversations for example about unclear goals and how members relate to these or that make a co-worker clear that there are reasons to do more about their behaviour.

What is even more important is that talking openly about things reduces insecurity. It may well be that you cannot agree but it will be become clear exactly what the reasons for dissatisfaction or disagreement are.

How to address non-verbal communication

Some groups suppress conflict or discussion about contentious issues and instead use body language to communicate by way of sighs, eyes rolled upwards, snorting, yawning and silence. This form of communication is extremely powerful but also intangible and is therefore generally regarded as unhelpful, offering no way of defending yourself or to learn from it.

How to address language that you regard as non-verbal:

1. Objectively describe behaviour without interpreting or assessing it.
2. Report how it affects you.
3. Explain what you need or ask the other person to explain quite what their behaviour means.

Do not expect miracles but instead reflect how you can gradually change the way the group communicates by switching more and more of the difficult discussions into more open dialogue, giving the group a real chance to do something about it.

Further reading

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Edmondson, Amy C: (1996) Learning from Mistakes is Easier Said Than Done: Group and Organizational Influences on the Detection and Correction of Human Error.

Evaluating researchers' career paths (2011), Danish Agency for Science and Higher Education (*report in Danish*).

Fogh, Kim (2017) Meetback – meet yourself via others' feedback (*book in Danish*).

FOKUS: Inspiration catalogue focusing on the mental working environment and dialogue for universities and researchers (2014), Danish Confederation of Academic Associations and Danish Agency for Higher Education (*report in Danish*).

Hattie, J. og Timperley, H. (2007): The Power of Feedback.

Kristensen, Tage Søndergaard (2009): Wellbeing and productivity (*report in Danish*).

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Mulder, R. H. og Ellinger A. D. (2012): Perceptions of Quality of Feedback in Organizations. Characteristics, Determinants, Outcomes of Feedback, and Possibilities for Improvement: Introduction to a Special Issue.

Ning Li, T., Harris, B. og Boswell, W. R. (2011): The Role of Organizational Insiders' Developmental Feedback and Proactive Personality on Newcomers' Performance: an Interactionist Perspective.

Northcraft, G. B., Schmidt A. M. og Ashford S. J. (2011): Feedback and the Rationing of Time and Effort Among Competing Tasks.

Perreault et al. (2013): Feedback and Organisations: Feedback is Good, Feedback-Friendly Culture is Better.

Teacher Evaluation (2014): Inspire Learning, not Dread. Create a Feedback Culture that Leads to Improved Practice.

Strong working communities in the universities

A guide to better collaboration and academic feedback for research and teaching groups

The universities are high performance environments, populated with specialised, creative personnel who focus on doing their very best. A working life can be dynamic and include lengthy tough stretches on your own. But focusing more on collaborating can boost quality and wellbeing.

In this magazine we make a range of recommendations for how management and collaboration forums can support the development of organisational collaboration.

We also present methods for how individual research and teaching groups can develop their relations and academic feedback so as to boost professionalism and wellbeing in the universities.

In the Danish Sector Working Environment Council, Welfare & Public Administration, employers and employees work together on activities to create better physical and mental working environments.

The Council helps workplaces create good working environments by drawing up guidance and information material, holding conferences and meetings, etc.

Representatives of the Danish labour market's main organisations have seats on the Sector Working Environment Council, Welfare & Public Administration.

For further reading on the Danish Sector Working Environment Council, Welfare & Public Administration, visit www.arbejdsmiljoweb.dk

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