
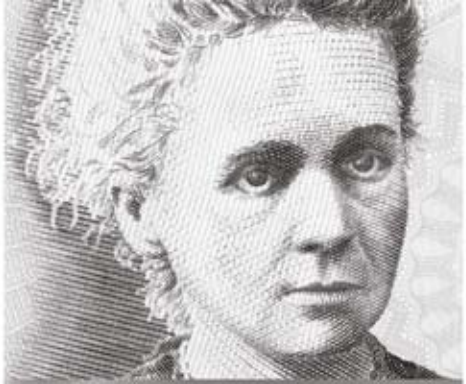


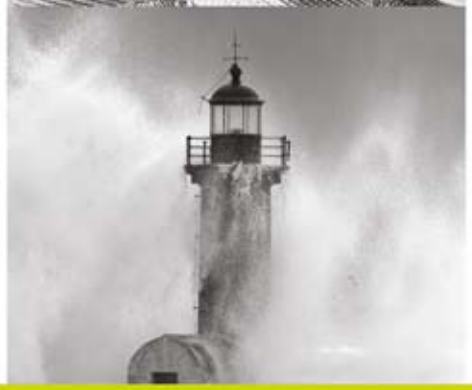


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beyond the manuals

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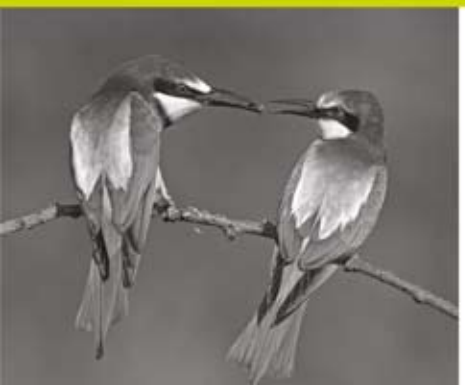
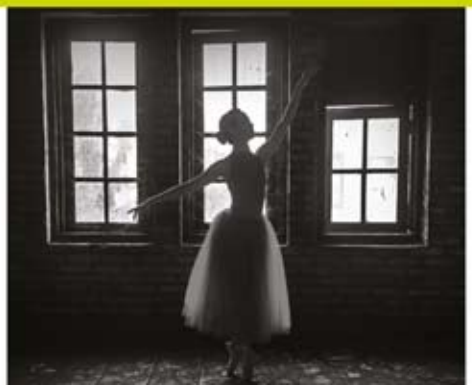
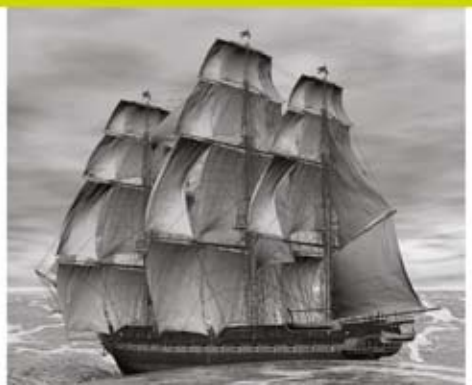

Mentoring:
beyond the manuals

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Contents

Abstract

The publication focuses on the impact of formal mentoring on the start of professional paths of early career researchers at doctoral and postdoctoral stages. The book of interviews with alumni of the mentoring programme of the Centre for Gender and Science at the Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences, gives an insight into the situation of early career researchers in the Czech Republic working and studying in various disciplines and various types of institutions. The book introduces young people's notions about scientific work and their careers. It also explores the perceived obstacles to their professional development which they sought to overcome in the framework of the mentoring programme. The book also offers possible future pointers for human resources policies at research institutions and provides inspiration for coordinators of mentoring programmes in Czech academia.

Keywords

Academic paths, early career researchers, mentoring, professional development

Mentoring: beyond the manuals

Kateřina Cidlinská

The present book was written with three essential goals. One is to testify to the benefits of the mentoring programmes for junior researchers and to attract the interest of both researchers and managers of research institutions. The second goal is to outline the design of the mentoring programme run by the Centre for Gender & Science, and to inspire other institutions running or considering their own mentoring programmes in academia. The third goal is to address international mentoring programme coordinators, and perhaps to start international collaboration which would give our and their mentees the opportunity to establish interesting and beneficial international contacts.

Why We Started the Mentoring Programme

In 2013, the members of the Centre for Gender & Science watched with sadness the negative development in the number of women in science (Tenglerová 2012). Despite the growing number of female university students, graduates, and postgraduates, their percentage among researchers was stagnating, and even decreasing in the field of engineering. We tried our best to think up a good response to the situation, to find a way in which we could extend our activities we had been doing for more than a decade, the research, communication with science and research bodies, training and lectures, to help reverse this unfortunate trend.

We already had a positive experience with a mentoring programme for female secondary school students who were mentored by female university students from the fields of engineering and natural sciences. We knew that personal and personalised approach can produce miracles. Getting acquainted with someone more experienced, hearing the story of his or her life, gaining access to 'backstage' information which cannot be read online or heard at open days – it was not just about getting the insight or making more informed decisions about which school or subject to choose; the main benefit was that it gave the young women the necessary confidence, the feeling that they can do it, that they know how to do it, and that they have someone to turn to in case they need assistance. That inspired us to launch a mentoring programme for young researchers. This type of individual support is very new and rare in Czech academic and research institutions. We knew that the critical time, when women tend to quit science, were the transition periods when people tend to consider whether to choose an academic or different career – the postdoctoral period for the natural sciences and engineering, and the doctoral studies stage in the humanities and social sciences (Tenglerová 2012, 2017). That was why we chose to target our programme at doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers across different fields of science. We wanted to mediate contact between experienced scientists and our mentees to let them consult their ideas and plans for a scientific career, and receive valuable practical advice about dealing with various situations they might face during their academic career, including various strategies for work-life balance. This turned out to be one

of the most burning issues for many female doctoral and postdoctoral researchers (Cidlinská and Vohlídalová 2017), as most of them consider having children, and some already have them.

Which Programme Design We Chose and Why to Read this Book

When we started to design the programme in the spring of 2014, there were many questions we needed to answer: which specific design to choose to make it helpful for our target group, to make the docs and postdocs interested, to make them want to join a programme that has hardly any tradition in the Czech academic environment. We ran a poll and found out female researchers would not trust a programme which was designed exclusively for women. Some said they would feel offended at such an offer, as it would imply female researchers were less capable than their male colleagues, and therefore they needed some sort of 'special' assistance.

Making women feel inferior was the last thing in the world we wanted to do. The main purpose of the programme was just the opposite. That's why we decided to open the programme for men as well. Coordinators of international academic mentoring programs we consulted via eument-net, the European Network of Mentoring Programmes for Women in Academia and Research, indicated that sharing experience among male and female mentees could lead to interesting results, and to mutual understanding of the gender-specific ways of considering academic career and different experience in research. Such discussions could make men more perceptive to the barriers women tend to face in the academic world. If men learn about these barriers, which often seem invisible to the majority of the male academic population, there is much more hope that the barriers will become easier to eliminate. A specific example is the willingness to make academic evaluation systems or recruitment criteria respect the disruptions or slowdown in research production caused by the need to care for small children. Women, on the other hand, can learn new communication strategies they can use in interaction with their superiors, predominantly men.

In the end, about 90 % of our mentees were women. It might be partly due to the fact that men might have felt reluctant to join a programme run by a centre with the word 'Gender' in its name, but we dare say the high proportion of female mentees is evidence of the shortage of informal support junior female researchers receive in an environment dominated by men and lacking female role models, resulting in their greater willingness to accept formal support. This assumption is supported by our experience with the previous mentoring programme for secondary school students, as well as international research which suggests a substantial effect of interpersonal relations on success in study path or career (Chao et al. 1992). When experienced male researchers tend to offer more support to junior male, rather than female colleagues, we can usually rule out bad intent. Rather it is a product of the intuitive tendency to collaborate with those who seem more similar and in whom older people see their younger self (Chandler 1996, Kosoko-Lasaki et al. 2006).

In addition to opening the programme to men, we decided not to limit the scope to particular disciplines or particular institutions. We made it accessible to doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers from

universities and other public academic institutions and from all research fields, because the problem of the low numbers of female researchers and university teachers extends even to fields which see high numbers of female undergraduate students (Tenglerová 2012, 2017). At the same time, we felt the need to reflect considerable differences between the culture and workings of various fields and institutions, as well as the typical differences in career development in different fields. That is why we decided to form two separate groups of mentees for the workshops on personal and professional development – one for researchers in the natural sciences and engineering, and one for researchers in the humanities and social sciences. This strategy proved very fortunate, and it facilitated peer mentoring and mutual support among mentees.

At the same time, we were aware of the need to minimise the risk for mentees' careers which would arise from the situation when mentees confide their worries, doubts or dissatisfaction with their work or study at their institution. We also wanted our mentees to cast their net wider, to get a look of how things work at different institutions, not just the one they study or work at, and to form valuable professional contacts outside their institutions. This aspect was seen as crucial due to high precarity of academic work, felt most intensely among junior researchers (Cidlinská and Vohlídalová 2017). That is why we introduced the rule that mentors should be from a different institution, not the one at which the mentee works or studies. We also suggested choosing international institutions. Another desired effect of this rule was to work against the traditional and widespread inbreeding, that is the common practice of passing all the phases of university studies and career at one institution. We hoped the programme could not only help increase the share of women in the Czech academic community, but also encourage collaboration between different institutions and fields and promote more international overlap of the Czech academic environment.

It is impossible to evaluate the effect of our mentoring programme on these long-term goals yet, because the effect can only be expected to occur over the next several years. But even several years from now, such an evaluation will be difficult due to the multitude of factors influencing the effect. Still, we can assess the immediate effects of the programme on the professional and personal development of our mentees based on the annual evaluation received from the participants. We are proud to say that the programme was attended by 162 participants (124 women and 38 men) since its launch in 2015, and that their rating of the programme was very positive. Most of them were very active in the programme, they perceived it as beneficial for their academic activity, and they would recommend the programme to other prospective mentees. That's why we would like this book to inspire more similar programmes stretching across institutions and fields. We have never heard of such a concept before, even in the international context, although it seems very beneficial for the mentees. We would be very glad if this evidence inspired future collaboration between international academic mentoring programmes and our programme.

The following pages present 14 interviews with participants (13 women and one man) of our mentoring programme. Our mentees demonstrate the different benefits our programme can offer to people in different professional and personal situations. Their stories reflect various ideas and attitudes doctoral and

postdoctoral researchers take to science, research, and their career, as well as the barriers they face in the Czech academic environment, and the things and people that help them deal with these barriers.

The Czech Context of Starting a Research Career

The Czech Republic, like the rest of Europe (OECD 2011) has seen a growing number of doctoral students and PhD holders (OECD 2010). Only some of them can find jobs at academic institutions and follow a research career. This situation is caused by two main reasons. One is the massification of university education which necessarily leads to the increasing number of people who reach the doctoral level of education. The number of fresh PhD holders in the Czech Republic increased by 36% between 2004 and 2013 (MŠMT 2014). The second aspect is the transformation of the Czech academic sector following the neoliberal reforms of the past more than a decade. It is due to these reforms that the Czech academic environment has experienced similar phenomena as those commonly observed in Western Europe, the US, Canada or Australia. Still, the Czech context remains rather specific. Let us look at some of the distinctive features to get a better insight in the conditions faced by junior researchers in the CR.

Compared to international standards, the Czech academic environment displays a specific percentage of institutional and targeted funding. Institutional funding, a stable and regular source of money, dropped under 50 % after the reforms (Technopolis Group 2011).[1] The prevalence of grant money in the budgets of research institutions transferred the responsibility for research funding to individuals, making academic work very precarious even for senior researchers and teachers. Their positions are rarely fully covered by institutional resources. Moreover, institutional pay scales keep the salaries very low, so that even senior academics with full-time institutional jobs need to increase their income through grants.[2] This represents a considerable burden for young researchers, as it seriously distorts the academic labour market. While the number of researchers has been continuously growing (by 76% since 2001), the number of stable institutional full-time jobs has dropped (OECD 2010: 16). The difference between the number of physical academic employees at universities, which employ two in three academics in the Czech Republic, and the number of filled positions calculated per full-time was 50% in 2014 (32,000 and 16,000 respectively) (Úřad vlády 2014).

The transformation of the academic jobs in the Czech Republic widens the generation gap between researchers. The new system improves the position of senior researchers while posing more barriers to junior researchers who find it more difficult to reach a higher career level and a more stable senior position. This situation is aggravated by the Czech system of academic positions, where associate and full professorship is granted for their lifetime, and is not connected with a specific position at a specific institution. Moreover,

1/ Between 2007 and 2013, institutional funding at the Czech Academy of Sciences, a leading basic research institution in the country, decreased from 62% to only 35%. According to the Technopolis Group (2011), the lowest possible limit for institutional funding is 50%; below this limit, the institution loses the ability to develop disciplines.

2/ The basic net monthly salary interval for associate professors is EUR 780-1000, and for full professors EUR 910-1120.

there is no fixed limit for retirement. Associate and full professors are indispensable for universities, as they are the prerequisite for having study subjects accredited. Schools therefore struggle to keep the employees who have reached these positions. The process of getting associate (habilitation) or full professorship, which guarantees a stable university job (Prudký et al. 2010: 73), is very difficult and lengthy. In 2016, full professors at Czech universities were mostly aged 70 and over, while associate professors were mostly aged 40-49 or 60-69 (MŠMT 2017). The structure of career development is rather rigid, not allowing for proper generational change (Technopolis Group 2011).

Despite the uncertain nature of junior academic positions frequently financed exclusively from short-term grants, the normative notion of academic career is linear and progressive. The current ethos says excellent academics must make a steady progress from doctoral studies and postdoctoral research to leading academic positions (Linková 2017). This notion is reflected in the basic principles of academic work evaluation. It also influences the opportunities for career development, because it is reflected in the recruitment and grant criteria.

The requirement for an academic career to be linear and progressive is detrimental especially for female researchers, as Czech parents tend to prefer the traditional division of roles in the family, and parental duties are largely carried out by women[3]. This is supported by the extremely long parental leave (the standard length is three years), the related considerable gender pay gap, and the lack of affordable childcare facilities and flexible part-time jobs. Women's careers tend to be disrupted or slowed down due to the performance of parental duties (Vohlídalová 2017).

The linear nature of academic career is also threatened by the gradually increasing demands for international mobility of doctoral students, and especially postdoctoral researchers. A minimum of six months of postdoctoral activity abroad is one of the conditions set by the Czech Science Foundation, the main institution financing basic research in the Czech Republic, for its junior research grants. This requirement, however, fails to be adequately compensated by a sufficient offer of return grants. There are several reasons why the international mobility of Czech researchers has remained below the international standard so far. The Czech labour market in general sees very little mobility even among educated people. There is an insufficient international overlap in the Czech academic environment; young researchers in particular suffer from insufficient contact with international researchers and institutions. Most doctoral programmes are taught in Czech, which represents a gross barrier for prospective international applicants. International applicants interested in doctoral studies in the Czech Republic are usually enrolled in separate programmes for foreigners which causes the problem especially in social sciences and humanities where PhD students do not meet on everyday basis in one laboratory. The recent tendency to require greater international mobility is usually not complemented with adequate support from research institutions. The opportunity to get a temporary job abroad is often determined by the commitment and contacts of the researcher's

3/ Only 2 % of fathers used the opportunity to take parental leave in 2016 (MPSV 2017).

4/ 84 % of students report the stipend does not cover their basic expenses (Fischer and Vltavská et al. 2014)

superiors, or by the initiative and efforts of the researcher. Women tend to be limited by the needs of their children and the prevalent traditional family model in which men are reluctant to move with their partner and jeopardise their own career (see above) (Vohlídalová 2014). The mobility of many doctoral students is complicated by the fact that they have to get a job unrelated to their doctoral project (see below) to cover their basic expenses. Leaving for a longer time would mean losing this vital income. Even PhD holders often work outside the academic sector if their contracts in academia fail to cover a full-time position. Some accumulate several part-time academic jobs in various projects and institutions. There are notable differences in incomes in different institutions and different fields. The salaries in the social sciences tend to be much lower than in the natural sciences and especially engineering.

The emphasis on the linearity and continuity of an academic career is closely related to the generally accepted notion of its most suitable timing. This is reflected in age limits for various academic awards and grant schemes, as well as in the legal status of doctoral students. There is a strong impression that doctoral students, and even postdocs, are young people. Doctoral students are largely treated as students in the last round of university studies, not as less experienced colleagues. Doctoral studies are usually not connected with a job at the institution; this is more pronounced in the social sciences and humanities, but it is not a rare sight in the natural sciences either. Full-time doctoral students are entitled to stipends, but not employment contracts and salaries. Stipends are very low and cannot cover basic expenses (the monthly stipend is around EUR 200–400, while the monthly rent in Prague is approximately EUR 400 for a small apartment, and the 2016 poverty line was EUR 400 a month).4 Due to these unsatisfactory conditions, doctoral students often take jobs not related to their doctoral research and work on their dissertation thesis in their leisure time. This limits their opportunities to engage in the academic community and create a network of contacts and knowledge which could increase their chances in the academia. It also impairs their attitude to research and their scientific motivation. More than one half of doctoral students never reach their PhD degree (MŠMT 2016). That was one of the reasons we decided to support young researchers with mentoring, as it can give them another opportunity to engage in the academic community.

Although it is becoming increasingly challenging to launch a research career in the Czech Republic, Czech academic institutions rarely employ proactive HR policies which could offer support to junior researchers, help them get a better insight in the complex situation, and assist them in meeting all the requirements they are assigned. The responsibility for the professional development of junior researchers is shifted almost exclusively on the researchers themselves and their advisors. The generally accepted assumption seems to be that skilful researchers can find all the necessary information themselves. The interviews in this book show how our mentees deal with these conditions and how they manage their research careers. They share the issues and challenges they faced when they joined our programme, they evaluate their success in dealing with the challenges, and they speak about the unexpected benefits they received.

We hope the book could be a source of inspiration not only for coordinators of mentoring programmes,

but also for HR managers, career centre managers, academics in managing positions, managers of research institutions, and national and international policy makers. All of them could use the interviews as a source of inspiration for new highlights in their agenda. The interviews discuss examples of good and bad practice in guiding junior researchers at different institutions and different fields. Anonymisation of interview data encouraged our mentees to speak very openly, which gives the above-mentioned actors a unique opportunity to learn about impressions, opinions and concerns to which otherwise they have rather limited access.

And naturally, we expect the book to be interesting and useful for junior researchers who can see they are not alone with their feelings and worries, who can maybe get a different view of their own situation, draw inspiration for their own collaboration with their mentors, or consider joining a mentoring programme. The book could be a priceless source of inspiration for mentors, as it can give them a better insight in the needs of junior researchers, and help them understand what they expect of their mentors.

I would like to thank all our respondents for their openness and willingness to share their stories, future plans, and mentoring experience with our readers. Also, I would like most cordially to invite all current and future coordinators of mentoring programmes in academia to collaborate with us via eument-net or within our mentoring programme, which we hope will gain more international overlap in future.

For more information about our programme, please see **www.genderaveda.cz**
For information about the eument-net network, please see **www.eument-net.eu**

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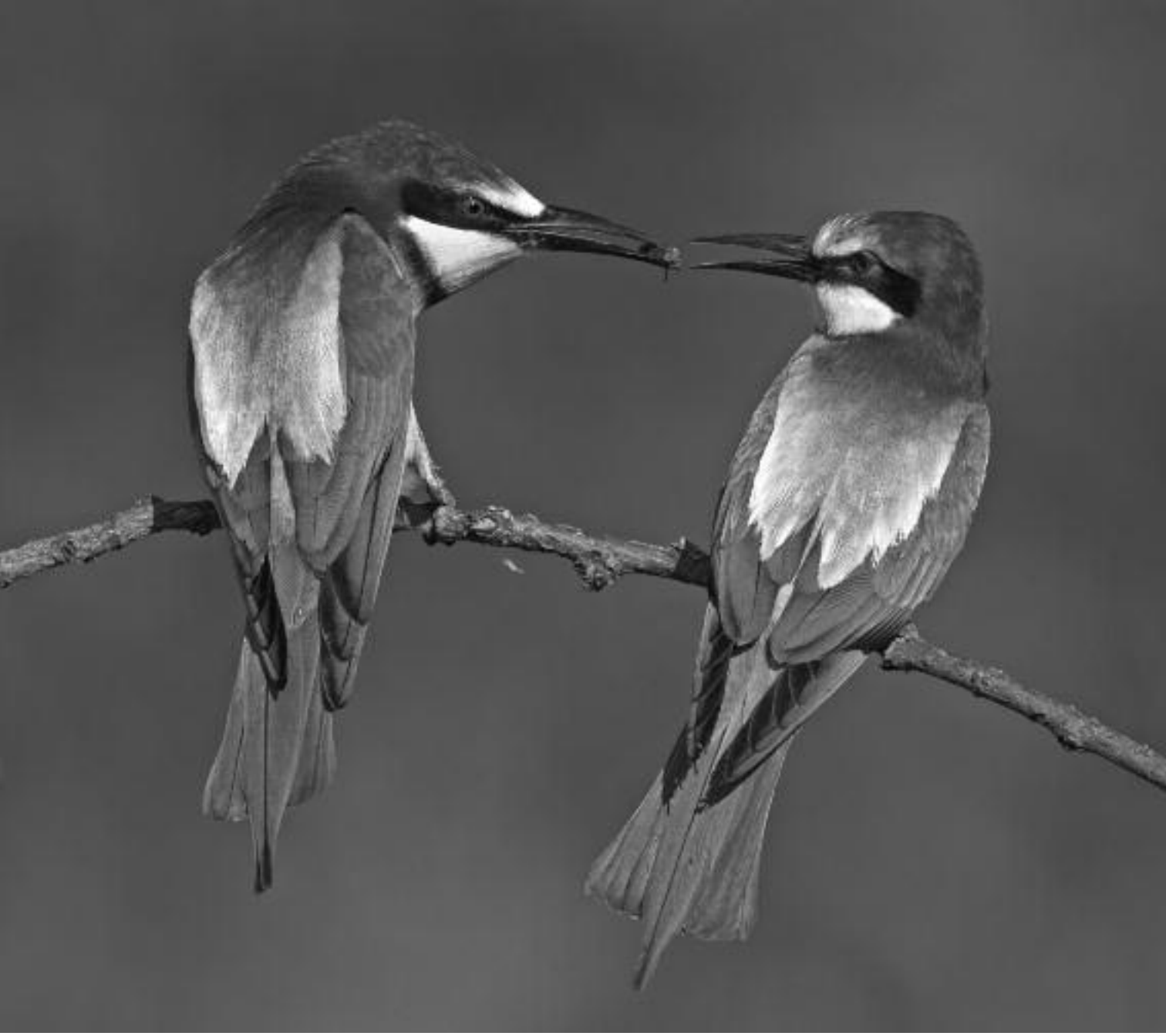
Adéla

Adela's path to social science was winding and full of coincidences. Originally, she wanted to study the natural sciences, but the teaching methods and attitude to students discouraged her in the first year. She wondered what to study when she was attracted by a description of a field in the social sciences. She liked the studies and she stayed. She found a job in research and at the time of our interview she was just submitting her dissertation. Although she loves her work, she cherishes her free time, she tries to cut her computer use, and spend time outdoors and with her family.



„The authority of the programme gave me the courage to address my mentor. I didn't feel like I was bothering her."

Mentoring as Mutual Support

Did you have any experience with mentoring when you entered our programme?
No!

What made you join it then?
It was because I didn't have anyone to guide me, formally or informally. I needed assistance, but I didn't want to feel like I'm bothering someone, like I'm taking someone's time, which is how I often feel when talking to my teachers and older colleagues. I liked the idea that I could address someone under the patronage of the Academy of Sciences programme.

What did you need assistance with? What did you set as your mentoring goal at the initial workshop?
I used the example in your form (laugh). Not that I would be too lazy to think of my own plan, but the example matched my main need at that time – to write an article I could publish.

Did you want to write the article alone or together with your mentor?
I wanted to write it myself, but I needed some advice. I needed to know how more experienced people do it, I needed to know about the whole process, from writing to publishing. Not that I wouldn't be interested in joint authorship, but nobody in the Czech Republic focuses on the topic of my dissertation. That's why I needed my mentor to help me rather with the general and practical things, how to deal with specific types of data. Even before the workshop, I considered addressing my mentor, because she is a specialist in processing this type of data files. Czech universities don't teach any courses in these types of software, you have to learn everything yourself, and then it's easy to get caught up on a simple problem just because you have nobody to ask what to do. I needed my mentor to help me especially with such technical problems.
Actually, I contacted her once even before the programme, when I needed her help on a technical issue. I was very surprised at her helpfulness when she answered my first e-mail. She replied straight away and told me to stop by. Then she discussed things with me for half an hour, explaining everything patiently. That's why I wanted her to be my mentor.

Shouldn't your advisor help you with that?
My advisor is great, but his research is a bit different. Moreover, he is now in charge of the department,

so he is very busy. I think he would like to help me, but there's little he can add to my subject, so we mostly only meet at the annual evaluation session. But I don't regard this as his fault. I counted on it from the very beginning, because my subject is very specific.

I see. So, tell me more about your consultations with the mentor.
We communicated on very friendly terms. My mentor is very open-minded and friendly. She certainly prefers informal communication. She is about my age, although she completed her PhD several years ago. We exchanged emails, and I visited her at her office. I wrote my article, she read it, and then we went to a café to discuss it. She was very flexible in adapting the meetings to my progress with the article.

Did you reach your mentoring goal? Did you manage to publish the article?
Yes, I did. The programme started in February, and I sent the article to the journal in May.

That was quick!
I knew what I wanted to write, I just needed some help with the data analysis, and I also needed to read some literature.

What do you regard as the main benefit of the programme?
The main thing was that I wasn't afraid to address my mentor, who could help me with my data. She is very kind, she would probably advise me even without the formal programme, but this way it was more pleasant for both. She could report it as part of her work.

Are you still in touch?
Not regularly because we work in different fields. We only use the same data, so I wanted to know the methods she uses and challenges she faces. But I know that I can ask her for help again whenever I need. We have met outside the programme already, when I needed to know something about a method she uses.

What would you recommend to future mentees?
To join the programme later in their PhD studies, not in the first year, to have a better idea about what they want, who to contact, and what they need the most.

The Loneliness of the Researcher

I remember at the initial workshop you said you would like to try teamwork, that you had no experience with it. That's why I thought you might want to collaborate with your mentor on your research.

That was my original idea. But then I found out my mentor worked alone, just as I did, because that was how everybody worked in her field. Even when they are doing a big joint project, they just distribute the tasks, and each of them works independently.

How did you deal with that? Did you feel uncomfortable about the individual work?
There are benefits and drawbacks to it. The main drawback is that you only know what you have been able to learn yourself. And then even trifles can take you ages to understand, because there's no one to help you. This makes the work terribly inefficient. If I could work with a team of people who work on the same topic, I would have published eight articles instead of three. And the loneliness can be depressing sometimes. But I'm rather introverted, I don't like a large group, I feel fine when I'm alone. Talking to people makes me very exhausted sometimes. I don't really know how I would manage teamwork, something they do in biological research. They have a clear hierarchy, and doctoral students are the bottom of the barrel, sooner or later they need to deal with interpersonal issues. Sometimes when I read your texts about PhD students in natural sciences, I think to myself: Thank heaven I have what I have, and my advisor doesn't boss me around, I have absolute freedom, I decide what I want to do, nobody controls me, it's up to me what I'm going to do. But that's another peril of independent work, I have to crack the whip myself. And there are so many enticements, when you sit in your office in June, it's hot outside, everybody goes swimming, and I know there's nobody holding me there, I could do it on Sunday when it's raining. Independent work requires a good deal of self-discipline.

When you say there is nobody who understands your subject in the Czech Republic, how do you manage to get your research funded?
I'm the only one who does this in the Czech Republic, but it is a usual topic abroad, nothing obscure or marginal at international conferences. In terms of funding, this exclusiveness in the Czech Republic seems to be rather advantageous. I can argue in my grant application that I'm the only one here who does a subject that is common abroad, and that we need my research not to lag behind.

Does that work?
It does. We just received a grant, we had an excellent evaluation, we got all we asked for.

If your topic is usual abroad, do you keep in touch with international researchers? Have you taken any study stays, are you a part of any international project?
I paid a one week visit to a very prestigious institution, but I often go to international conferences to establish contacts, and it goes quite well. I stay in touch with some people I meet at conferences, which is very useful for my research. I don't think it's necessary to leave for six months, even a three-day visit can teach you a lot.

From Passion for Natural Science to Passion for Social Science and Current Job

You study a unique social science topic in the Czech Republic, whereas originally you studied biology. How did you get to what you're doing?
It was all a coincidence. I liked natural sciences in secondary school, I wanted to study medicine, but I didn't make it. I was accepted to the school of natural sciences, I enrolled, and in the very first year I saw it was not the right choice. I felt my teachers were all burnt out, they didn't care a straw about their students, nobody talked to us, we just fulfilled template tasks, we calculated exercises. It was a nightmare. So, I started to look for something else to study and I found this combined social sciences field. I had to study a lot because I had always focused on natural sciences, but I managed to pass the entrance exams. I was quite at sea at first, but gradually I began to love it, I generally tend to like things I don't understand much (smile). I like to learn new things. That's why I went to a different school after I received my bachelor's degree, I wanted to try something new, do things that were not taught at my old school. And that's where I encountered the subject I do today.

So, did you decide to do research already during your master's programme?
No, definitely not. It is not usual for teachers to engage their undergraduate students in research projects, so I felt sort of out-of-place, I didn't consider making research my profession. But I found an advert for a job in our department, and during the interview I was asked whether I wanted to get a PhD degree. That was the first time anyone had asked me. I felt I shouldn't say no or I would not get the job, so I said yes. And that's how I got my first academic job. The whole of my studies and career is a matter of coincidence. And I'm grateful for the luck, I love my work.

On Not Considering Work in Private Sector an Option Despite Poor Conditions in the Academic Sector

What do you see as conditions for a successful academic career?
Most senior researchers around me have stayed at least for one year at an academic institution in Western Europe or the US. I see that as a great barrier to my research career. I have a great job, I can do what I want, I can explore new ideas, my colleagues are great, there are no conflicts, so logically, I don't want to lose the job. I'm happy I found such a good academic job. And also I participate in three grant projects, and I have tasks to complete, I cannot just leave for a year. That would be very unfair to my boss.

That's ironic. You do research which makes it difficult to fulfil the requirements placed on young researchers. International stays are included in the junior grant conditions of the Czech Science Foundation.

The system is stupid. My boss is very nice, I can propose just about anything; if it was all up to him, I'm sure he would agree to let me leave after I finish the projects and then pop back in when I return. But it's not that easy. The projects don't all start and end at one point. I have no fixed employment at our department, my job is tied to the projects, so if my boss fails to include me in another project, I can find myself jobless when I return. I would need a crystal ball to plan several years into the future. I only know my plans for the next year or two.

Given the uncertain situation, have you ever considered leaving and doing something else?
I have, but not because of uncertainty; rather because of the money. There were times that I had so little money it made me desperate. I considered getting a commercial job. But my boss was able to get my salary to a level which was higher than two thirds of a checkout girl's wages (laugh)…

Have you ever worked in private sector?
I have. Not in research. And it was killing me intellectually. I often meet people from corporate research at conferences, and I also know from my former schoolmates about the nature of the work there. I must say I'm not attracted at all. I heard several conference contributions from commercial researchers recently, and their quality was much lower when you compare them to academics. There is a lot of prejudice against academic work, I have heard comments that were totally erroneous. I think people from corporate and academic research are on different planets. I think that working in commercial research would destroy me, not just because the people are different; it's also about the nature of the work. Agency work is boring and superficial. Clients set the requirements, mostly something of little interest, you do it, you present it to the client and that's it. The whole process takes a week and the next week you do just the same thing for someone else. That would drive me mad. Meaningful work is crucial for me. I don't see any sense in commercial work.

So, your professional ambitions are firmly tied with academic research?
I don't plan far into the future. The only thing I plan now is that if I manage to hand in my dissertation, I shall be happy, run out into a field and hop up and down (laugh). And when I get myself together, I will continue what I do now. Many people keep asking: "What will you do when you finish your PhD?" They think it's like an ordinary school. My grandma says: "When you're a doctor, you should get a well-paid job – perhaps on TV." (laugh) And I say: "Granny, I work hard to learn something, and then I would do work that doesn't require any skill?" Sometimes it's funny, sometimes it's a bit scary. I just hope the title will let me continue doing what I like.

Do you have any role models, someone inspiring, someone you want to be like?
That's hard to say. I don't know the community much, I don't have the time to read the works of people

who do other topics. I don't know who is a good researcher in my field. Half of my work is reading texts relevant for my topic, and all the authors are foreigners. And when I get home in the evening, I don't feel like reading anything, not even fiction, I just watch blockbusters (laugh).

I can understand that. I haven't read any fiction for some time either. But I was not really asking about researchers in your field, rather about personal qualities, attitude to research or students, etc.
I admire my mentor. I was amazed at how much time she was willing to devote to explaining things to me. Some of my schoolmates, PhD students, display the same eagerness to help others. I like that very much, our field of study has been neglected for a long time, and people willing to offer free assistance are badly needed.

What sort of researcher would you like to become?
I would like to publish articles in journals with some impact factor (smile), to get enough grants so I can earn my living, and to be able to choose what I want to do.

Anežka

Anežka already fell for biology in secondary school, and it was then that she got her first part-time job at the Academy of Sciences. University studies only confirmed that her choice was right. She went to study abroad during her master's programme, and she stayed there to complete her PhD. She returned to the Czech Republic several years ago, and now she is about to set up her own research department. Nevertheless, she would also like to leave some room in her life for other things. She sees the need to balance her work and her personal life as one of the main challenges of her career.

„I realised that expert knowledge and experience was not enough for a research career."

Mentoring as a Way to Develop Communication Skills

Did you have any experience with mentoring when you joined our programme? Even informal, outside of official programmes.
I didn't have any experience with mentoring programmes. And informal…(thinking)? Actually, the mentor I chose within your programme had mentored me informally before. He is a friend with whom I had consulted similar issues many times. And then we discussed them within the programme.

Why did you choose to enter a formal mentoring relationship when your friend supported you already?
I chose him because I thought it would be difficult to find another mentor, and I was also curious about how it would work under the formal rules.

What was your mentoring goal?
There were several. I wanted to improve my communication, make my communication strategies within our team more efficient, both with my bosses and subordinates. My mentor works in a successful company where he communicates with clients every day, and obviously he is rather proficient. I wanted him to help me analyse various situations and advise me on how to respond, how to keep certain positions toward other people that would help me reach my goals. Sometimes we went on trips together, as we have really been good friends for ages. This was a part of mentoring for me too; I could watch him talk to the hotel staff, etc. But it is not just that I stand behind his back and watch him (laugh). He learned something from me too. I saw him use some of my communication tricks too, even on me (laugh). He had fun watching me realise it.

What was the main benefit of the programme, since your communication with your mentor was similar as before?
I realised how I could profit and learn from everyday situations. I started to see mentoring where I used to overlook it. Now I can see more when I look around. But it's not that I'm like some sort of a secret agent, I'm not that sophisticated (laugh).
In terms of other programme activities, I found the initial workshop very useful. I had considered my plans many times before, but I was never required to give them specific outlines until the workshop. I also liked the part where we were to work in pairs, learn as much as we could about each other and then imagine each other's situation 15 years later. It was fun, and it made us learn surprising things about what impres-

sion we make on others. And the picture of myself I was asked to draw, I still have it hanging above my bed. I made a vibrant collage of pieces in very positive colours. Every night I go to bed I see my bright future (laugh). I would love to take the same workshop again, to see if there is any shift in my vision of my future.

You said you had several mentoring goals. What were the other ones?
I also wanted to learn to relax, draw a line between my work and my private life. I wanted to learn to switch off and stop thinking about work.

And did you manage?
I didn't really succeed with my work-life balance, but I'm trying. I didn't find any mentor for this, it was not in my power. But I took the time management course again, to get more encouragement. I would recommend future mentees to be more diligent in looking for mentors (smile).
And as for the communication, I realised that expert knowledge and experience was not enough for a successful research career. The higher I get on my career ladder, the more I can see that you don't need to be an excellent expert, but you have to be able to "sell" your abilities. That's what determines your position, the conditions for your work. I had always focused only on the expert part of the work, but when I started my postdoc, I had to fight for my position and the position of my team. If I really want to do research, ironically, I will have to turn away from pure research to some extent, and focus on communication. My participation in the mentoring programme, and my collaboration with my mentor were the first steps.

What is your communication with your mentor like, now that the programme is over, given you have been friends for a long time?
We keep discussing the same things, of course, but I would also like to get inspired by other people. I'm focusing especially on one of my bosses who is an excellent manager, incredible negotiator, he can profit from many situations, he can turn negotiations in his direction. I would like him to be my next informal mentor. I've asked him if I could join him at the negotiations of our project consortium. I want to see him "in action". I'm glad he agreed. It will not enhance my research skills, but I'm sure I will learn new negotiating skills, I could even say political skills.

Did you find it helpful to meet other mentees in the courses of personal and professional development?
Not really. They were all PhD students, and they discussed things that were an issue for me some five years ago. But I've moved on since then. There was almost no other postdoc, nobody to discuss setting up and managing your own team, which is the most burning challenge for me now.

I know you have some experience with coaching. What is the main difference between coaching and mentoring?

A coach should guide you to set your goals yourself and find the way to reach them. A coach should not tell you what you could do and how, whereas mentor should. You consult your mentor with an issue because you presume he or she has some experience with it and he or she says: "I have faced this issue, and I did this and that, but today I would rather do this, so I recommend you do this." A coach makes you do various exercises to think about things, or even gives you homework to do.

On the Desire to do Free Research and Settle Down, and how to Fulfil it in the Czech Republic

How did you get to your current work?
I decided to study biology when I was in the sixth grade. I took part in a natural sciences club where I met many of my future colleagues and friends who were interested in the same – to learn about the workings of nature, plants and animals, how all the things interact. At the end of my secondary school studies, I started to work as a lab assistant at one of the institutes of the Academy of Sciences. I knew exactly what I wanted while most of my schoolmates had no idea what they would like to do. And it was the right choice. When I got to the university, I could see it was just what I wanted. I started to travel to foreign universities, I spent one year abroad during my master's programme, and I stayed there for the entire doctoral programme.

How does a secondary school student get a job at the Academy of Sciences?
I got there within the Students' Professional Activities programme, and I got a tiny job there, ridiculously short hours, but I didn't care, I just wanted to do research.

So, it felt natural for you to study for PhD, didn't it?
I wanted to do research, and you definitely need a PhD degree for that. I spent a lot of time in the lab when I wrote my bachelor's and master's theses, and I realised that although I loved the work, I might want to change the topic and spend more time outside, in the field, and have more opportunity to use my creativeness. I could never do that without a PhD degree. I could only be a lab assistant. I would analyse samples for someone else's projects, and I could never influence the design and content of the research.

Do you have the freedom in research that you desired when you started your doctoral studies?
Yes, on the whole. When I started this job, I got complete freedom to do the topic I "imported" from my studies abroad. Nobody did that in the Czech Republic until then. So, the last years have been about finding sources of money and persuading others my research makes sense. And I think I have succeeded. Now there is a good chance I might have my own research department, but I'm trying to postpone it. I want to learn as much as I can from my boss. He is a sort of my mentor now, he teaches me a lot about research management and project management, how to call for bids, how to choose people for my team. But I'm

looking forward to having my own department. It is hard to create something from scratch, but it is exciting to be starting something new.

It is definitely a great achievement. Congratulations! How was it to return to the Czech Republic after your doctoral studies? Did you consider doing a postdoc abroad, in one of the countries that do your topic?
Not really. I wanted to go back, I wanted to speak Czech, meet people with the same mentality, people I can understand. I was trying to find an institution that would be willing to accommodate my research, I addressed heads of various institutes and teams in the Czech Republic. And my current boss was the fastest, he replied the same day, and that decided it. I had a job (smile).

Wow, that was quick. Did he know you already? Or why did he decide so quickly?
No, he didn't know me. I sent him my CV, references, and of course a description of my research and my vision. I think it was the prospect of collaboration with international institutions that attracted him. My topic is currently being researched in only a few countries, so we all know each other, and we collaborate on joint projects.

In addition to the language and mentality, was there anything else that enticed you to return? Anything to do with the Czech academic environment?
What I like is that when you receive your PhD degree, preferably when you earn it abroad and then return, you have the freedom to do your own topic, develop it, even set up your own department. This is not usual in the countries where I studied. You only get some freedom after you become a junior professor. Until then you just work for a professor, you help his or her projects or projects of the institution. Of course, you can try to apply for your own grants, but there's rarely enough time for that. And when you finish a project, you usually move to another research institution, preferably in another country, to learn as much as you can. The road to freedom and responsibility is very long, it is tied to a managing position or professorship.
In the Czech Republic, you can stay in one institution for a longer time after your PhD. You can build your team and develop longer research perspectives. I can plan what I want to research in six years' time because my institution supports long-time research plans.

You're lucky it works like that in your institution. But I suppose most institutions only grant short term contracts which make it difficult to form any long-term plans for research and life.
I think it's great to do each phase of your career at a different institution, preferably in different countries, but in the postdoc phase, people should get the opportunity to settle down, have a safe job, not just a one-year contact. They should get a contract for several years, or an unlimited one. That's a pipe dream

for most young Czech scientists. They should be allowed to put down roots. They should be allowed to settle down, but they should keep the yearning to know more, to learn, to develop, to promote their field of study. But you can achieve that through regular short-term stays at international institutions, you don't need to move to another country every two years. Within the last four years, I have travelled very often to various countries. I believe that collaboration and interdisciplinary overlaps will be the most important trends in science in future. We should try to see phenomena from different points of view.
Some level of security is indispensable both for good personal life, and for good research. I focus on longitudinal experiments. One of the bigger projects I plan will take some seven years to complete. If I only had a two-year contract and was supposed to move somewhere else afterwards, it would be pointless to plan experiments of this kind, although they can be important for the development of the field.

Science is neither the Only Mission in Life, nor Ordinary Work

Where do you get inspiration for work-life balance?
I would say there are three types or groups of scientists. The first includes enthusiasts, workaholics, people willing to work twelve or fourteen hours a day, including weekends. These people really get science going, but they give up almost all their personal life. They live for science, only science gives them satisfaction. The second group is people who work hard when they are at work, but they also keep their personal life, and they manage to find a balance between the two. They try to do both very well. And then there is a third group of people who see their work just as a job that lets them live a comfortable life, a job that is perhaps more interesting than working for a corporation. So, they just work their eight hours a day, they drink their cup of coffee and go home.

I thought this third way could not keep you in research for a long time, as there is a lot of competition in research, and you have to work hard to satisfy all the requirements.
I think that depends on the boss of each institution and department, whether they know what their employees really do.

In which group are you? One or two?
The impression I might make is wrong, I'm not one of the fanatics in the first group, or at least I try not to be, although I'm afraid my friends would not hesitate to rank me there. But science cannot fill my life entirely, I need some room for other things. I definitely aspire to be in the second group, but it is very hard for me to achieve. I try to do good research, discover new things that will move our knowledge to a higher level. I have more ideas and plans for projects and experiments than I shall ever be able to do. I try to do everything correctly and properly, not to be ashamed to sign my results. And that pushes me to

the first group. I will have to learn to accept that not all the things can be done perfectly, otherwise I can never hope to reach any work-life balance.
My partner is staying abroad at present, which makes my situation even more hopeless. When you know there's nobody waiting for you at home, why should you hurry from work? That's why I often stay at work very long, and then I'm angry at myself. I could have done different things, do some sport, enjoy nature! I find it hard to keep a fixed schedule of my leisure activities; not just because of the time I spend at work, but also because of frequent journeys. I'm on the go all the time, mostly on research journeys. I keep shuttling between the few countries that study my topic. My attempts to take regular yoga lessons or language lessons have always failed.

Couldn't you qualify for the second group by getting a job in the same country as your partner and friends?
It's not that easy. My field of research travels with people who do it. And it is currently fading in the country where most of my friends live, because the people who did it moved to another research institute. Balancing your work and life is very difficult in the current system of research institutions. I sometimes doubt it makes sense. I'm not sure the couple of pages a year can give me enough satisfaction to keep me in research for the rest of my life. A couple of pages and an awful heap of work behind them! Although not everybody does that…
But I know science is my mission, the effort to know more, to broaden our horizons. I know that if I was to choose, I would prefer science to my private life.

What do you mean?
My current doubts about the meaning of scientific work and career are largely inspired by my recent collaboration with people from the third group, people who see research only as a job. In some countries, in particular, people tend to see scientific work differently. They have a cup of coffee at eleven a.m., lunch at noon, and another cup of coffee at two p.m. When they contract a trifling cold, they feel too ill to come to work at all. Collaboration with such people is discouraging and draining, because in the end I do their work just to avoid spoiling the whole project and wasting the precious data. And then they have no qualms about adding their name to the publication, and they often boast about it… By adding their names to each other's publications, they can report fifteen publications within three years. I'm not sure my attitude can ever compete with this. They would say: "Hey, what are you doing all the time? You only have one publication in three years?! I know it is in Nature, but still, it is just one!" That really annoys me. But I must admit that working only with workaholics might be equally frustrating. Ideally, I would imagine a team combining people from the first two groups, especially people who are highly motivated, who can push the limits of science, who can do really good work. Motivation is the key. You have to keep finding motivation to work well. It's a question of self-discipline, patience and strong-mindedness.

So, your doubts about your career are due to your displeasure with the attitude of people around you. Not that you started to dislike research itself?
I like doing research, only I don't know whether I want to go on in this system; whether I can do with the humble appreciation of my work. I can feel that I have come to a crossroads, and I'm not sure which road to choose, although deep inside I know which one I will choose in the end. I just need to persuade myself, find enough energy, new motivation.

If you consider leaving research, do you have any idea about what else you would like to do?
I would love to have a tiny wooden house, a small farm, some animals, live somewhere in the mountains all alone (laugh). You can see I'm overworked, I should relax and then look at it from a distance. My real plans include associate professorship and full professorship. I want to teach, but I haven't been able to squeeze it into my busy schedule. But when I have a team, more doctoral students, they can go to measuring campaigns instead of me, and I would have more time to do some teaching in addition to research.

Why do you want professorship when you work at the Academy of Sciences and not a university?
I regard associate and full professorship as a token of appreciation for scientific work. These degrees are widely acknowledged abroad. When you want to do research at the Academy of Sciences, a PhD is enough.

You have done research ever since your secondary school, you are about to manage a department. What would you recommend junior researchers, or people who are just considering doctoral studies?
I would say the main thing is to be active and follow your goals. If you want to receive your PhD at a good foreign university, you have to start looking for an eligible team and funding options in time. There are various stipends. You should write your proposals soon. With a good stipend, you get the opportunity to focus on research, you don't need an additional job. It also gives you some independence in relation to your team leader, because you don't depend on their money. And because you're not paid by your institution, they cannot ask you to do auxiliary work; or they can ask you, but you can say you're paid for doing research and writing, not for copying.
Students who consider a research career should think about their long-term targets; what they want to do in future, what they want to achieve, what is important for them. They should ask themselves whether they are willing to make research their life mission, give it more time and energy than what they are paid for? If so, I wish you luck and a lot of patience on your long path to understanding.

Antonie

Antonie's family has always been close to nature, so she instinctively chose natural sciences after secondary school. She chose a completely new topic for her PhD project, and she was looking for a mentor to give her expert support. A former fellow from the programme helped her find a laboratory job, and today Antonie works in a hospital lab. She likes seeing her results and the practical effect of her work, which is very different from primary research where you rarely have any hope of seeing your results in practice. That's why she plans to stay even after she finishes her PhD.

„I couldn’t find an expert to be my mentor, but peer mentoring worked perfectly.”

Mentoring as a Way to a Lab Job and Self-Knowledge

Did you have any experience with mentoring when you signed up for our programme? Even just informal?
Yes, I did. When I began to work as a counsellor in an outdoor club for children, there was always someone to give us feedback, to advise us. They were not really mentors, they were senior counsellors who shared their experience. So, I expected something like that.

Do you think you needed something like that?
I think I did. I started a new topic for my PhD project, very different from what my advisor focused on, so I needed expert assistance. And I was really interested in the mentoring courses. I knew some of them from my school, but I thought it would be great to take as many of them as I could. For instance, I had already taken a course in identifying my strengths and weaknesses, but the other courses were new to me.

You developed your mentoring plan at the initial workshops. You were to identify specific targets for the next year. What was your mentoring plan?
I wanted to get to a lab, learn to use it, to be able to get a job later. And I also thought mentoring could help me build a network of professional contacts.

And did it?
I couldn’t find a mentor, but the lab worked out, largely thanks to one of the former programme participants. Meeting her and working in the lab helped me get in contact with more people in the field, so in the end I managed to fulfil my plan even without a mentor.

What mentor were you looking for?
My thesis topic was new to me, I had never done anything in that specific field before, and I needed a real expert in the field. I also hoped for some inspiration, a view from outside my own institution.

Why do you think you were unable to find a mentor?
Looking back, I can see I contacted people who were very unlikely to do it. They were both very busy, and I could have anticipated that they would not have the time to guide me. I wrote an email to each, but none of them answered, which was frustrating. Naturally, this discouraged me from trying to contact

someone else. I have seen a similar situation before, when I was trying to arrange for practical training. I wrote some ten emails to the professor, until I felt really frustrated. I find such chasing humiliating.

I'm sorry about that. We rarely meet with no response, even from international mentors. Even if they refuse, which happens exceptionally, they apologise.
It was just bad luck (smile).

How did you get to that lab?
It was a winding path. I needed to do some experiments, and the lab I had used before was busy. So, I was looking for another facility. I asked the friend who told me about the mentoring programme if she knew about a suitable facility. She worked in a research centre, so she asked her colleagues, and they helped me find a lab for my project. When I went there for the first time, I was worried and uncertain. But when my friend wanted to introduce me to the lab manager, it was unneeded, it was a former mentee from the programme. We had met at the courses. We didn't realise it at first, but when we found out, it was very pleasant and it stimulated our collaboration.

So, you ended up with a peer mentor?
Yes, it was a sort of informal peer mentoring.

How was your lab work?
It was great. I went there for about three months and I did experiments. It wasn't long, but it was enough. And there were other benefits to it – I still collaborate with one of my colleagues from the lab. I think it also helped me get my current job. So, generally very useful.

You didn't get a mentor you wanted but you took the courses of personal and professional development. Was there any specific effect?
The course on expert writing and publishing helped me finish my article. We received a presentation that I referred to when writing. I also gave it to other students to use when they needed help. I liked all the courses. The project course was great, it's a pity I'm not in research, I can't really use it (laugh). But the course on strengths and weaknesses was great too, very deep, it made me realise many things.

PhD and Information Chaos

What attracts you about the natural sciences?
We had a great biology teacher at my secondary school. When she explained some of the topics, I just

loved it and I knew it was something I would like to do for living. All my family are zootechnicians; we have many animals at home, so it seemed to be a logical choice.

Tell me more about your PhD course.
I have interrupted my studies, I'm finishing my dissertation and I have a full-time hospital job. Within my PhD programme, I worked at two institutions; one where I had my office and my advisor, and one where I did my experiments, but I had no guidance there. Whenever a problem occurred during my experiments, I had to call my advisor, and he was often unable to help me because he had no idea what it was about. That's why I was looking for a mentor to help me master lab work and get a better insight in my topic.

Wasn't your advisor supposed to provide that insight?
My topic is marginal for him, so he couldn't give me all the information I needed. From the second year I had a specialist to advise me, but he had his own programme and his own doctoral students, and he didn't have the time to explain everything. When I needed something, he told me the information, but he couldn't analyse my experiments and so on.

Can you see any difference between an advisor and a mentor, or do they seem the same?
I think an advisor should spend a lot of time with me, always be available, while a mentor is someone who only sees me now and then. In practical terms, I think the mentor should look at the results of my work that I have consulted with my advisor, and give me some feedback. My advisor was always available, but since he doesn't specialise in my topic, the influence was limited.

Did you travel abroad within your PhD programme?
I spent one month in Japan. I got there by chance, thanks to a friend who had the collaboration included in his project.

I see you weren't short of networking (laugh)!
Yes, it worked just as it should. And when there was nobody around, another coincidence brought someone in my way, such as the mentoring programme. I didn't contact people on purpose.

Was there anything surprising in Japan?
I think I was surprised that things worked in roughly the same way as here. People there had to apply for grants, they were paid mainly from grants, they needed to write articles, go to conferences. It was basically the same thing.

On Research as Endless Work with Little Palpable Impact

You liked the project management course, although you said you cannot really use it because you're not in research any more. Do you consider going back?
Not really (smile). My experience with university work is that it's fuelled by articles. That's not my cup of tea, it's very stressful. When I started my PhD programme, I regarded researchers as people who really liked their work, who had plenty of information, who knew a lot, who could see the context of things, who stuck to moral rules, and who educated others. But the reality is different. They are always very busy, hectic, they keep looking for sources of money, most of them have one-year contracts, just for the time of the grant. Researchers are enthusiasts who are willing to dedicate all their time to research, at the expense of their private life. The ethical standards are often violated, you often see articles with names of authors who have never even seen the text. I feel that researchers need to be mentally resistant not to get broken. But I don't want to take part in this.

So, you say you would like to do research, but you don't like the context?
Not really. Primary research is nothing for me. I love my hospital job. When I did research and we did an experiment, it only opened a million subsequent questions. That's great, but what do you achieve with that? You publish an article. You don't see any practical effect of your work, it never ends. This was demotivating, I was never satisfied. Here in the hospital, whenever I do a test, it determines the treatment of a specific patient. It can save lives. I understand that there would be no hospital tests without the primary research, but I cannot wait forever to see the effect. It usually takes some twenty years to see your findings make their way to the patients.

What did you like about research?
I liked the hands-on part in the lab, experiments, when I reached some conclusion. I didn't like applying for grants, writing articles, and going to conferences. Unfortunately, the administrative part takes up some seventy per cent of the job, lab work is just a cherry on top. I don't know if it can be done differently, but I really disliked the way we did it.

What are your nearest plans?
The first thing is to receive my PhD degree. Then I would like to continue working where I work now. Now I'm officially just a proxy for a woman who is on her maternity leave, but I hope it will work out in some way, and I will not need to look for another job.

Do you need the PhD degree to do your hospital work?
Generally, you don't need it, but I have a master's degree with the title of "engineer", which is not enough here, because I only studied the relevant subjects in my PhD programme.

Is there any perspective for career development in your job?
I can get certified and move to a managing position, which is great. What I like here is that I'm required to keep developing, I have to take study stays, get additional training. And I can do some research, too, my colleagues write articles, they go to conferences. I can combine both, diagnostic practice and research. This is the direction I want to take, but I have only just set out, so we will see.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth earned her PhD in an interdisciplinary field within the natural sciences, but her path to scientific research was not straightforward and smooth. Before she started her doctoral studies, she tried the role of a secondary school teacher. Her early career was influenced by the arrival of her children. Today, Elizabeth has got a stable research job, and she is looking forward to setting up her own research team.

„Mentoring gave me new perspectives."

Mentoring as a Source of Information on the Workings of Research

Why did you apply for mentoring?
I felt I needed more practical information about how things are done in research, about the options of grants, and so on. I had always imagined research was only about doing science, you just examine something, and that's it. I soon found out that the notion was completely wrong, that you need to do all the paperwork, you need to know many additional things – where to look for grants, what tasks you are obliged to do and what you can refuse. And because I'm lazy and I don't want to read all this information, it is simpler for me to go to a course and listen to all the information. I often go to various conferences and courses, because that way I can learn things much faster than if I read heaps of articles. And this way my husband and I both profited from the courses, because I told him all that I learned there.

Did you ask your advisor about these things?
He sometimes explained things to me, but I felt he filtered the information choosing what to tell me. He didn't really encourage me to finish my PhD, I suppose he thought I couldn't make it with two kids, and that I didn't really need it. I think he might have viewed me as a housewife who sometimes comes to work, does her tasks, contributes a good idea, and that's it. I don't know, I think he would have liked me to stay in the auxiliary position and just do my work well.

Your collaboration with your mentor stopped. Why?
I wanted her to advise me on my postdoc. We only met once, and she was really helpful, she told me a lot about how things work, but then we never met again. There was no need.
And then I met a female biologist at one of the mentoring sessions. We liked each other and we talked. She astonished me with her opinion that a woman can either have a family or develop her career in research, because you can never manage both. I still hope I can have both. She decided to have a research career, so she has no family. But we discussed things and we stay in touch. She is a sort of my informal mentor.

So, did the programme help you?
Certainly. The crucial moment was the lecture by Jana Roithová. This showed me and my husband a completely new perspective. Until then, we had regarded the PhD as the paramount object, but the lecture helped us see that PhD is just the beginning, that it opens the door to the real launch of our research careers.

This is what your programme gave me – information about the workings of our research system. I like the way you encourage and motivate women. I would have never made myself do many of the things I did, especially during my maternity leave. I can see the same thing happening to my friends now, I can see their self-confidence sink as they stay at home with their kids. So then, when I told them some of the things I learned at your courses, you were actually helping them too.

The Path to the PhD

How did you get to your research field?
It was all a coincidence. I have always liked the natural sciences, but I wasn't very strong at chemistry. When I was about to finish my secondary school, I was looking for a study subject where I wouldn't have to take an entrance exam in chemistry. And I found a subject where I only needed to pass mathematics and biology. I had no idea what to expect, I just liked the description of the subject, it sounded interesting and modern. I did some research already during my studies and I loved it. I knew I wanted to go on to do research, but then I became pregnant, and my plans had to wait.

How long did they wait?
Five years. I worked as a biology teacher, it was interesting and inspiring. But I gradually lost motivation, I started to feel the routine, I knew all the questions my students would ask, I knew what I would answer. One of my colleagues suggested I should try the doctoral programme. I did, and it worked out. But I had my second child during my studies, so it took me eight years to get the degree. It was really challenging, the grannies helped me a lot, and it all came to a happy ending.

How did your doctoral studies go? How was your collaboration with your advisor?
It was fine, but I think we had different notions of what our collaboration should be like. I think I needed some more attention, I wanted to ask zillions of questions, but he had little time for me because of his managerial responsibilities. Furthermore, he was not happy I wanted to do other things than just lab work, I wanted to attend doctoral courses, but he thought I didn't need them. That's why I took a holiday to attend the mentoring courses; I didn't want to discuss it with him. He didn't encourage me to be independent at the beginning. He never told me about research grants for students. And when my husband told me about the option, my advisor did not seem happy about it. I was very active, I kept asking questions, and he didn't seem happy about that. I think that if you want to make research your career, you need to know all the available information – where to get money for your research, how to do the paperwork, how to set up a team, etc. It is not relevant for research as such, and I would personally prefer not to do it at all, I would really love to do nothing but research, but that's impossible. Maybe my questions annoyed him because he found these activities annoying too.

He started to be really helpful only after I defended my dissertation. He made me a part of an excellent research team that worked on a new project, he helped me get a postdoc grant. It might have been my defence that persuaded him to trust me.

Were you the only woman he supervised?
No, there was another female doctoral student, young and ambitious. She wanted to go abroad as soon as she finished her PhD to have this duty fulfilled, so that she could have a family. But our advisor kept her back, he didn't want her to finish her PhD and leave. She wanted to join the mentoring programme with me, but she changed her mind because she was afraid our advisor might hear about the things she says at the courses or discusses with her mentor. This could happen, the community is very small.

The Postdoc Stay as the Apple of Discord

You defended your dissertation recently, what are your next plans?
Immediately after I finished my PhD, I started to look for an international university to do a postdoc, but my former advisor, now my boss, wouldn't let me. So, I stayed at the same department where I did my PhD, and my boss is happy. I suppose he really wants me to work for him (laugh). He gave me more hours to work, he increased my salary, he gave me a better computer, and he even offered to let me do my postdoc in the department, in a new team. That would leave me without international experience, but it would be a great solution in my current situation. I think postdoctoral researchers should be offered this option, it would let people who have children decide whether they want to go abroad or stay here. It would be great for men too, as they wouldn't have to leave their families.
I will see how it works out with my international stay. My boss thinks I'm not serious about it – I have children so I cannot travel.

Did your boss give you any reasons why he doesn't want to let you go abroad?
He says the system is wrong, because it makes institutions invest in the education of students, who would make great researchers, and then they go abroad and most of them never return. He thinks people should stay at the institutions where they "grew up".

That's interesting. Some institutions do it just the other way around; they don't allow people to stay after PhD.
That's right, some of my friends told me it was their case. I have mixed feelings about it. On the one, it is great that I have a stable job; on the other hand, I would like to try to work somewhere else. As Jana Roithová said in her lecture: after you finish your PhD it is time to dive into the wild, to set up your own team, start your own research, become an independent researcher. That's why it is great to move abroad,

to learn new things. This was a crucial impetus for me, and for my husband too. He told me to work hard, to develop my career, because life is not easy for female researchers.

Your husband is a researcher too. You both should consider a postdoc. What are your plans?
My husband completed his PhD four years before I did, and he applied for a postdoc then, but it didn't work out. Then our second child was born and he didn't want to leave me here with the kids. Our older daughter had already started school, so we couldn't leave as a family. And we just forgot about it. But the lecture I've mentioned really changed our minds. We decided to submit a joint postdoc project that could get us all abroad as a family. We had everything agreed with a lab where he would do theory and I would do experiments, but we didn't get the grant.

On Research as an Occupation

Has your notion of research changed since you started your doctoral studies?
Definitely. I never used to think about who pays for research, where the money comes from, I never used to think I could manage a project myself. I am ambitious, and I've always liked doing things my way, but I've never nourished this aspiration. Now I know how things work, and that I am responsible for getting the money for my projects. The sad thing is that it often prevents you from researching things you would like to study; you have to do what is needed by the society, rather practical things than theory. But I suppose that's how it should be; when someone pays for your research, it should bring them some benefit.

Would you say you are a researcher? Do you meet your own criteria for being a researcher?
Not yet. I would like to be a researcher, but there are still areas to develop. When I have my own team, my own project, I will consider myself a researcher. Now I'm an incomplete researcher – I am a member of a team, I am learning new methods, and I do my best to manage everything.

In addition to creating your mentoring plans, you were also asked to outline your vision of yourselves in 30 years. What is your vision?
I see myself as a head of a research team that works on a very interesting project. At the same time, I supervise students, I'm very supportive. I work here in the Czech Republic, because I like it here, and the conditions for research are good here. I would like to take short stays abroad: various study stays and gatherings with the international research community.

Irma

Already in secondary school, Irma knew she wanted to focus on the humanities. She managed to balance her studies and academic career with family – she welcomed her first child during her master's programme, and the second during her PhD programme. She took her family with her when she went on a one-year research stay abroad. She regards the subject of her research as the topic of her life, and she says she gets a charge out of doing research interviews.

„Mentoring was the key activity in my career so far"

Mentoring as Inspiration from Elsewhere and the Way to a New Job

Did you have any experience with mentoring when you entered our programme?
Not at all. I had no idea what it meant. I imagined it would be some sort of brainwashing, I thought I would listen to someone who would "mentor" me, and I would profit from it in the end. I imagined a study group or something like that.

You must have been surprised at the initial workshop.
I mainly appreciated the babysitting service at the workshop (laugh). It might sound strange, but my daughter is terribly fixated on me, so it was a special occasion for me to spend the whole day without the kids, moreover in such an intellectual and positive atmosphere.

What were your mentoring targets?
I needed to get going with my dissertation. I had collected some data, but I had no idea what to do with it. My advisor and I got stuck, we just couldn't proceed, and at the same time I was moving to Prague. I knew I needed someone in Prague to help me find a way to tackle my data, and I wanted to finish the dissertation by December. Which was incredibly naïve (laugh).

Did you already have any idea who to address?
I was considering three people I knew from conferences. The workshop helped me decide whom to contact first. It was a female researcher I had contacted even before I moved to Prague, and asked her if she would meet me in Prague. She found it funny she had to sign the mentoring contract, she didn't want a formal relationship, but I persuaded her it was beneficial for her.

Did you consider whether to choose a man or a woman?
The personality of the mentor is the main thing. You have to be in tune. But I thought a female mentor would be more likely to understand my situation. Jennifer de Vries spoke about it at one of your workshops. She explained the different career developments and said that women generally have a different career line from men, and men are often unable to see and understand the different situations women face.

What criteria did you consider when choosing a mentor?
I knew she could understand my topic, that she was a nice person, that I would like her personally. She

has kids too, so she could understand if I was not available, if I cancelled an appointment at the last moment because the kids were sick, and so on. That was a crucial thing for me.

What was the main thing your mentor gave you?
To fulfil my study plan, I needed to write not only my dissertation, but also something to publish. So, we agreed I would write an article based on my data, and if I managed to have it published, I would develop it into my dissertation. My mentor was very instrumental in the process of finishing the article.

Could you describe your collaboration?
We met about once a month in a café that has a kids' corner. I went there with my younger daughter. My mentor was great. She always read everything I sent her, she always had something interesting to say about it, she guided me in an unbelievable way, and she did it all in her free time, although she is a very busy person. Eventually, she arranged for an informal meeting with people from the journal in which I wanted to publish my article.

That sounds amazing!
It was. Nothing like that had ever happened to me before. In the end, they decided not to publish my article, and again my mentor consulted the situation with me, and we agreed that I should offer it to another journal. So, I did, and I got two very positive reviews with only minor requests for changes, and the article was published later that year. I managed to write my dissertation over the next summer. So, I completed the plan, and my mentor played a crucial part in the process. I appreciate her assistance very much.

Do you think your mentor might have found your collaboration useful too?
Frankly, I don't understand why she did it for me (laugh). She said it was rewarding for her too, but I don't know in what respect. She said it made her consult her own topic and look at it from a different angle. I also felt that it made her happy to see someone develop, and that she was really interested in my topic, in all the things one can do with it.

Do you think you will stay in touch?
Sure, we do. I have seen her recently when I needed her to help me with something else.

Did you also attend the personal development courses? Did they help you?
To be honest, I found everything helpful and essential at that time. I started to focus on myself again after a very long time. This helped me consider different things. The time management course helped me realise how much time I needed to write my dissertation and encouraged me to find a co-working centre to write it. It all just fit together. I think that if you make a decision and take the first step, it all just gets going. You only need the initial impetus. For me, it was the mentoring programme.

What was the main benefit of the programme?
It was the crucial activity of my career so far. I realised I could stay in research after my PhD, it helped me get anchored here in Prague, but the main thing is that it drove me towards my current job.

Congratulations! How did it happen?
I started to chat with another participant at a mentoring event, we found out we do the same subject, and she said they needed a new team member for their project. I didn't give it much of a chance, but the project coordinator called me several months later to ask me if I was interested. So now I work. I have a business mobile phone, and I'm tremendously efficient (laugh).

That's a wonderful success!
It is! For the first time, I have my own place in an office. I had never realised how important that could be. I can invite people for interviews, I don't have to run about with a voice recorder. My career got a fixed location. I can imagine I could stay here for a long time. It was all such a lucky coincidence.

I don't think this can be only about coincidence…
I was lucky to meet the right people (laugh). Or I'm simply able to persuade them that I'm reliable.

And are you not?
I don't really know (laugh). I try to be reliable, but my reliability ends where my family life begins. When my children contract chickenpox, my priority is set and I feel free to cancel any meeting or appointment I was supposed to have. I believe this disqualifies me in some way from calling myself a researcher, it prevents me from being absolutely reliable, from being what I would like to be. But whenever there is a conflict between my career and my role as a mother, it's the career that has to give way.

On PhD Studies as an Alternative to the Family Stereotype and on the "Mother" Label

Why did you decide to study for a PhD?
My motivation certainly wasn't to do research. I was looking for something to do for a few years, before I move on. I was on maternity leave, and my advisor said my topic was interesting and worth exploring further. My husband and I were just discussing that we didn't want to live in the usual family stereotype, and I thought I could try to study abroad for some time. At the same time, I knew I wanted a second child, and thought I could combine that with PhD studies.

Did your international study stay meet your expectations?
Exceedingly. It was an incredible experience. And having that record in my CV helped me get a job later. I would say that my foreign advisor really acted like a mentor. He introduced me to everybody around, he took me to conferences. These are the things my Czech advisor never did.

Tell me more about your doctoral studies in the Czech Republic.
The main problem was that it was never quite clear what is really required. The conditions changed several times during my studies, the curriculum changed, we didn't know how many credits we needed, how much we had to teach. Although I was enrolled as a full-time student, I spent one year abroad. There were terms that I didn't go to school at all, I just communicated online. I told myself I would even appreciate if they had stricter requirements, if they got me engaged in the activities, but nobody cared. They rarely asked what I was doing, which was not very motivating.

That sounds confusing.
The crucial problem is that the doctoral curriculum is not fixed. I know that it depends on the specific school and that there are schools where this is not a problem at all. Our school didn't have this. But on the other hand, they helped me out several times when I needed an exception because of the kids or exams. They never threw spanners into the works.

You haven't spoken about your advisor. Do you see any difference between him and your mentor?
A vast difference. My advisor is a very strong personality. He focuses on his own projects. We had very different ideas about the methodology I should use for my dissertation, so he became rather half-hearted during the process. I don't know, I think he might not have expected me to finish my studies.

Why do you say that?
I just feel I was labelled the "mother with little kids" which influenced my position. Although they were all very obliging, I didn't get to know about the new opportunities, things that were happening, as if they thought that I was so busy with my kids I didn't have the time to do anything else. I think my advisor felt the same, especially when I interrupted my studies for a year to have my second child. Everybody was surprised that I still wanted to hand in the dissertation.

Did you worry that the things you discussed with your mentor could get to your advisor?
He knew I had a mentor. I told him immediately. And I don't think we discussed anything I wouldn't want him to know. We're on friendly terms, very informal, we are on first name terms. And with my mentor too.

So, it's all rather informal?
That's because this is really a very small playground, we keep bumping into the same people over and over. But I don't mind that. I prefer informal relations.

Can this be detrimental in some situations?
Yes, perhaps. There are people who cherish their animosities with other people, and you can easily lose track of who is friends with whom. But I learned to think for myself, and not to worry about things I don't understand. I have the right to consult anyone I choose. This is the core of mentoring, to get inspiration elsewhere.

On the Inseparability of Studies and Family

You did all your studies with children, didn't you?
Almost all. I got pregnant when I was undergraduate. But it's true that my studies were marked with the constant conciliation between my family and my academic activities. I always felt that I had my family in the first place and my studies were an additional activity. I really enjoy the current situation, the kids are both in school, and I have some time for myself, for my hobbies, that's new to me.

You went abroad with your husband and child. What was it like?
I would say that foreign universities accept it as a natural thing that their students and young academics might have families. We lived in a campus where there was a doctor's office or the option of campus-based family housing for international students or teachers with families. This greatly supports their family life. There was also a kindergarten for employees where pedagogy students had their practical training and they could do their research with parental consent.

You will confirm that the career of researchers with small children is determined by the available childcare options…
This was absolutely crucial for me. When I learned about mentoring, it was at a conference I went to just because they provided babysitting. When my first child was born, my identity changed entirely. I became a mother, which was suddenly my primary identity, and everything else had to give way. When I went to my first international conference, I went with my sister, I paid for her hotel room, and she babysat for me. I'm very lucky to have an amazing family who are always ready to help: both grannies, my husband, my sister. And my daughter was very calm, she took long naps, so I mostly had the three hours after lunch to write my master's dissertation. It always worked out so that I had good conditions for my studies.

On the Ungraspable Nature of Science

What do you like about research?
I think that the essential condition for research is not to lose the zest. I would never do it if I didn't like it, if I didn't feel strongly about my topic. I can't imagine doing it just as a job. The other most important thing is my family, so I always have to keep these two in mutual balance to have the strength for both. I also like the flexibility. I like the moment when I write a grant application for a topic I like, and I get it. It's adventurous, uncertain and ungraspable, but that's what I love.

Is there anything you mind about it?
I'm sorry social science enjoys little public esteem. When a researcher with a microscope speaks about cells on TV, people think this is "the" scientist, while when an expert in social science comments on a topic, he is just "wittering". I think the public status of social science is a great challenge for people who do social research. It is very demanding to explain what we actually do. It's not easy to understand.

Julie

Julie received all her degrees, including her PhD, in the Czech Republic, but at different schools and in different major subjects. She also studied at several international universities, she keeps in contact with the international academic community, and is a member of several international professional societies. Now, several years after her PhD, she is considering habilitation (achieving the position of associate professor), but at the same time she is trying to limit the role of work in her life, because she has herself experienced how giving work priority over personal life can damage your health, relationships, and eventually also your zest for the work itself.

„I needed someone to consult my research and career."

Mentoring Opens the Door to Indispensable Information You Cannot Learn Elsewhere

Did you have any experience with mentoring when you joined our programme?
Not in such a formal and organised way. Every time I needed someone to help me with research or any related aspects, it was all left up to me. I had to find someone to advise me.

I'm sure you were a really active student so you must have been successful in looking for informal mentors.
Oh, yes, that's right (smile). I was lucky to study what I really liked, and I suppose my enthusiasm always persuaded people to help me.

If you were never short of advisors, why did you join our programme?
I described it as smooth sailing, but it was not always easy to find someone to advise me. Sometimes it was hard to persuade people to give me feedback. And it was never about longer collaboration. With every new question that emerged, I had to find a new advisor to help me find the answer. In the end, I had plenty of ad-hoc advisors.
It was somewhat easier when I was a student, from undergraduate to PhD. Older researchers feel some commitment to help and teach, and also when I did my PhD, there were not as many doctoral students as there are now, so older researchers had more time and motivation to help. It became much more difficult to find people who would advise me when I finished my PhD. I had two mentors at the foreign universities I attended, but they could hardly help me with specific local problems, because the Czech context is specific in many ways. In the UK or US, advisors and PhD students have closer ties, they communicate more. I only saw my Czech advisor several times during the whole course of my study, and the relationship was not good enough for me to turn to him for advice on matters of my career. That's why I signed up for your programme. I didn't have anyone here in the Czech Republic with whom to discuss my career openly. I finished my PhD several years ago, I work at the university, everybody expects me to habilitate. But I had no idea how and when. I needed a Czech mentor.

How did it turn out? Do you have any specific idea or plan about what to do next?
I wasn't sure I wanted to habilitate at all. I didn't know whether this was the only possible way, or whether there were other options in a research career. I only knew I wanted to do what I was doing, that I wanted to do it well and with international overlap. The programme helped me recognise all the options and un-

derstand that habilitation can give me more opportunity to do things that I prioritise in research and teaching. That's what I can see now after the mentoring programme.

And did your mentor help you realise that, or do you see any benefit also in our workshops?
The initial workshop was very beneficial. It was like a mirror, I had to have a deep look at my situation, think about what the picture should look like in future. I found it very important that they didn't just focus on career, but considered the overall balance of different aspects of life.
I had to give my future plans for life and work a communicable shape, which helped me set the priorities. Looking back, I consider that moment crucial.

What criteria did you consider when choosing a mentor?
Since I mainly needed advice on my habilitation and the options of academic career in the Czech Republic, I needed someone who habilitated recently, so that he or she would remember the whole process as it is currently done, with the conditions being comparable to those I might face if I decided to habilitate. I also needed someone I could trust, someone I could feel confident enough to share my doubts about my own career. That's not easy to admit, especially in the Czech academic environment. When I considered who to address, I wanted someone from another department, someone who would keep my information confidential, a good researcher in terms of moral profile, and someone who somehow relates to what I'm doing. From my international experience, I knew I needed someone I would be in tune with. That's why I preferred a woman. Finding a male feminist in the Czech academic community is a hard task. It is also that women in research, especially in the Czech Republic, encounter specific barriers that men never see. I simply felt that it would be easier to build a mentoring relationship with a woman than a man, although I'm not saying it would be impossible. It had to be possible in the end, because I couldn't find any suitable female mentor (laugh). There are few female associate professors, so I know all of them in my field personally, and I needed a new point of view, someone I didn't know well.

You said you wanted your mentor to be a good researcher. Could you be more specific? What makes a researcher good?
He or she should be more interested in finding out something valuable, in having something to pass on to the next generations, in promoting his or her field of study, rather than personal success or politicking, which is so often the case in the tiny Czech academic environment. He or she should also achieve some success and collaborate with international experts. He or she should publish interesting stuff and be a part of the international network, but again not because of clientelist ties, but to produce innovation.

Your demands for your future mentor were pretty high. Did you manage to find someone who matched them?

It did take a lot of time. First, I considered people I knew, then people I didn't know personally but was familiar with their work, and then the personality of the mentor played the key role. I chose a man who I believe is an honest person with high moral credit, someone I can trust. Oh, that sounds lofty (laugh).

If he heard you, I'm sure he would blush. How did you consult?
First, I sent him an email which he found so heart-breaking that he just couldn't refuse. No, I hope it was not so bad (laugh). And then we met about three times, always discussing a question that was particularly burning for me. The first appointment was rather disappointing for me, my mentor did not have as much time for me as I expected. It was partly because I needed to discuss things that require some time and rapport. I didn't tell him exactly what I needed. I didn't tell him I need to meet in a confidential environment, not in a room where other people keep disturbing. The first meeting was not a typical mentoring consultation. We just outlined the future collaboration. Looking back, it was a good thing to do, but I didn't feel comfortable at that time because I wanted to consult the things straight away, and I didn't want other people to listen. The following consultations were all very fine. We discussed the vital questions and he gave me a really valuable feedback that helped me change my job. That was a very good decision that made me really happy. People in the new department sometimes look at me with suspicion because I'm so enthusiastic about everything, I like it all, which is quite rare in the Czech academic world. But I suppose it's a normal reaction when you change the scenery after a long time.

So, you discussed your habilitation with your mentor and it led to getting a new job. What other questions did you discuss?
The book I'm planning to write. I was uncertain about the overall conception, how to tackle the topic. He helped me with that a lot, he helped me find completely new directions and ideas. So, we just met twice for a cup of coffee and once for lunch, and the mentoring plan was completed (smile).

Since you already knew your mentor personally, was there any difference when meeting under the formal framework of the mentoring programme?
I think it was better for both of us. Our meetings got the hallmark of exceptionality. He was not an acquaintance, he was my mentor. And I think he also felt more comfortable in the role of a formal mentor. I had to define my request; we had to agree on the definition of his role. I think he would be willing to meet me even without the programme, he is very supportive, but this made it more legitimate. To have a mentor, or to be a mentor, that's something you can be proud of. We were both influenced by our experience with mentoring as we knew it from international study stays, where it is seen as something special (smile). So, we are a mentor and a mentee. I would definitely like to continue this, but my mentor is extremely busy. If it was up to me, I would definitely like to have more appointments during the programme,

but he just couldn't make it. But I'm not complaining. I knew about his situation from the very beginning and I'm grateful for the three meetings.

I'm glad you liked the programme. Have you participated in any of our courses focusing on professional and personal development? I mean in addition to the initial workshop.
Yes. I found the time management course particularly helpful.

Why?
Because the lecturer showed us a completely different approach to time management, and gave us priceless advice that helped me set priorities and plan my activities much better. I'm sort of chaotic, I tend to do several things simultaneously rushing from one to another, and, in the end, I find out that I've been terribly inefficient, and I can't make it. The workshop helped me understand it doesn't have to be that way. It is really about our attitude to our time and the demands that the world places on us. It was encouraging to hear poor time management is not just my problem, my mistake, but that it is generally determined by our society and lifestyle. The main thing was that I got tips to deal with this challenge, and I got rid of a lot of stress.

What would you recommend to future mentees?
Not to worry. I'm sometimes very shy, I was afraid I might make myself seem ridiculous to my mentor, to a person I value. That was pointless. When someone agrees to advise you, be sure it's an openminded and friendly person.
I hope the programme will gain ground in the Czech Republic, that it will become a matter of prestige for mentors to take part in. I think the programme has the power to fill the gap that exists here. Looking back, I cannot tell whether it gave me what I expected, but it gave me what I actually needed. And that's great.

On the Clash of Ideal and Reality or Variations on the Leviathan

Why did you decide to take a new job after so many years?
The new managers in my old institution exercised that sort of authoritative control which I didn't like at all. There was no room for creating new things. It was just: "Publish! Publish! Publish! Two impacts a year – if you don't make it, you're a loser!" The atmosphere was dispiriting, not creative at all. And they made the individual departments engage in fierce competition. A sort of Variations on the Leviathan. I wanted was to continue my collaboration with my international colleagues, but my institution wouldn't give me any support to reach for international grants. I felt I couldn't do things as well as I would wish to. And, at the same time, they criticised me for not keeping my career plan, or rather my publication plan which

they made me accept and which they set up as a condition of my contract. I was dealing with lasting personal problems at that time, and my writing didn't go as planned. I just couldn't make up for that lag. They never failed to remind me when they evaluated my plans, and they always copied the backlog into the plan for the next period. I lived with the constant stress that I should catch up with my old plans.

And what if you took a maternity leave?
I've no idea, I didn't. But I was very active in international professional associations, which was another aspect that consumed the time they wanted me to dedicate to publishing. Although I consider active membership in such associations very important, it was never reflected in my career plan, they didn't see it, they just said I was not diligent enough. That's why I didn't expect my manager to mind me leaving. It surprised me that he was quite bothered (smile). I could never really understand his mind…

What I find strange is that everybody keeps highlighting the importance of international ties, and they never supported your international grant applications, and your activity in international association seemed unnecessary and unwelcome, as it was never included in your evaluation.
It is strange. I really consider collaboration, sharing, and mutual support crucial for research. Only discussion can inspire new ideas and all the tremendous things that drive our progress. Those are the reasons why we do research. It is an illusion to think science is a solitary profession.

On Starting a Research Career in the Czech Republic and Extinguishing the Zest

You sound like a very enthusiastic researcher. Have you always wanted to do this? Did you plan your PhD when you were an undergraduate student?
To start from the beginning, my major subject during my bachelor's and master's programmes was newly opened, and I wouldn't say the quality of teaching was very high. I was lucky to take an international study stay during my master's programme, which really broadened my horizons. I felt I wanted to know more. That's why I wanted to do a PhD programme. But in the end, it was all a matter of coincidence. When I finished my master's studies, I was offered a job in another related field. I was also able to start my PhD courses in that field immediately, while in my original field, I would have to wait for one year. A friend persuaded me to enrol in the same school as her, because she found it great there. I thought I would switch when they open the course in my original field, but I stayed. The quality of education was really good there, I learned a lot, and I made a considerable professional progress.

You have rich international experience. You studied abroad during both your master's and PhD studies, and you keep close ties with the international academic community. What do you regard as the main barriers to starting a research career in the Czech Republic?

I see two main challenges. One is that when people enter PhD programmes, they are enthusiastic, they want to do research, but nobody makes any use of their enthusiasm. I can't see why. I can't see why doctoral students are given inferior tasks that do not match their education and abilities. Why are they asked to copy books? Machines can do that, or unskilled staff. Doctoral students are skilled researchers. But they rarely get to lay their hands on real research, and their enthusiasm gradually fades. When they are given expert tasks, it's usually teaching. They are asked to teach auxiliary pre-planned courses or evaluate tests, and they are often terribly overloaded. When I think back on what made me stay and finish my PhD, it was the opportunity to teach my own course. I had to prepare for it, which made me learn new things, and the discussions with my students were very inspiring.
The other challenge is that many people who enrol in doctoral courses don't plan to do research at all, which discourages both their teachers and other students who are serious about their research plans.

On Achieving More Professional Freedom

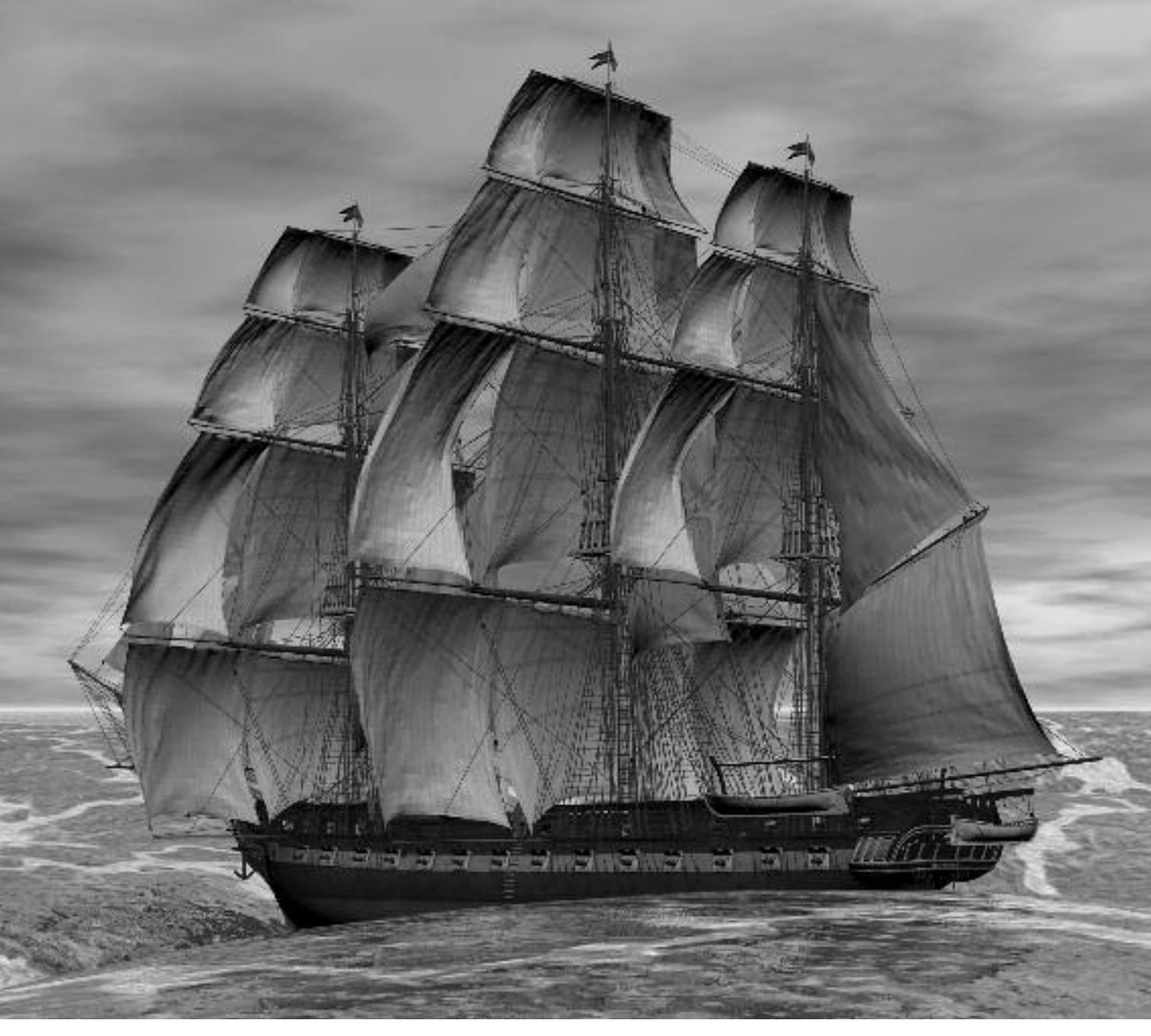
Your mentor inspired you to take a new job and helped you develop the concept of your book. What about your decision to habilitate?
They asked the same when I applied for my new job (laugh).

And what was your answer?
First of all, I want to write the book that would summarise my research so far. I need to round it up to be able to move on. But I do plan to habilitate, I realised that it can give me more freedom and independence in the Czech academic environment. I don't see it as a target, I don't need to add more letters to my name, but it can open more opportunities to do things I consider important, things I like doing. It can also let me define or at least influence the conditions of my work.

We are looking forward to reading your book. Good luck!

Karin

Karin is a PhD student of political science. Politics is not just her major subject, but also her lifestyle. She is active, she joins debates in social media, published several commentaries in the media. Her favourite topics include various aspects of Czech and international politics, social issues, and gender equality. Now she works at the Ministry as a department manager. In addition to politics, her hobbies include sci-fi and football.



„Mentoring will help me finish my PhD (hopefully), but I don't want to do research."

Mentoring as Remedy for PhD Loneliness

Did you have any experience with mentoring when you joined our programme?
No, that was my first encounter with mentoring.

What did you expect?
I rarely form any expectations of new things. When I signed up, I had just started my doctoral studies and my advisor was abroad. Although we consulted some things using email, I felt terribly isolated. The character of the studies is completely different from the master's programme, where you are in touch with a group of people, in permanent contact with the subject of your study. I felt lost, I didn't know what I wanted to do next. And I felt distressed by the requirement to publish articles and obtain grants. I thought mentoring could help me decide how to do things, if at all, even just through sharing experience and impressions with other people in the same situation.

This was a perfect definition of the aspects of doctoral studies that mentoring is designed to assist with.
Filling out the forms for the initial workshop was helpful already; I had to start thinking about the things, clarify them, and I realised I actually liked doing research. Only I wasn't sure whether I liked it enough to make it my career, or whether I would just have it as a hobby, and maybe decide later.

So, you wanted to determine whether you want to make research you career?
Not only that. My problem has always been doing an awful lot of part-time activities. At that time, I had a small grant at the university, I worked part-time in an NGO, and I had other commitments all over the place. The time management was terribly demanding. I needed some inspiration to help me balance the activities, so I could do more things simultaneously without burning out (smile), I needed to find more time to do research.

And did it work out?
Yes. Mentoring helped me conclude that I didn't want to do research forever, and at the same time it helped me stay in the PhD programme.

On Power and "Ego Boost"

How did you search for your mentor?
During the first session, I realised I wanted a woman, someone who could understand the strain of managing both research and public activism. The workshop gave me more opportunity to consider these things. And then naturally, I chose a mentor with rich experience in all this.

Why did you want a woman?
(smile) Because I feel Czech society is still quite macho and sexist, women are capable of reflecting the lines of power in both politics and research. It was crucial for me as a woman to find a person who could see the role of gender within these relations in the same way as me. I think this takes a woman. I suppose there are men who understand, but there are not many and they don't see the full extent of the problem, because they simply enjoy a better position and their academic life is easier.

What were the cornerstones of your collaboration?
The main benefit was the new opportunity for me to sort out things, to consider what I wanted to do next, whether to do research and how, and if not, what I would like to do. My mentor discussed these things with me in great detail, we shared views; it was very natural and informal.
We discussed practical questions about the workings of research, time management, managing several jobs, we spoke about policies and power in the world of research. What it's like to be a woman in research or politics, as both fields are generally dominated by men and women face various structural barriers.

What mentoring plan did you create at the initial workshop? And did you manage to complete it?
Yes, most of it. I sketched out a plan that my mentor found very ambitious, but I managed to complete it all except for one point, which is very satisfactory. But in the end, our discussions turned out to be the main benefit. The value I got from the discussions was much more important than achieving my primary goals of improving my time planning and balancing my research and my job.

Could you give an example of what you learnt? What one thing did you gain?
I mainly gained a very good impression, such an amazing person discussed things with me in a very open and respectful manner. That helped me prop up my self-confidence. Not that it had been too low, but still it was a good "ego boost" (smile). I sorted out a lot of things for the future, but I regard the ego boost as the main gain.

Do you think you will stay in touch even after the mentoring is over?
Certainly. We have already agreed to have a cup of coffee now and then, to chat, discuss things, share experience, etc.

When you say "share experience", do you mean the mentor finds the discussions beneficial too?
I hope so (laugh). We have never discussed that explicitly, but I think it's the case. It was clear from the discussions about how important it is to form your networks, especially with respect to some of the highly competitive areas we engage in. I think this aspect was important for her too. And, of course, it's flattering to think that I was of some use to her.

Do you see any pitfalls to such a mentoring relationship, something you should avoid?
There is always the risk of clashing expectations that are not properly discussed.
There might be a problem if your advisor and your mentor came from antagonistic interest groups, that might get unpleasant… But otherwise I can't think of anything, I haven't experienced anything of the sort.

PhD Programme as a Hobby

Why did you start studying for your PhD degree?
I thought I wanted to do research. Then I found out I didn't (laugh). But as I said, I like doing research, so it was a logical decision.

What kind of researcher did you aspire to become?
I wanted to work at the Academy of Sciences, read books, write articles, go to conferences, have a small research team, and be happy. I worked as an assistant in an Academy project during my master's course, and I found the research environment rather nice, I wanted to join in. But I failed to see other consequences, such as the financial aspects and the demands that such a job poses.

How did this awakening change your plans?
My original aspiration was to do the PhD studies and have a part-time job in an NGO. But having several part-time jobs is terrible for work-family balance. So, I found a job in the ministry. I work from nine to five, I take my doctoral courses on Wednesday, and I read and write in the evenings and on weekends. And that's fine with me.

So doing your PhD is really a sort of leisure activity for you?
Yes, it is. A rather peculiar one. But since I set up things this way, I've enjoyed doing research much more

than when I was constantly under pressure to perform. It is also liberating to realise that I don't have to do it, that I just want to do it, although of course I have certain tasks I have to complete. But I no longer feel the push to search for grants, which makes my research more efficient. I know this is actually a sad picture of research in the Czech Republic.

That does sound pessimistic, especially in view of the fact that Czech science is not likely to drop the emphasis on performance and grants soon.
I'm really glad I got rid of those financial concerns and fights for grants. Because even if you get the grant, it's not the ultimate victory. And the field I engage in is very specific, very conservative in our country. The major focus is on areas that I don't like. The topics I'm interested in are perceived as marginal, so they are not likely to attract a lot of money. The conservative nature of the field is reflected in the way grant committees are selected, often engaging people from various interest groups, so you can fail to get a grant just because you are from a particular institution. Everybody knows who you are and what you do, because there are only two or three people in the Czech Republic doing a particular topic. Everyone knows everyone. Those are the things I hated about it.

So now when you get home from work in the evening, you do research. Do you like research so much that you're willing to sacrifice your free time?
I really enjoy intellectual activity, reading things, making out theories. I love discourse analysis, I do that all the time. When I started working in the executive branch, it felt like entering a neo-matrix. When I saw the pieces of discourse flying all around me, I thought: Isn't that lovely? (smile)

On Committed Research and Future Plans

What's your concept of the ideal researcher?
I feel such a person should be a strong individuality. He or she should not be afraid to swim against the current, because the main thing is letting your creative thought go beyond the limits of established concepts. And I feel researchers should be readier to acquaint the public with their results and the whole field of their study. I think that this is needed in the social sciences even more than in the natural sciences.

You said you planned to do research rather as a hobby. How does that go together with your concept of ideal researcher?
My ideal model would include some sort of balance between the private sector, applied research, or perhaps teaching. There has to be some contact with the outer world. I'm not saying the way I do it is ideal. I know it should be the other way around, that I would take my job in the executive branch as a hobby. (smile) A good researcher should always keep in touch with the outer world, with the context of the research.

Where do you see yourself in the nearest future?
There is a standardised career system in the executive branch, so I count on proceeding there. I like the work, especially the strategic considerations, conceptual thinking outside established frameworks. I think that's my main contribution to the job, and it's largely inspired by my research experience.
As far as my studies are concerned, I would like to finish my PhD studies, do some teaching while I study, and hopefully keep a tiny teaching job even afterwards. I have taught a course together with my advisor, and I liked it very much. I feel that if I enjoy teaching, students will enjoy learning (smile).

On the Requirements of PhD Studies and Some Advice to Future Students

Do you have any experience with studying abroad?
I took six months abroad through the Erasmus programme. It was great. It was in a great context, too, it was just before their early elections. I had a very special individual study plan in one of the courses, I am still not sure whether the teacher wanted to scare me or test me. He gave me some fifteen hundred pages to read within three weeks, and he wanted a paper proposal afterwards. So, I read it, I chose the topic, and I wrote the paper; I consulted the paper part by part and I just loved the whole process. This directed me towards theoretical research and determined the topic of my PhD project. I might change it now, but that doesn't matter; I understand this is actually the standard way – you start doing something, and then you find out you don't really want to do that; that you want to do something completely different.
I haven't taken any international stay during my doctoral programme, but it's a standard part of the programme, so I will have think about what to do.

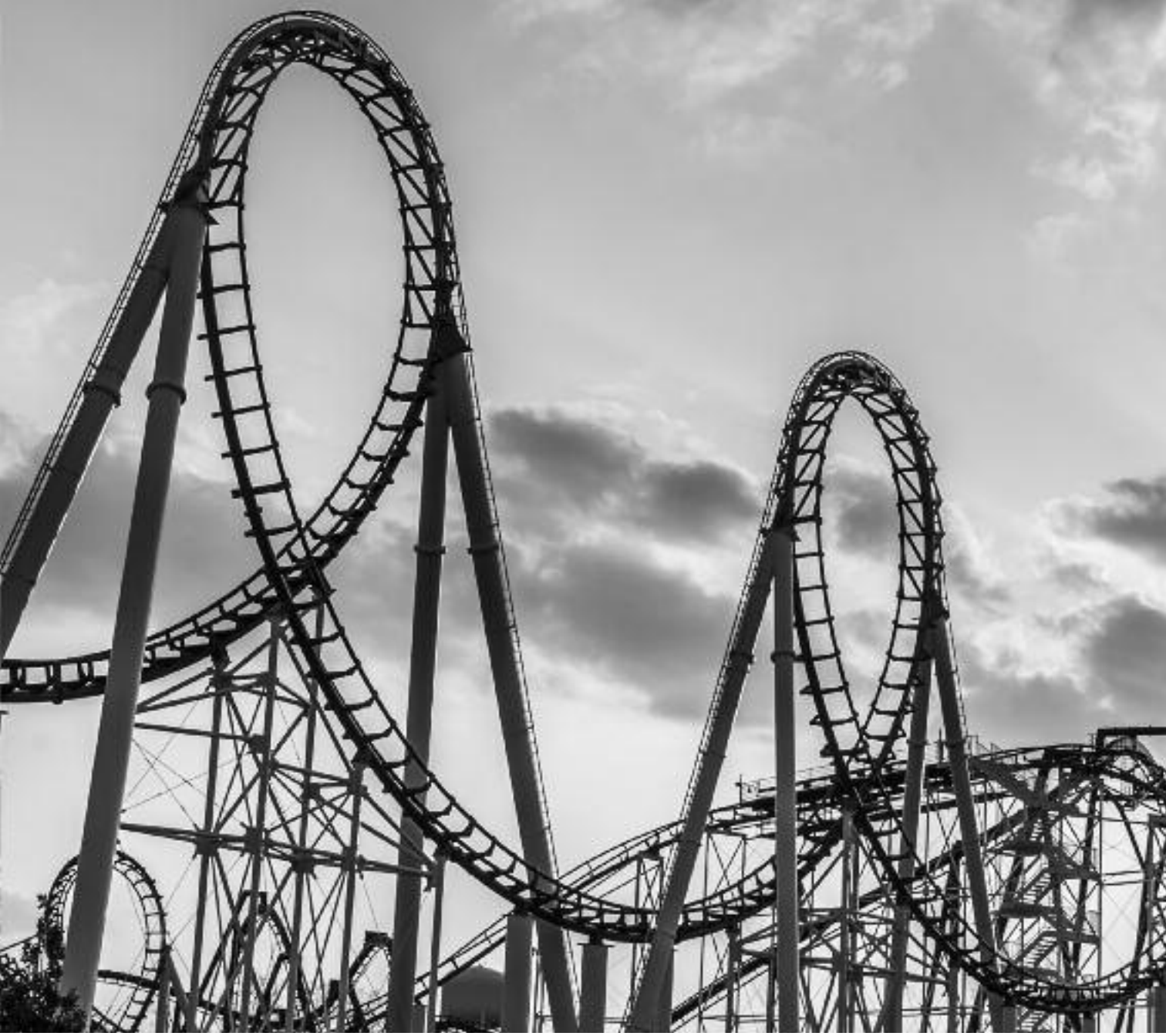
Can you leave for a month or more when you work in the executive branch?
That's exactly the problem. This is linked to the weakest point of the doctoral study system. The scholarship money is less than the usual rent, you have to find another source of income. It is great if you can get a job in the academic sphere, but the opportunities are limited. And when you have to take a regular job to earn your living, they cannot request you to leave for several months. Not to mention mothers!
I generally do think travelling is great, it is great to keep in touch with foreign universities and institutions, see how things are done elsewhere, but it shouldn't be a compulsory condition. Science should be international, you have to keep in touch, but there are many barriers.

What would you recommend to people who study or consider studying for a PhD?
They should expect the bad aspects of the programme, the feelings of isolation. You will be left on your own much more, you shouldn't let it drive you mad. Furthermore, don't lose contact with reality, the social context of your research, consider the consequences of any research. I feel our academic community is afraid to step out and get engaged in public affairs, which is a pity.

Can our programme help people tackle these challenges?
Certainly. At least in terms of getting to know themselves and others, networking. From this point of view, I think these programmes for doctoral students are essential, and there should be more of them.

Kateřina

Kateřina has fancied healthcare ever since her secondary school, and although she didn't choose the straightest path to her destination, in the end she got just where she wanted to be. She combines research with clinical practice, which gives her the opportunity to see the real application of research results. She can be in contact with people who benefit directly from scientific research. That's what Kateřina values the most. To be able to do this, she works at two different institutions, but she doesn't mind, because that's what makes her work exciting.



„My mentor taught me to say NO."

Mentoring as New Impetus in Routine Practice

Did you have any mentoring experience when you joined our programme?
No, I didn't, but I knew what it was about. I explored different forms of mentoring when I was working on an international project, but that related to different methodologies in lab work. I have never gone through anything like that myself. And thinking back, I never received any informal continuous guidance either.

What did you expect from the programme?
I don't think I had any specific expectations, I was only attracted by the offer. I had spent some time in the academic environment, and I started to notice various things that annoyed me or that I wanted to do differently. I was dealing with an extreme workload at that time, I felt I was unable to set the limit. Furthermore, I was happily married, I had just turned thirty, I was also thinking about how to reconcile my research, my family (or rather my husband), and my leisure activities.

And how did it work?
I learned to say "no", and I'm trying to manage my time better, to plan my appointments in a different way. I think I have learned to identify the moment when things are getting up to my neck, when I just have to slow down. I can see when I have to stop neglecting my family.
I try to communicate more. When there is a long-term project, I ask my colleagues about their progress, I give them feedback, I summarise the things we discussed and agreed on. The courses have helped me manage my professional relations much better.

In addition to the courses, you also collaborated with a mentor. How did you decide whom to choose?
I wanted a person who can organise his or her work well, who can balance work and family. I thought of two women. One of them works for our "competitor", so we do similar work. But I wanted someone I could confide my objections, and this woman knows my boss and other colleagues, which ruled her out. I addressed a woman I have known for ages, but each of us works in a completely different field. Before she became my mentor, we had only talked about personal things, family. When we spoke about work, it was only superficial complaining (laugh). Addressing her formally within the programme gave us an opportunity to speak about work in more depth and more constructively.

Did you consider only women?
I can't imagine discussing these things with a man. This is a sort of 'girl's stuff', rather personal (smile). We spoke about family, children, about the way she manages her family and work. It was very inspirational. It gave me priceless tips and ample support. It helped me to hear how much time you have to invest in certain things and how much time it returns. I realised you can manage just about anything, only it might require an awful lot of energy. I think it would be different if my mentor was a man. I think it would be hard to find a man who would be willing to discuss these things.

Do you think male researchers do not need to balance work and family?
Oh, of course they do, but I feel the Czech society still perceives family as the woman's business. And that defines men's role at work, they are given more space to plan their work. The same can be seen in research, although I know several men who take care of the whole family or couples that share equally.

You said you needed advice on how to communicate with your boss. In what way did your relations with your mentor differ from the relations with your boss?
In very many ways (smile), but the main thing is that my relationship with my mentor is fairer. Just to give an example: my boss uses a style of communication I'm not comfortable with. I generally accept it, I'm the subordinate, but then I got to a point when I really needed to question those rules, to influence the rules of our mutual communication. I never needed to do that with my mentor. I was given the opportunity to ask questions, to influence our relations, we were equals.

How did you consult?
Our meetings were very informal. I usually had several issues I wanted to discuss with her, she asked me about additional details, and the discussions helped me realise what I should do differently. My mentor works in the humanities, so I had to modify some of the things to fit my field, but that was of little importance.

What was her reaction when you asked her to be your mentor?
I think it was a pleasant surprise (smile). I think she felt she could help me, she seemed pleased.

Could you give us a specific example of what you've learned?
There were many things. She encouraged me to be able to say "no", to plan things. She also encouraged me, when I apply for a grant, to include a position of my "aide", someone who might not be very ambitious, but who would like to work in research, someone I could ask to do the tasks I'm too busy to do.

Do you feel that your mentor profited from your discussions too?
I hope so, but we've never discussed that. I definitely did not feel it annoyed her, I think she liked it. I think it gave her the opportunity to speak about her issues and complain about her work. She has her life very well planned. Actually, I think people in the humanities generally think more about different things that natural scientists neglect, especially when it comes to relations and communication. She always seemed to have a solution at hand (smile).

Do you keep in touch now that the programme is over?
Yes, we do, and I feel our relationship has even improved. We are more familiar with each other's situation at work, we can discuss it more openly, and we seem to value one another more now that we know about all the troubles each of us faces.

On the Deadly Speed in Natural Science

Would you like to try mentoring again in future with a different mentor?
Definitely, but I would choose someone in my field, someone from abroad, not from the Czech academic environment.

Why?
I don't like the way research is done in the Czech Republic. Most people are overworked, they cannot plan their work, and then they are unfriendly towards people around them. Everybody works overtime, they count on you working at night, at weekends, nobody cares you also have a private life. Many people I know have problems at home, their families fall apart, relationships fail, some have several parallel relationships; this is all due to the fact that they invest very little in their families. But I know from people in other countries that it doesn't have to be so. I don't know anyone in the Czech Republic who could mentor me about that.

Why do you think research in the Czech Republic works this way?
There is enormous competition in the natural sciences. When you know several labs are working on the same task as you, it creates an immense urge to work and publish quickly. Of course, this is not only a Czech problem, it's all over Europe. But Czechs also suffer from poor administrative support, so the situation gets really demanding. I work more than my full-time contract stipulates, but I spend at least 60 % of my time doing paperwork. That's wrong.

How do you manage such terrible workload?
I try not to lose touch with the everyday world. I purposely step out of my social bubble to meet people

from different fields and different professions, I have many friends from various walks of life which helps me keep a realistic view of the world. Many researchers I know are too busy to do that, and they become detached from reality.
I try to avoid accepting a heap of new ad hoc tasks at work, I try not to make myself indispensable. I'm responsible for several grants I applied for, and I was appointed to manage some more, and when someone comes with something additional, I try to refuse. I prefer to do less work really well than being all over the place. Learning to make myself dispensable was a big success for me.

How did you learn this?
It was related to a certain relief after I finished my PhD. As a student, I had to report results, I had to write articles, so I tended to do many things at once in order to produce enough data for writing. And when I received my PhD, I realised I didn't have to go on like that. But my boss had become accustomed to it. I know people say the main thing is not to be too efficient. But now I'm in a better position, I can organise a lot of things myself, and I don't need her consent for everything I do.

Healthcare Career as the Original Plan and the Back-up Plan

How did you get to your profession?
Actually, it was not a straight path. When I was choosing a secondary school, I wanted to study nursing, but my mum talked me out of it. She has worked in healthcare all her life. She told me to choose a grammar school and then study medicine. But when I finished secondary school, I found the six years of medical studies plus additional specialty courses too long, and I chose a different field which didn't seem too far from medicine. Soon I found out that I was not made for so much theory, I needed some hands-on experience. Luckily, I was allowed to choose a topic for my master's thesis that I could do in a lab, one of the labs where I still work.

Why did you decide to do a PhD course if you wanted hands-on experience?
That's exactly why I didn't want to do it at first. I just wanted "normal" money and life (smile). But I received a very generous offer from the lab to do my PhD there. It opened the door to the other job I have. Both my jobs combine very well – one is more about primary research, the other is more about clinical practice. I've never wanted to get immersed in theoretical research, this is perfect for me.

So, you don't see yourself as a researcher?
Well, I suppose I am a researcher, but I don't like the word, it has associations with theoretical contemplations, which is not what I like. I like doing research, but there must be some practical effect. I need to see that the research does something, like when a new examination method is used in clinical practice or

when I can watch patients' response to certain medicines and modify their therapy accordingly. I need to see the consequences.

What are your plans for the future?
I have some ideas for my research, things I would like to focus on. I like working with students too, so I can imagine teaching my own course, I want to develop the things that I like, things that I find meaningful. But I don't want to become a head of a research group, because there's too much paperwork and too much stress.

And how do you want to do that? If you manage to do all what you want, you can hardly avoid a managing position?
I know it's hard (smile). You need to work with ambitious people, so there's always someone else to be the manager. I would be willing to take a formal managing position, but it all depends on the specific situation. I'm not ambitious, I never wanted to be a leader. I'm just curious about what things are and why they work the way they do, I don't need any career development.
I can see that if I aspired to be a manager, I couldn't do the things that I like, and I would inevitably get to a point where it would be more about politicking. That puts you under more pressure, and you tend to decide not quite in line with your conscience. And I don't fancy that.

Do you have any back-up plan?
I'm not fixated on science. If it doesn't work the way I want it, I can imagine doing something completely different. I'm experienced in healthcare, I work in a facility where I'm now studying for a specialty certificate, that's like a PhD in medicine, only it's rather specific, but it will open my way to jobs in the field. So, that's my backup plan number one. Number two is to be a housewife, but I don't think I could do that forever (smile). I sometimes complain about work, but I still like it and find it motivating. I can't imagine not working at all.

How about going abroad?
My husband and I sometimes consider going abroad for a year or two. I'm sorry I've never lived abroad. There were opportunities, but that was when I felt I couldn't be spared at work. It is a drawback when I apply for grants with the Czech Science Foundation. And generally, it would be great to see how things work elsewhere. We are currently reconstructing our house, so then we'll decide. Either we rent it and go away, or we just make ourselves at home and never leave again. We will see.

What would you tell people who are considering our programme?
To be sure to join it. At the very least just to find out about different ways research can be done. I would

like to tell mentors to ask questions, to find out as much as possible about their mentees' situation, and tailor their guidance accordingly. It helped me a lot.

Magdalena

Although she liked biology from her childhood, she questioned her choice even at university. She got really absorbed in research only when she had the chance to try applied research combining the natural and social sciences. She began to understand her work as a contribution to the ongoing debate about the workings of the human society. She has always been very particular about the role of scientific evidence in the academic, political and social milieu. She went abroad after she received her bachelor's degree, but now she is glad she is living in the Czech Republic again. She joined our programme twice as a mentee and once as a mentor.

„I needed a guide in the Czech academic landscape."

Mentoring as a Way to Set Professional Priorities

Did you have any experience with mentoring when you joined our programme?
No, but I knew what it was because I studied and worked abroad where such programmes are common.

What was your main motivation?
When I was abroad, I discussed my future career with several people, and it was then that someone advised me to find a mentor. My advisor at the foreign university had a mentor who helped her with her professional development. When I learned about your programme, I thought it was an ideal opportunity. I had just returned from a long stay abroad. I left when I finished my bachelor's and I returned after my postdoc. And when I got back I needed to figure out what I would do in the Czech Republic. I needed a guide through the local academic landscape. I was also changing the subject of my study, so I needed someone with a deep insight in the field.

You were looking for a mentor who worked in the Czech Republic and understood your research topic. Were there any other criteria?
Of course, I had an idea about the ideal mentor, but you can never find anyone who fits it perfectly. That's why it is great to have more mentors at once. Moreover, your criteria might change with the different issues you face. I took part in your programme twice, and each time I created a different profile for my prospective mentor, because I had no project in the first year, while I had one in the second year.
But in the end, the crucial criterion was the personality of the mentor, and I also wanted a woman, because children make a great difference between the careers of women and men. It is natural, it is biologically determined that children impact women's careers more, at least in the first several weeks or months. And then, naturally, if one of the parents is to stay at home with the children, it is usually the mother. I wanted to have someone to discuss their professional experience from this point of view. I don't have any children myself, but I would like to have them one day.

And how did you succeed in your search for a mentor? Did she meet your expectations?
Not really. I couldn't find a mentor during the first year, and then in the second year, my mentor was an older lady who started her career a long time ago, when the academic environment was completely different. There was almost no international competition, which is very different from what we have now, they rarely travelled abroad, and there was little emphasis on publishing articles and keeping an impact factor. So, in the end, we didn't discuss the potential directions of my career. But your courses compensated

for this to some extent. I really liked the discussions with other mentees during our lunch breaks, when my peers told us about the ways they manage to balance their research career and family.

What did you learn from other mentees about balancing career and family?
That it's difficult, and that the original plans often vaporise all of a sudden. Many of the women said something like: "I was planning to study abroad, my career was developing very well, but then I had kids, I took a break, and now it's all much more difficult, I work shorter hours, I cannot find enough time for work". It influenced my nearest plans greatly. I feel that I should do as much as I can before I have kids, I have to publish a lot, because it is easier to return when you already have some standing in the field than after you have only worked on other people's projects. It might sound gloomy but I don't think it is. It just helped me think further ahead.
It is good to know how things work. That's why I needed mentoring. Knowing about how things work abroad wouldn't help me in the Czech Republic. I lived in two foreign countries, and each situation was completely different. In the English-speaking country, I never even met anyone with small children. I don't think it's easy there, because the pressure to produce and publish is immense there. And when I was in Scandinavia, it was common for graduate students to have children, their system can accommodate that and it is not much of a problem. Their maternity leave is not as long as it is here, but they have an excellent network of childcare facilities, so you can always have your children cared for somewhere near your home or workplace.

As far as I remember, all our mentees who had children used the traditional division of family roles. Do you plan the same, do you plan to stay at home with your kids?
It will all depend on the situation at the time. My partner and I both work only on projects, we have no fixed employment, so it will largely depend on our employment conditions. But I wouldn't want to lose touch with research even when I'm on maternity leave, I wouldn't want to lose the mental drive. But I know there are many factors, that cannot be planned. Only you have to accept that the arrival of children can completely change your situation, you have to be ready to deal with it.

What do you see as the main benefit of your engagement in mentoring?
In the first year, I sorted out my priorities, and I decided to have a full-time research career. In the second year, I wrote an article inspired by my mentor, which was recently published in a high-impact journal.

What would you recommend to future mentees?
To get the most of the initial workshop. It is a "moment for you" (smile), you can explore your current priorities and consider what you expect from your prospective mentor. And because you are not likely to find someone who fits your criteria perfectly, you should set one or two criteria as your priority. And

I would recommend to meet your mentor informally at first, to see whether you're in tune. You cannot see that over email. A good rapport with your mentor will let you gain more. You can decide whether you want to collaborate only after this initial meeting.

You were a mentor too, you mentored a fresh PhD student. What would you recommend to future mentors?
I would recommend the initial informal meeting to mentors too. But it's hard to think of something that would attract new mentors. My situation was specific; I gained a lot from the programme, and I felt I should give something in return. But being a mentor is definitely encouraging. It is interesting to learn about how other institutions work with students. And it took very little time, because me and my mentee regularly met for lunch. So, I just extended my lunch break by 15 or 30 minutes, and that was all. When I discussed with my mentor, it was in her office, because that was convenient for her. The mentee simply has to adapt to the mentor's schedule.

On Passion for Applied Research

How did you get to biology and research?
I've always liked the natural sciences, I took part in the competitions for students. But as an undergraduate student, I could see that I lacked the fascination some of my schoolmates had. They could identify all the flowers and animals, and I couldn't. But then I found "my own" field where none of them felt really at home, because none of them had a microscope at home (laugh).

That was cunning (laugh).
But the field is really incredibly interesting, and it involves fieldwork, which attracted me. But the main aspect I loved was the overlap with environmental issues. I gradually started to see that I need to do research that has some direct influence on mankind. I need to see the positive effect of my work. That's why I try to get involved in various institutions that tackle different influences on the environment and society.

So, you found this passion for research as a graduate student?
It all worked out in weird way. My partner decided to study abroad when I was just finishing my bachelor's. We wondered if there were any opportunities for me too, and I found a study programme that I liked, and it worked out, they accepted me. I received the equivalent of master's degree and PhD there. A funny coincidence helped me get there. My advisor there had no idea about our grading system, so she consulted an acquaintance of hers in the Czech Republic, and he told her my study results were excellent, that I got the degree with honours, and that my credits would suffice to earn me a master's degree. I don't know to whom I'm indebted for this. But to return to your question, I really only found the passion for research during my studies abroad.

You left right after your bachelor's. How long did you live abroad?
I studied there for four years. Three years were covered by a generous stipend which paid all my expenses. I didn't have to pay for their school fees, and I got some wages, so I lived comfortably. I stayed for another year after my PhD, and then my partner and I decided to go to another country for nearly two years. And then I really wanted to go back home.

What made you want to return after such long time?
I'm grateful for my international experience, I think it gave me very much, but I always wanted to return. Some people leave the country saying they never want to live here again. I rather wanted to try it and see if it works. I never asked whether to return, the question was when. And then when I lived in the other country, I realised I had had enough, and I moved back. And my partner joined me later.

What do you like the best about life in the Czech Republic?
I can't verbalise that. I don't see my family more often than when I lived abroad (smile). It was not until I spent several years abroad that I realised how much I love this country. I found out how important my social background was for me, being surrounded by people I love, people I trust, people who share my cultural experience. It can get extremely exhausting to build a new network of friends, even though I'm a rather sociable person. I was with other people all the time, I worked as a volunteer and kept myself surrounded by people all the time. But when you know you will only stay for two or three years, it is not the same as when you have known someone ever since your childhood, or when you know you will be meeting someone for the next ten years, because it's your neighbour.
Only sometimes I need to take a break from the typical Czech complaining and lack of broadmindedness, I need to get new inspiration and energy. That's why I go to international conferences or courses at least twice a year.

How was your return to the Czech Republic?
It was rather smooth. I was working for a private consultation agency when I started considering it.

So, you didn't return right after postdoc?
No, I didn't even know if I ever wanted to do research again. My last boss discouraged me greatly, he was terribly unreliable, very difficult to work with. And so, when my boyfriend wanted to move to another country for his postdoc, I decided to join him and find a non-academic job. In the end, I worked for that agency for nearly a year.
And then, when I returned to the Czech Republic, I didn't have any plans, I thought I would just look around and see what I would like to do. But my boss from that agency called me and told me to contact a friend of his who was the director of a Czech research centre. I contacted him and he offered me a full-

time job, because someone had just left one of their projects. I hesitated because I wasn't sure I wanted to join the academic community again, but the job was not only about research, it was largely managerial, so I agreed, and I'm glad I did! It didn't take me long to realise that what really diverted me from research was not research as such but my boss, and that I really loved research. That's why I started looking for more opportunity to do research. I started to work shorter hours to have the time to plan my own projects and find sources of money for them. And it worked. I started a two-year project that is currently running. And I will see what happens next.

On Why is Academic Career More Difficult to Start in the Czech Republic than Abroad

Can you see any differences between the challenges faced by doctoral and postdoctoral students in the Czech Republic and abroad?

I've often heard that advisors don't have the time to guide their doctoral students. I don't know if this is the case everywhere, but I've heard it surprisingly often. I have never seen anything like that abroad. My advisor guided me very well, and even though she went abroad in my second year, she consulted with me via Skype. She helped me a lot especially at the beginning, she introduced me to all the people I needed. I designed all my experiments myself, but my advisor often told me: "Consult that person or try that course, it could help you". Such support is indispensable. Nobody is advanced enough at the PhD level to have no need of further guidance. It is not only about expert advice, but also about moral support. All doctoral students go through hard times, and it's fine to know there's someone who can help you.

But it was not only about advisors. The school took care of us too. They organised various trips and activities related to professional development. They drilled us to master presentation and academic writing skills. When I wanted to teach, I had to take a two-day teaching course. We learned the basic theoretical background, and then we tried teaching and we gave each other feedback. I asked a friend to come and see my lesson and then I went to see his, and then we exchanged feedback. It was very helpful. It is funny that the only teaching level that requires no teacher training in the Czech Republic is university.

Is there anything you like better about the Czech academic practice?

Let me think. I think people here don't go from one research team to another, there's a lot of inbreeding, which influences our results. Of course, people like to stay close to their home, but I think everybody should see how it works elsewhere, at least for some time, and then return and bring back their international experience. There are some excellent teams in the Czech Republic, open to the international experience, with international students, in contact with the international community, but it is not common. We should be more open, attract foreign students, although it is more difficult for us due to our low wages and the language barrier.

Do you expect to get full employment in future?
Not in my current position. The money our institution gets from the university only cover the salaries of the director and his secretary, that's all. Nobody in our institution gets any fixed salary, we all depend on projects. Many of my colleagues have another job somewhere else, because they want to teach or because they want to habilitate (become associate professors), which is not possible in our institution, or because they don't have enough projects to cover a full-time job. On the one hand, it gives you incredible freedom, you can have anything you are able to get money for, but it is also terribly uncertain, because you often don't know until the very last moment whether you will still have work the next year.

What are your plans in this instable system?
Uncertainty can become frustrating. It's fine when you have no kids, but then it gets really tough… I would like to stay for now, I like that freedom. I can plan my work as I like, nobody interferes, that's great. But I'm considering getting a part-time job elsewhere too. I would like to teach. I miss the interactions with students. But that's not likely to happen soon. As I said, the current priority is to achieve a good publication list and international standing in my field. If I went to another institution and said I would like to work there, nobody would ask about my teaching experience, they would only ask how many articles I published and where. That's what people care about nowadays, and I just swim with the current. I don't despise it, we all know how things work.
In the long run, the logical target will be habilitation. I don't know if I will ever get there, but I'm considering it because I like to develop and set new goals. It's not that I have my future thoroughly planned. My experience has taught me that plans can change suddenly. I think planning is a good thing but you should expect things to work out in a different way.

You said you didn't mind swimming with the current when it comes to the evaluation of your work. I rarely see that in young researchers.
The Czech routine system of evaluation in research is bungled, but it is supposed to change soon, so I hope it will improve. No system in the world is perfect, you can always find areas for development. The requirement to adapt, to fill in the forms, to publish, it is all annoying, but I try not to think about that too much, and do good research instead.

What's your notion of good research?
The main motivation for any research should be to find out new things. A good researcher does not work to have more publications, but to discover something new, something that can be important for the whole society. He or she shouldn't be influenced by any other interests. This is what I regard as the main differ-

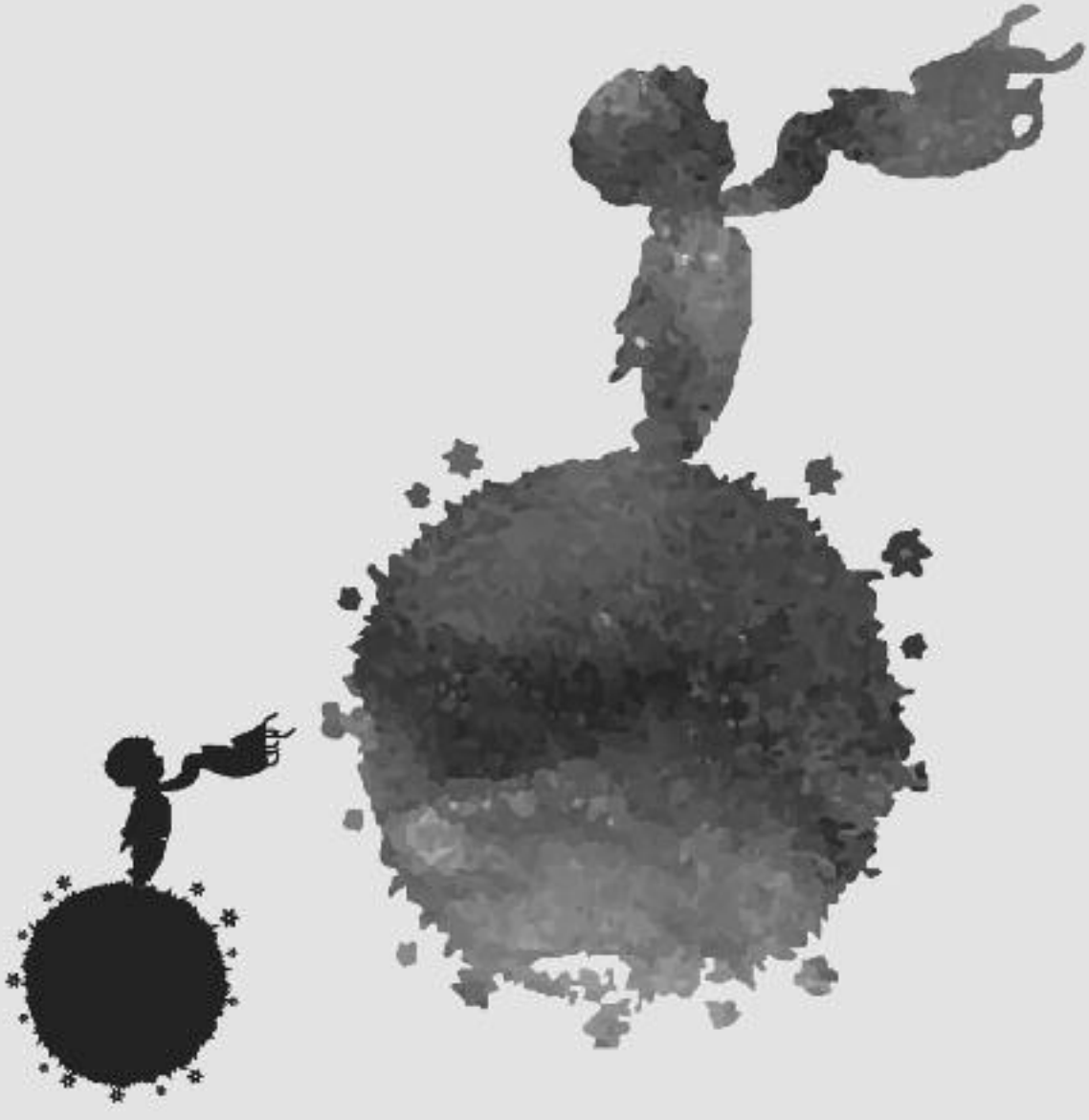
ence between scientific research and other areas of human activity, especially business. Researchers should always report only to their own conscience. Their hypotheses and statements should always correspond with their best knowledge based on the latest findings. That's why it is important to share our results with the international community, so that researchers all over the world can see the latest development in the field.

You are a member of several governmental advisory bodies, so politics matters for you as a researcher, doesn't it?
I do that because I want to bring in my disinterested view. It gives me the opportunity to say: "Oh, but this document completely neglects this or that, although it is included in the relevant international documents, and it should certainly be added". I cannot influence the final result, but I can comment and highlight things. I see that as one of the roles of the academic community, to join the political and social discourse, and contribute the disinterested expert opinion inspired by international knowledge. Such documents are naturally also influenced by entities from the private or non-profit sector who support their partial interests, often limited to the local Czech context. That's not necessarily bad, but it is always good to have the things discussed by a number of actors.

Can you imagine going back to business?
Not at present. My freedom is crucial for me, nobody tells me what to do and what to say, I only follow my own opinion and my own conscience. It is hard to do research in the current system of grants, but I want to give it a try.

Marie

Marie's original dream was to teach at a secondary school, but she soon found out that she loved laboratory work much better. She received her PhD in a technical field, and she currently studies engineering because she feels she needs to know more. Her research career is very promising, she takes part in European projects, and she is one of the few researchers who are happy about their current situation.



„Mentoring courses helped me get rid of a lot of stress."

On the Postdoctoral Emptiness and Need for a Male Scientific View

What did you know about mentoring when you joined the programme?
Nothing whatsoever. I had just finished my PhD, I had reached a point that had been my target for a very long time, the summit of my studies, and I started to feel a strange kind of emptiness in my life. I didn't know how to deal with it, how to move on, what I should set as the next goal. And then I received the information about mentoring. I checked the website and I thought it could help me, whether it was collaboration with a mentor or the courses. I had no specific expectations, I just thought I would give it a try. And it gave me a lot. Above all, two new friends, researchers. We have kept meeting even after the programme finished. But the main thing was that I saw I was not the only one who felt that way, that many people felt the same after their PhD.

Can you remember the mentoring goal you set at the initial workshop?
I wanted to get a deeper insight into the academic writing and management of projects, because I knew I would have to deal with this agenda sooner or later. I wanted to develop my soft skills.
It was nothing tangible, reportable, but it was just the right thing for my uncertain state of mind.

Do you feel the courses helped you develop these areas?
Certainly. The courses made me discern a lot of petty things that clicked together, and everything became sort of calmer and smoother, I got rid of a lot of stress. I would probably figure out most of the tips I learned if I faced the specific situation, but it is great when someone warns you in advance and tells you how to deal with the challenge.

In the end, you took part in many courses, but you didn't have a mentor. Why?
I addressed my potential mentor and it looked fine. He said that it was an excellent idea and that he would love to be my mentor. But then he was very busy, and I didn't feel like pushing him all the time. I didn't feel I needed him that much.
And then the courses started, and I realised I didn't really need a mentor, because I could learn a lot from the lecturers, and we also discussed many things with the other mentees, which helped me a great deal. In the end, I thought it was enough and I didn't even try to find another mentor.

Why did you choose the mentor you addressed?
I formed a rough notion of who it could be after the initial workshop, where we set our individual goals

and plans. I wanted a man experienced in managing his own projects, I didn't even require him to be from my field of study, because I didn't need to tackle any specific aspects. I asked people around me if they could think of someone who would fit my needs, and my boss and former advisor had just started collaboration on a big project with such a person. It was easy for me to address him because I was to take part in the project, too.

In the context of other interviews we conducted, it is interesting you wanted a man – most of the other mentees preferred women. Why did you choose a man?
I wanted a male mentor because three in four people in our department are women, everyone around me discusses things like maternity and work-life balance all the time. But it was only thanks to the mentoring programme that I asked someone about this topic directly. I asked two colleagues for thirty minutes of their time, and we had an informal discussion over a cup of coffee. I asked them what it was like to start maternity leave, whether there were things they were sorry about, whether they could work on projects from home, and how they managed to return to work. Based on these discussions, I thought I needed a male view, because that was what I lacked. I wanted to meet a good and successful male researcher.

How Good Research Must Be Fun to Do

What are the things that make a researcher a good researcher?
I think it is about their approach. Successful and good researchers don't feel the need to exhibit, they don't think they stand higher than others, they are generally liked among their colleagues. They have rich experience which have taught them to be modest. At the same time, they manage a number of minor activities that may not be seen at first, things that don't boost your impact factor, things that nobody really rewards or appreciates, but they are indispensable because they represent the tiny pieces in the complex mosaic of science. This includes popular science – although I know this is not a task for anybody, because if people who do it don't like it, the effect is not worth the effort. It also depends on the managers of the institutions, whether they appreciate this part of science and understand its importance.

And what about you? Do you consider yourself a good researcher, or are you just on the way there?
That's an incredibly difficult question. I got to a point where I can appreciate my strengths, I can appreciate myself for doing things well. I know I have already achieved something. If I wasn't good, my boss would never appoint me to manage a European-level project, and she would never let me present the project internationally.
At the same time, I realise there is an awful lot of things that I can't do and things that I don't know, there are many areas for development. When I see what my boss can do, the amazing things she does, the things my international colleagues can do, I feel very inexperienced. But that's the power that keeps me going.

Going where? What are your next targets and plans?
My nearest goal is to bring the European project I've mentioned to success. At the same time, I have submitted a postdoc project application, and if that works out, I will spend six months abroad. That would be a big leap in my career, because I would be heading for an excellent institution full of excellent scientists. Moreover, international experience is among the conditions for junior grants from the Czech Science Foundation, which I would like to receive in future.

It looks like you got off to a flying start. What do you like the most about science?
In addition to lab work, I love the notion that you pursue something that nobody knows, or they know very little about it, and you can find out. I love the moment when things click, and you know: "Oh! That's the way it works!" I like travelling and meeting many interesting people whom I can learn from. I like the fact that just sitting and contemplating is actually work. I love all that about science.

You sound really enthusiastic! Is there anything you would prefer to do without?
All the paperwork. It has increased recently. It seems to me I'm filling forms and checking timesheets all the time. I hate that – I'm not a secretary, I'm not a clerk, I'm a scientist. But it is a part of my climb on the career ladder. With every rung, you do less lab work and more paperwork.

Doesn't that put you off? Do you really want to proceed with your career when you know you will just do more paperwork?
That's a part of the whole process. As you gain more experience, you don't need to spend hours pipetting, you can focus on getting resources to have your ideas brought to life. If you are able to find really competent people to work in your team, clearly you will only be needed as an advisor and coordinator. I would like that; to have my own project, which would require a tolerable level of paperwork, and a team of people I could coordinate. But I cannot imagine I would manage a whole institution, where you never do anything but paperwork, and you have to reconcile petty disputes between your subordinates. I couldn't stand that.

PhD as the Door to a New Career

Did you know you wanted to earn a PhD degree when you were doing your master's?
Not at all. The path was quite winding. I went to study chemistry and biology teaching. I thought I would be a teacher and I believed I would love it, and that lasted exactly until my first teaching experience in the first year of my master's programme. It's not that it was a complete disaster, but I didn't like it, and the same feeling remained after the next round. I knew something was wrong, because most of my schoolmates were delighted, and some even found part-time teaching jobs. I was surprised at my sudden disin-

clination, because I had always wanted to do that. And then I was offered to replace a doctoral student at a two-month research stay abroad, and I realised that it was lab work that I really liked. At that very moment, it was clear that I had to proceed to my PhD I did that at a different school, in a different town. My advisor was a woman I had met at a conference, and we talked during coffee breaks. I didn't want to stay at my original school for various reasons.

And was it a good decision?
Definitely. I had the best guidance I could hope for. My advisor was great. She didn't stand behind our backs to push us all the time, unless it was really necessary.
I'm a rather active person, so I kept proposing things I would like to do, people I would like to collaborate with, and she always encouraged and supported me. If all advisors took the same approach to their students, everybody would be satisfied.

Can you see any barrier that prevents junior researchers from developing to the fullest?
Money is a great problem. When you only earn six thousand crowns a month during your PhD studies and you never get to participate in a project that would give you some extra money, you can't even cover your rent. I never thought of doing research for money, but this was too much for me, and many people left because of that. Only now, one and a half years after I finished my PhD, do I earn enough money to feel my work is appreciated. Many people view doctoral students only as cheap labour, they will just trample on them. And when you're a woman, things can get even worse. I'm fine, I finished my PhD when I was twenty-eight, so I still have a few years to fiddle about with science before I have children. But when you start school a year later, or you take longer to study, or you just don't finish your PhD within the standard four years, you're suddenly in your thirties and you have completely different things to worry about.

You have rich international experience from your studies in Europe and Asia. Did you observe any substantial differences from the Czech academic system?
Not in Europe, but Asia was completely different. For instance, you cannot leave the lab before your boss does. Even if you were only to sit there and play games, you simply cannot leave. You go to the school or lab at noon and leave at ten p.m. Every Saturday morning, there is a meeting with the boss – undergraduates, graduates, doctoral students, they all have to report about what they did the last week, and the boss consults about their work. It is very different from the way we do things here. You just email or call your advisor, and you have ad hoc consultations about the current issues. They have one morning a week reserved for this. I find their way of working rather inefficient. They spend long hours at work, but it's mostly just to show you are there.

What would you recommend to people who consider a research career?
The key is to set your priorities. Research will never be a branch where you can earn a lot of money, where everybody will pat you on the back at a meeting every week. It is very much about your inner drive, your enthusiasm, and if that is missing, it will show sooner or later. Enthusiasts find it easier to tolerate the low salary and poor working conditions, because they do it for the sake of the science itself, for their good feeling if they discover something new. But if you lack the drive, it is bad.

Patrik

Patrik originally studied social science with the plan to work in commercial sector, and he only played with the idea he could teach. But a chain of coincidences turned his direction, and now he is firmly tied to teaching. After trying secondary school teaching for some time, he got a teaching job at the university where he currently works. He has finished his PhD and is preparing for his habilitation (associate professorship).

„I was looking for someone who was successful abroad."

Mentoring as a Way to International Contacts and High-Impact Articles

Did you have any experience with mentoring when you joined the programme?
None.

What did you expect from the programme?
When you sent the information about the programme to our school, I realised that a mentor could help me expand my network of professional contacts in other institutions in Czech Republic or even abroad. That I could consult my research or collaborate on articles, projects or grants.

Did you manage to fulfil the plan?
Yes, it worked well. My mentor works in one of the best schools in the UK, I found her over Google. I wrote to her and she agreed to consult with me about an article I was preparing for a conference. She gave me some really valuable feedback which helped me develop the article further, and now I'm waiting for a response from a high-impact journal. We haven't written anything together so far, but our future plans remain open. There are plenty of ideas but little time.

Do you plan any future collaboration?
I firmly hope we will collaborate. We currently collaborate on the organisation of a conference. I might need my mentor's assistance in future if I plan a research in the UK academic environment. She is familiar with it and her advice would be priceless. I appreciate the prestige and importance of her institution. I'm endlessly grateful to her for agreeing to be my mentor, and I try not to trouble her too much. I don't want to put her off.
Actually, addressing my mentor was one of the crucial effects of the mentoring programme. I don't think I would ever consider doing it if I was not backed by the programme.

Who were you looking for?
There were two main considerations. I wanted to find someone who publishes in journals with a high impact factor. I took this as a token that the person is very accomplished and he or she can help me write an article that can compete internationally. I somewhat preferred a person who did a similar research topic. At the same time, I expected such a person to be experienced in designing projects and to have a good network of international contacts. So, I started to search articles on related topics, and that brought me to my mentor.

How did you collaborate with your mentor?
I sent her an article, actually a conference contribution I had written, which I wanted to develop into an article that could be published in a high impact international journal. And she really read it (smile), and gave me very valuable feedback relating both to the content and the language. I couldn't reward her for her work in any way. Then one day we were choosing people to board the conference we were planning, and we wanted to include respected international experts, so I offered her to become a member and she agreed. I often refer to the articles written by my mentor in my texts.

Could you give us an example of something you've learned from your mentor?
I find my mentor very inspiring. Her career demonstrates that when someone is really good, even if they come from Central or Eastern Europe, they can succeed at prestigious Western European or American universities, they can do research there and teach. She is an important role model for me. If one day I could write the sort of articles she writes, I would be very content.

In addition to consultations with mentors, the programme also includes personal and professional development courses. Have you taken any?
No, I didn't have the time. I would have to travel to another city to participate. I only took part in the initial workshop in Prague where we discussed various topics related to our studies and future plans. It was very interesting, and it gave me a lot of clues, it helped me set the priorities for choosing a mentor.

On Good Research and International Recognition

Could you define a good researcher?
A good researcher is a person who can prove his or her hypothesis using relevant data, who can create good output and sell it to a good journal. And naturally, he needs to be able to find the money to do all that – apply for a grant and get it. And ideally, the research should be money-making. I would like to achieve all this, I hope the work I do is meaningful. I work at the university, not the Academy, so it's not only about research, I also share my knowledge with my students. I have to do some writing, but there is not much time left for that, and it is rather difficult to publish in good journals in the social sciences. My colleagues and I sometimes try to send something to the good Western European journals, but they only accept some eight per cent of articles, so it is a challenge. But when you succeed, it's a token of quality. My colleague and I have managed to place three articles in Eastern European high-impact journals recently. And we hope one day we will succeed in the West too.

Do you think the quality of research in the East is lower than in the West?
When you look at the journals in terms of their impact factor, although it is widely criticised, but still it

gives you some clue, you can see Western European journals score better. The positive news is that the impact factor of journals in our field of study is growing. Most of our articles have been quoted in high-impact journals in the Czech Republic and other Eastern European countries. It would be great if the articles of Czech authors got more recognition in the West, but clearly, if you analyse data from the Czech Republic, you will be much more likely to publish your work in the Czech Republic or Slovakia.

What do you like about research? And what would you prefer to leave out?
I like finding out new things, learning new things, looking up articles and reading them. And I like to combine that with teaching and working with my students.
I would really appreciate if all the examiners of external research project applications (administered in the Czech Republic) were exclusively researchers and experts from foreign universities. I hate to see my grant applications evaluated by local examiners, the Czech playground is too small for that.

From Secondary School Teacher to Associate Professor

How did you get to your subject of study and your academic work?
I've always liked teaching. I took a teacher training course during my master's studies, because I knew I might want to teach. And I did. I got a job as a teacher at a business school, and then I got a part time job at our university. About a year later, I enrolled in a PhD programme, because I felt I might need the degree one day, and it was sort of a natural thing to do at the university. I knew the degree can get me a better position and better salary.

So, you didn't want to do research originally?
No. I've always fancied teaching. But I have to admit that the first six months of teaching at a secondary school were discouraging. When I saw all the disciplinary problems, discussions with parents, etc., I thought it might be a good idea to back off, and I applied for a job in a bank. But then, fortunately, I got this teaching job at the university. Looking back, I'm grateful for my secondary school teaching experience; it makes me appreciate my university job. I don't have to worry about the students' absences, about their marks, discuss everything with their parents… University students are adults who study because they really want to. I like that.

What was your PhD programme like?
I worked at one university and studied for PhD at another. At that time when I wrote an article, it was possible to record it both in my doctoral study activities, and my professional activities. Today it's different, and my colleagues who study and work at different universities have to write twice as many articles.
The main drawback was that my job prevented me from daily contact with my advisor and other people at school, with my fellow doctoral students. That's what's easier for full-time doctoral students.

I don’t think you were the only one. Many doctoral students work to earn their living. They miss these opportunities too.
I suppose it is a common thing, when the stipend is some seven thousand crowns. But that’s not good. Such students cannot concentrate on their studies. The lack of money is definitely a serious problem, but students also face stinging uncertainty about their future. I’m not familiar with the situation at all schools, but I don’t think the academic sector can employ all the PhD graduates; and I’m not sure the degree is something that helps you get a better job in the private sector. My situation was exceptionally favourable in this respect. I knew I had a job that I would keep, so it was a clear step forward in my career.

What are your future plans?
I would like to become associate professor within some five years. That’s why I focus on publishing my articles in high-impact journals. I’m also choosing the university I would like to join as an associate professor.

You have upgraded your plans considerably – from secondary school teacher to associate professor.
I think the need to habilitate will not let me stop developing, I will have to write articles, I will have to work hard. All this can help me get a better professional position and more money. Our school supports us, we have a fund for prospective associate professors, which can cover expenses related to publishing articles (in open access journals), conferences or various work-related trips. I really cannot complain.

Your career seems to be going really well. Do you plan any internship abroad?
I go on regular one-week teaching stays within the Erasmus programme. I have been to many places with the programme, and I find it very enriching. You get to know new places, new institutions, you teach in English. It is very interesting to compare the workings of various institutions in various countries, both in terms of research and education. But I only have short-term experience, I’ve never taken a longer study stay, and I don’t plan one in the nearest future. I have a family, small children.

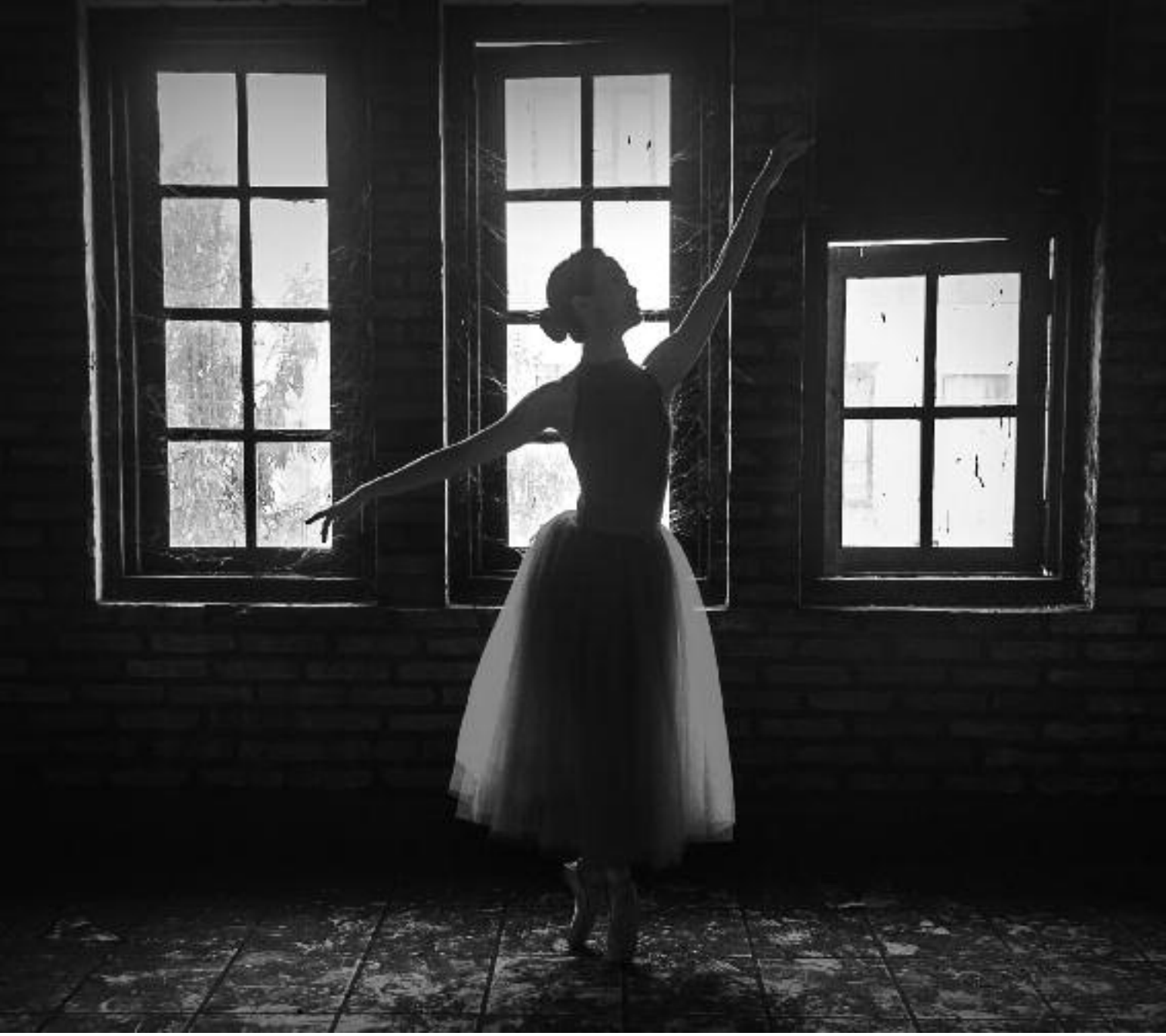
Some say that’s the best time for the internship, before the kids start their school.
My wife and I are not that sort of people, we are not courageous enough to take our little kids and move abroad. Maybe later, when the kids grow up a bit, I might take a study stay at a university within an easy distance, so that I can go home at weekends or every two weeks. I don't know, we haven’t discussed that, but I'm thinking about it.

What would you recommend to people who are considering our programme?
It is a great impulse, it can help you find someone to collaborate with. Your advisor might not be available at all times, and when you finish your PhD, you will have no advisor to assist you, which was my case.

The great thing is that we were not pushed to do anything, we didn't have to find a mentor, we didn't have to take the courses, and they were free of charge! Even though the programme was not time consuming, the effect was surprisingly good, I'm satisfied.

Šárka

Šárka studied general biology and virology. During her PhD programme, she worked as a researcher at a medical school and a school of natural sciences. Then, when she was still studying for her PhD, she got a job in a private pharmaceutical company. It was her mentor who helped her find the job. Her career in the company is developing very well, and she has no intention to leave at present, although she says she might one day consider joining the academic community again. She loves research just as much as dancing, her favourite leisure activity.



„I wanted to know about my opportunities with a PhD in biology."

Mentoring as a Map of the Postdoctoral Landscape

Did you have any experience with mentoring when you joined our programme?
None at all.

So, what made you join our programme?
My advisor sent me the offer, and I was really interested because I was in the fourth year of my PhD programme, and I was just considering what I would do next. I needed to find out which direction to take. That was the main mentoring goal I set at the initial workshop. I needed to map the options for a person with a PhD degree in biology.

Did your school offer any consultations for doctoral students about their future career?
Not at that time. The situation is somewhat better now; the school organises career days where companies show presentations, students can try coaching, there are courses in CV writing, in interview strategies. That's great.

Your mentoring goal "find out what to do after my PhD" is very broad. What were your criteria for finding a mentor?
I agree (smile). At first, I didn't know where to start. And then, after the initial workshop, you sent us the link to the National Contact Centre website[1], to the interviews with researchers you interviewed during their doctoral programme or postdoc and then once again a few years later.2 So I read them, and I found one of the women really interesting, she worked both in the academic and private sphere. I addressed her and said I would be interested in her comparison of both sectors. But another mentee was there before me, obviously interested in just the same thing, so my mentor wasn't sure she would have enough time for me too. But it worked out, and I'm really grateful. She was very kind and helpful.

How did you collaborate with your mentor?
We met at a café where she told me about her professional experience. Then she invited me to go and see her company where I could see how things work. We only met twice within the mentoring programme.

And were the two meetings enough to help you find out what you would like to do?
I was greatly impressed by the visit to the mentor's company. I liked the place very much, and I asked my mentor immediately if she thought there might be a vacancy soon. She said there would be a vacancy,

and it worked out. I work there now. Of course, I had to go through the standard recruitment process. My mentor and I work in different departments.

So, it was thanks to mentoring that you were at the right place at the right time. I'm glad to hear that! Does that mean you started working there even before you finished your PhD?
Yes. And I worked full time from the very beginning.

That must have been demanding when you were finishing your dissertation.
I only worked on my dissertation in the evenings and on weekends, so it took me one more year to finish.

And now it's complete, the defence and all?
Yes! I got my degree for Christmas (laugh), at the beginning of my sixth year.

Congratulations!
Thank you. I'm really glad it's all over.

Before we get to your work in the academic and private sector, have you taken part in any of the courses within our mentoring programme?
I only attended two of the courses – communication skills and identification of personal strengths and weaknesses, although I had originally planned to attend a few more. The course on personal strengths and weaknesses helped me understand that the aspects that we consider our biggest weaknesses might in the end produce our biggest strengths. I could see that about myself.

If it's not too intimate, can I ask you what particular feature you identified as your strength?
The first drafts of my articles were very weak and my advisor had to correct them a lot, but it improved over time. And the positive thing that came out of it is my ability to accept criticism and learn from my mistakes.

That's a precious skill, not only in science.
When I said that to my advisor, she responded: "Oh, thank heaven, I hope it will last (laugh)."

What do you see as the main contribution of the programme? I don't mean getting your current job, but rather something more personal.
I think the best thing about the programme was that it made me think about myself, about different aspects and from different angles. Without special opportunities, like this mentoring programme, nothing ever makes you stop and think. You need something to distract you from the everyday routine.

What would you recommend to future mentees? What should they do to get the most from the programme?
I would definitely encourage them to use the opportunity because the programme is very rich, and everybody can find something helpful in it. And you can tailor your participation to your needs. For instance, I didn't have the time to participate in the courses, so I only attended two, but I gained a lot from the consultations with my mentor. When I look back, I'm sorry I didn't attend more courses, because it was a very special limited offer. If I wanted to take similar courses now, I would have to pay a lot of money. But it all depends on your priorities.

How Biology Seemed Easier than Medicine, and How Difficult it is Not to Work Overtime in Research

Would you say that the mentoring programme helped you see you didn't want to stay in the academic environment?
I wouldn't make it so decisive. I still consider going back one day. Rather I realised that after all those years spent in schools and academic institutions, I was ready to try the private sector, to be able to compare the two. And then I would see.

The view of the academic world from the point of view of a student and researcher must differ, I'm sure. Did you also work during your studies?
I had two part-time jobs at two different schools, so I think I can compare the academic and private sector now. But I have no experience with the Academy of Sciences, and within my university jobs, I could largely work on my dissertation.

How did you get to biology?
We had an excellent biology teacher in my secondary school. She made me like it. In the final year, when I was considering what school to choose, biology was naturally one of the options, along with medicine. I come from a family of doctors. But my older sister studied medicine and I saw her studying all the time, she had almost no holidays, and that dissuaded me. I thought I simply didn't want to do that (laugh).

So, it was your self-preservation instinct that favoured biology over medicine, wasn't it (laugh)?
I studied general biology in my bachelor's programme, and I specialised in virology in my master's programme. When I finished my master's degree, I could stay in the lab, but I felt I wanted to try something else. It's not that I was dissatisfied there, only I liked the presentation of my future advisor at one of our courses, and she said she was just looking for new doctoral students. It was because of her that I started to work in the medical school lab, although I studied at the school of natural sciences. It was a lucky co-

incidence. At first, I participated in my advisor's grant, and then I got my own grant. But I was also partly paid by our institute, which gave me enough time to work on my dissertation. Unfortunately, this is not a common situation for doctoral students in our country. I had very good conditions for my doctoral programme, and I didn't even have any teaching duties.

Did you want to go on to study for the PhD when you were in your master's programme?
No, I didn't. I decided to enrol in the doctoral programme mainly because I had no idea what else to do. I was very uncertain. I was afraid that it would be above my head. That I would never make it. I saw other doctoral students in my lab, and I admired them, I thought: They are so good! If I can ever make it to be like them, I can do anything (laugh).

Do you have any role models in science, now that you have made it and you know you can do anything?
I can't think of one specific person I would identify as my role model in research. But I have a notion what a person should be like to be a good researcher, it combines various features and patterns of behaviour that I observed in people around me during my studies. Good researchers should have a good insight, as well as a comprehensive view of their field, they should keep up-to-date, they should always be ready to take in new information and develop. At the same time, they should not let their success and achievements go to their head, they should keep their feet on the ground, remain human, they should not think they are better than others. They should keep in touch with the lab, even when they get to higher positions, not to lose touch with the practical side of the research. Senior researchers often just sit at their computers and write, and they tend to forget how much time it really takes to do the lab work. That's why their demands are often unrealistic. And it could be fun for experienced scientists to take a break and do some pipetting. It is also important to reserve some space in your life for other things, not just research. I don't like people who only focus on their career and have no personal life. That's not healthy. Even though I know that science is really a mission, that it requires people to sacrifice something, and it is often difficult to keep pace in research without working overtime.

As a fresh PhD, what would you recommend to people who consider doctoral studies?
Not to be slaves to their studies. The cruel jokes about doctoral students that picture them as slaves are often true. This is largely determined by the attitude of their advisors and employers, but it is also partly the fault of the doctoral students who put up with it. They let others pass a heap of tasks on them, because they have little experience and they don't know they don't have to accept that. You are really not obliged to suffer. I would recommend fresh doctoral students to learn to say "no" when they feel they're overloaded.
My second recommendation is: Clearly define the target of your dissertation right at the beginning. It is easy to lose your vision and objective view in the everyday routine, duties and deadlines. I often felt that

my target was disappearing in a haze and I was losing motivation. You have to realise why you do each petty thing, each experiment, what it is supposed to bring you in the long run. When you get lost in it, consult your advisor, because he or she might fail to notice you need help. Don't be afraid to ask.

On not Letting Routine Prevail in your Work

You have left the academic community but you still do research. What are your future plans? Do you consider any changes?
I think people from the academic community would not call my current work research (laugh). I sometimes feel I drown in the sea of numbers, charts and tables, and it makes me think I would rather have a small café or be a professional dancer. I love dancing. But everybody has such thoughts sometimes. I think I would always like to stay in the field, but if another opportunity arises, I might take it.

Did you need your PhD degree to get your current job?
It certainly helped me that I was about to finish my PhD when I applied, but they were mainly interested in my experience and ability to analyse data.

What are your career prospects with your current employer?
I have only worked here for a year, and I've been promoted already. Nothing changed officially, I still work in the same department and the name of the position is the same, but the work I do is more interesting, more about research. If I could get even further in future, it would be nice, but it's not a priority right now. The first promotion is quite fresh, I'm happy.

What earned you this promotion?
It was partly due to some changes in the staff, but I also asked for it, because I was getting bored with my original work.

It's great you can be so assertive.
I wouldn't stay here otherwise. There was too much routine, it felt like a treadmill, it was not satisfying. One of the reasons I left the academic sphere was that I found the work there very demanding, and I wanted to relax, but this was the other extreme. I felt like I was becoming stupid.

On the Exhaustiveness of Academic Research, and How It Gives You More Freedom and Less Paperwork than Corporate Work

You have been in private employment for over a year. What are the main differences between your jobs in the private company and the university?
The clear benefit of academic work is that it is much more liberal in terms of planning and flexible working hours. Even though you often work overtime, because the work is more demanding, you can plan your work, and if you arrive at 10 a.m. because you had something else to do in the morning, it is not a problem. The content of the work is more open too. You can do anything you can find a grant for. Corporate work is more restricted, at least in the position I am now. There's little room for creativeness, and more paperwork.

I'm really surprised! I would guess university work would involve much more paperwork than the private sector.
It might be because our company works under the GMP ("Good Manufacturing Practices") certificate, and it takes an awful lot of paperwork to meet their requirements. Whenever you make any tiny exception from the best practice, you have to fill in noncompliance forms and describe the exception, and several people have to approve it. When you make an exception in academic practice, nobody cares, we can choose our methodology as we like.

So far, you have only spoken about the negatives of corporate work and positives of university work (laugh).
All right, let's get to the positives of corporate work. You don't have to worry about money, you don't have to look for someone to pay for your research. In academic work, you have to hunt for grants, you have to manage grants, which is very stressful and it takes up a great proportion of your working time and a lot of energy. I generally see it as a substantial barrier to the onset of a research career that young researchers find it very hard to have their projects financed. Many young people get trapped in a vicious circle: you don't get a grant because you lack experience, but you can hardly gain experience if you have no grant.
A company can give you much more stable conditions for research, and generally the working conditions are much more stable. I had a limited contract for the first year, and now I have an unlimited contract. I don't think I could ever hope to get that in the academic sector. But one should keep in mind that profit is the primary interest for any company, and when they think they need to reduce staff, they will not hesitate to do it. The approach in academic institutions is more considerate.
I also feel that university work made me more exhausted, it was intellectually very demanding, as I've mentioned. You have to keep up-to-date, have to read articles, you can never take a break. Even a mater-

nity leave can be a problem. But I only know the position of doctoral students, I might speak differently if I had been a standard researcher. As a doctoral student, I really felt very busy; I sometimes stayed in the lab until late at night, even though nobody forced me, I planned my experiments like that myself. But, in general, I think that the workload, given all the writing and all the paperwork with grants, the workload is greater in the academic sector than in the private sector. I can see that I have more free time now than I used to. The first three months in the company were pretty challenging, but every beginning is difficult.

Are you still in contact with the academic community and academic research?
Yes, I'm still in touch with the people I met during my studies, and I'm grateful for it. At least I know about the progress of the projects I used take part in. I must say I miss the academic work in a way, I miss the freedom, and I'm annoyed at the excessive red tape.

1/ www.genderaveda.cz
2/ Vohlídalová, Marta. 2014. *Rozehraná partie: talentky sedm let poté.* Praha: Sociologický ústav AV ČR, v.v.i.

Veronika

Veronika earned her master's degree in political science with an award winning master's dissertation. Her current activities stretch across three different research fields, as she hopes to achieve more scientific value from joining different areas. Beside her research targets, she focuses on cultivating the Czech academic environment to provide more encouragement to young researchers. In future, she would like to engage in both research and education.

„Everyone around me seemed well acquainted with the academic environment. That impression was wrong."

Mentoring as the Introduction into the Workings of the Czech Academic Environment

Did you have any experience with mentoring when you joined our programme?
No, I didn't. Neither formal, within a programme, nor informal, that is being continuously advised by somebody with relevant experience. That was the reason I signed up for your programme. When I received your offer in the winter, I had some idea what it could be all about, because I knew the concept from abroad, from my international study stays. That's why I took the last-minute decision to join in. The initial workshop took place just the next day, so I had to cancel my original plans. I had no specific expectations. I simply told myself: let's take a chance whatever comes out of it. I didn't have time to consider, anyway.

But you had plenty of time to think at the opening workshop (laugh). What mentoring goal did you set up?
My main goal was to write a grant application, and then I also wanted to gain more insight into publishing strategies.

That's a model plan, very specific. So, what did you expect of your future mentor? Did any specific names come to mind already at the workshop, someone you wanted to ask?
I didn't consider any specific names. Since I really learned about the workshop at the last moment, I had no time to prepare for it and consider the options. I came completely unprepared. Based on what I knew from abroad, I expected to be given a catalogue of mentors for us to choose from.

I'm sorry about that. We dropped that because it didn't work. Our programme runs all over the country, across study fields, it is not bound to a specific institution. That makes it too hard for us to anticipate the specific requests of our mentees. We used to recruit mentors in advance, but in the end our mentees did not choose from the list, and we felt awkward towards the renowned scientists who volunteered to be mentors.
Oh, I see. But, in the end, I chose a mentor from the brochure that was made for the exhibit about the pilot year of your programme. I noticed a researcher from my own department in the list of former mentees, a woman I didn't know personally at that time.

Although we urged mentees not to choose mentors from their own workplace… (laugh)
Well, that's right, but I was new there. I came from a different school, and I felt totally lost in the new environment. I really needed to get a better grasp of the place. I felt like everyone around me was so well

informed. As if they had some sort of a manual, as if they all knew what to do, only I didn't. I was wondering if that was because they all knew just what to expect from their doctoral studies, and I didn't, if they all knew what the study was about, or if they all were simply better than me. I felt a great handicap. And I came to the conclusion that I needed someone to make things clear to me, someone I would not be embarrassed to share all my doubts with.

How did the mentor work with you and what did it give you?
I found out that my impression was all wrong. Most other doctoral students felt no better than me. I suppose it is our national habit to pretend we know it all. And that makes you embarrassed to admit you don't, because you think you would look stupid.
But back to my mentor. Until you helped me contact her just after our first workshop, I only knew her from our doctoral courses where every student presents the outcomes of his or her work once a year. Researchers from our department sometimes take part, too. She felt rather stern and standoffish there, I was almost afraid of her.

That's strange. I know her as a very open and friendly person.
I wouldn't call her stern today. It is just that she always asked interesting but very difficult questions, moreover in excellent English. Mentoring was simply full of surprises for me. But I was so desperate then that I thought I had nothing to lose. So, I just told myself I would give it a try. And it was the right thing to do. Everything went smoothly right from the moment I contacted her.

What did you do during the mentoring year?
It was rather easy to consult, as we work at the same department. We could meet for lunch so that mentoring did not interfere with our working time. We would always set the topic in advance and prepare for it to make the most of our time together. I wanted the mentor to see some benefit too, to reward her in some way for her efforts. And we found the time to discuss other things too, which was great.

Could you give us an example of the topics you discussed during lunch?
At the beginning, I just wanted to discuss what grant to apply for, where to apply. I kept clutching to the idea that I had to apply for a grant, I suppose older researchers around me made me think so. I felt that if older people around me encouraged me to do that, it would be the right thing that is expected from me. Then gradually I found out it was not the right time for me to do that. My mentor made me see that it would be a waste of time at that point, because I didn't have any relevant output I could present in the application. It was too ambitious at that point, and I could easily do without it. I reconsidered my aspirations, and I focused on writing and publishing really good articles, that's what we discussed in detail. We discussed what strategy to choose. Whether to look up a journal and tailor the text to its requirements,

or whether to work out a draft version of the article, then search for suitable journals, and then modify the final version to fit the style of the selected journal. And we also discussed my problems with my advisor.

And which of the two strategies did the mentor recommend?
The latter.

So, the originally standoffish colleague turned out to be a caring mentor who was able to advise you even in rather personal matters, right?
I was rather cautious at first, before we got to know each other really well. I didn't want to get it all out at once. I started asking questions, such as what is the role of the advisor, because nobody had ever told me that either. My advisor was new too, he had never supervised any dissertation before and didn't know what to do either. My mentor had a fresh openD degree, so I asked her about the responsibilities of the advisor, to what extent I should work independently, and to what extent I should request consultations. I needed to make these things clear, because the situation as it was set up could lead to substantial problems. It was not just the mentor who helped me with this issue. She received her PhD abroad, so she was unsure about certain details of the studies in the Czech Republic. I learned a lot at the mentoring workshops where I met PhD students from other schools. When my mentor and I got to know each other more, we started to discuss personal things, too.

In addition to learning information about PhD studies from other mentees, were the workshops helpful in any other ways?
Unfortunately, I only took part in two workshops, because they took place on Mondays and I didn't have time to attend. The initial workshop was crucial. I could suddenly see that I was not the only one at sea. That's very important, more than people generally tend to think. It was a great relief to find out I was not an alien, that I was actually the same as the rest. Information from behind the scenes is essential, and I don't know how I would reach it without mentoring workshops.

What do you see as the main benefit of our programme?
In addition to the things we discussed, I feel more at home in the Czech academic environment. And when I feel at sea, there's someone I can turn to. Plus, I'm glad I discovered the National Contact Centre. I'm happy someone takes a professional approach to something I'm interested in but don't have the time to do it.
Actually, I would appreciate it if mentoring became an integral part of doctoral studies, if it did not depend on grants. Simply the system they have abroad. That would give young researchers more opportunity to develop. In the current situation, the success of the student largely depends on the advisor. And when the

advisor does not do his or her job properly, the student is bound to grope in the dark, just as I did the first year. That's detrimental not only for the individuals, but for the whole community. If we could give students proper guidance, they could finish school within five years and be perfectly ready to contribute to their field of science. Instead, students lose time finding out about the system and its requirements. All they told us when we started was: write articles, consult with your advisor, and above all don't take a job, or you'll never finish, the CZK 6000 stipend is here for you. And I thought: "Don't take a job?" Should I move back to my parents and tell them: "Surprise! I'm adult, I have to pay for my social security, but I'm not allowed to earn money." These conditions together just don't make sense!

On the Desire to Understand Politics and the Demands of Scientific Research

How did you choose to study political science? Is it a family tradition?
Not at all. My parents have never studied social science. Mom holds a degree in the humanities, and my father never made it to a degree, because he reached the professional status he wanted and he quit school. He wouldn't have the patience anyway. But my parents discussed politics a lot. It formed our lives, both my parents have always been activists. And I wanted to understand politics, I wanted to know what my parents were talking about. I wanted to understand what is going on in society. That's why I decided to study political science. The entrance exam committee was rather perplexed when I told them I wanted to understand what was written in the papers, but they liked it (laugh).

You said your advisor never supervised any other student before. How did you get to him?
He was my master's thesis examiner. But the choice of advisor was largely determined by the way I got to study for my PhD Originally, I didn't want to. I was tired of studying after I finished my master's degree, and I wasn't offered to continue, which was a standard at our school; when the head of the department wanted someone to continue studying for PhD degree, he would offer it after the final exams. For some reason, he didn't fancy me. I can just conjecture, someone told me it might have been because he didn't like my master's thesis advisor, so it might not have been really about me. I really don't know. But he did all he could to prevent me from continuing. So, I thought: he didn't offer it, he was very severe with me, I will not elbow my way in there, I will just take a job, and if I feel like studying again, I can apply in a few years. And that's just what I did, I started working for an NGO.

What made you try PhD after all?
My mom and everybody around kept saying: "You were born to do research, just go for it!" And during the next year I realised I missed research. I missed the constant inflow of new information, the level of learning that I was used to at school, I felt like I was getting retarded. And I have always dreamed of doing research, ever since my childhood. I like doing research and I feel my abilities match the require-

ments of scientific work. I was so disgusted with the interpersonal relations and conflicts during my master's studies that I started questioning my choice.

What abilities are they?
I judge from what I observed in my mother, who was a university scholar. I knew research was a fiddly tedious work, often terribly boring, but that's all necessary because if you keep on, it will lead you to a discovery which is worth the toil. And I have the will to finish things.

So, tell me more about your return to the academic world
Given the situation at my original school, I decided to apply to another school where nobody knew me. I didn't want people to be prejudiced when judging my application. And I was accepted. To my surprise, I soon got an offer to study for PhD at my original school, because the department had sent my master's thesis to a competition (without even letting me know!), and I had won. So, they started to be interested in getting me back, it was like a headhunt. They said: "We offer superb conditions to our PhD students, we have grants, you will earn big money." I was all perplexed. I just thought it didn't make sense. When I needed them, nobody stood by me, they did all they could to make me leave. And then I find out they considered my work so good they made it compete. And suddenly they didn't want to let me go elsewhere. It made me angry. I was looking forward to the change, so I refused the offer.

And back to the advisor, how did you get to him?
So, finally I'm getting there (smile). I didn't know anybody at my new school, so I was looking for a supervisor among people I knew from my former school, someone who would be close to my project topic. I didn't want to contact my master's thesis advisor, although he is an excellent expert in the field. He did very little to advise me and I didn't want to go through that again. That's why I turned to the examiner who had given me a very valuable feedback, I could see that he had read my work very carefully and that he understood the subject. And he seemed very open minded, so I felt it could work.

And why do you think it didn't?
It was fine at first, he advised me really well. Today I know we made a mistake right at the beginning. We agreed that I would learn certain methods myself during the first year, so instead of getting guidance, I started ploughing a lone furrow. I felt lost. My advisor was from a different environment. He and the people from my department told me different things. I could not focus on my work during the first year, I just needed to find out exactly what I should do. After six months, I could see it didn't make sense, so I applied for an international study stay to sort it out.

And did that work, did you find out what to do with your project?
Yes, fortunately, the mission was completed successfully. But when I returned, I found out my advisor moved away from research and started to engage in other things. He was too busy to consult fully. Now a new advisor agreed to take over my project, only I have to find a way to tell the original one. That will make me a persona not grata at my original school forever.

On Czech Nature as a Barrier to Education and Scientific Progress

What helped you sort out your ideas about your studies when you were abroad, rather than when you were in the Czech Republic?
It might sound strange, but I suddenly could ask questions and discuss things.

Could you be more specific? One would expect universities all over the world, including the Czech Republic, to be a place to ask questions and discuss. After all, that's what they are made for.
True. But I must admit I feel there is a certain national culture of communication that prevents the free asking of questions in the Czech Republic. There are psychological features apparent not only in the academic environment. Czechs generally feel that showing a lack of knowledge means weakness. People are afraid to ask, everybody pretends they know it all. The great thing about my study stay was that everybody kept asking questions and it was appreciated as an effort to learn. I often tend to ask seemingly trivial questions which are meant to open the doors for new topics and new points of view. This was appreciated abroad, while here everybody looks at me like I am stupid. People are not used to it.
Czechs are also notably touchy and inept in dealing with criticism. People tend to take any comment personally. That annoys me terribly. Mum says it shows lack of professionalism. People should be allowed to say: "This didn't turn out well" or "From the professional point of view, I don't like this thing you did." It is not the same as saying "You are a bad person" or "I despise you." I think this is very specific of Eastern Europeans, at least those I have worked with so far. The Visegrad syndrome.
I try to change that at least a bit within my teaching practice. I tell my students that making mistakes is a great thing because you can remember them and never make them again. We have to take the courage to tell people when they do something wrong, but not in a caustic or humiliating way. We should motivate them to give it another try. Unfortunately, this is not the case at our doctoral courses, where everybody parades round like a world champion. And when someone's presentation betrays they are not exactly at home in their topic, others ask questions just to ridicule them, to show how good they are themselves, they scorn each other. When I see someone uncertain about their project, I ask questions to help them succeed, to find out what they need.
As soon as I'm allowed, I will quit the doctoral courses, I hate the hostile atmosphere. And you don't learn anything there because there is no real discussion, and everybody just does the same, the same theories,

the same methods, the same topics. That's not research. Research should be about new options, discovering new ways and their combinations. All the people in our department do quantitative methods, and I'm sort of an outlander with my theoretical topic, they seem to feel I'm not doing proper science. That's another reason I didn't get on with my dissertation during the first year; they kept pushing me to do their methods, but that's inappropriate for my topic.
Moreover, the social sciences in the Czech Republic are still pervaded with the presumption that there is some sort of neutral or correct way of thinking. And if you admit any ideological premises, you get labelled. In other countries, it is fine to say what paradigm you build upon, it makes you more transparent. Here it is the other way around, if you don't admit it, you're neutral (laugh).

What you say suggests that the foreign university you visited was much more encouraging for young researchers, in terms of the classroom or workplace atmosphere. Were there any other differences you noticed in the relative situations of the doctoral students?
When I was at that doctoral study stay, and also earlier when I visited foreign universities, I could see that PhD students were included in research teams from the very beginning, they earned good money. When they said they were doctoral students, they were admired, because it meant they did something for the society. And the society – through their university – tried to give them good conditions to get the best of them. This is not only about higher salary, but also about easy access to information and various educational options. Their system is welcoming, flexible. For instance, when I thought one of the courses did not really help me achieve my goals, they just told me to choose any other course, at any university in town. I found that amazing. Actually, I don't understand what's so hard to understand about it, why they don't take the same approach to PhD studies here.

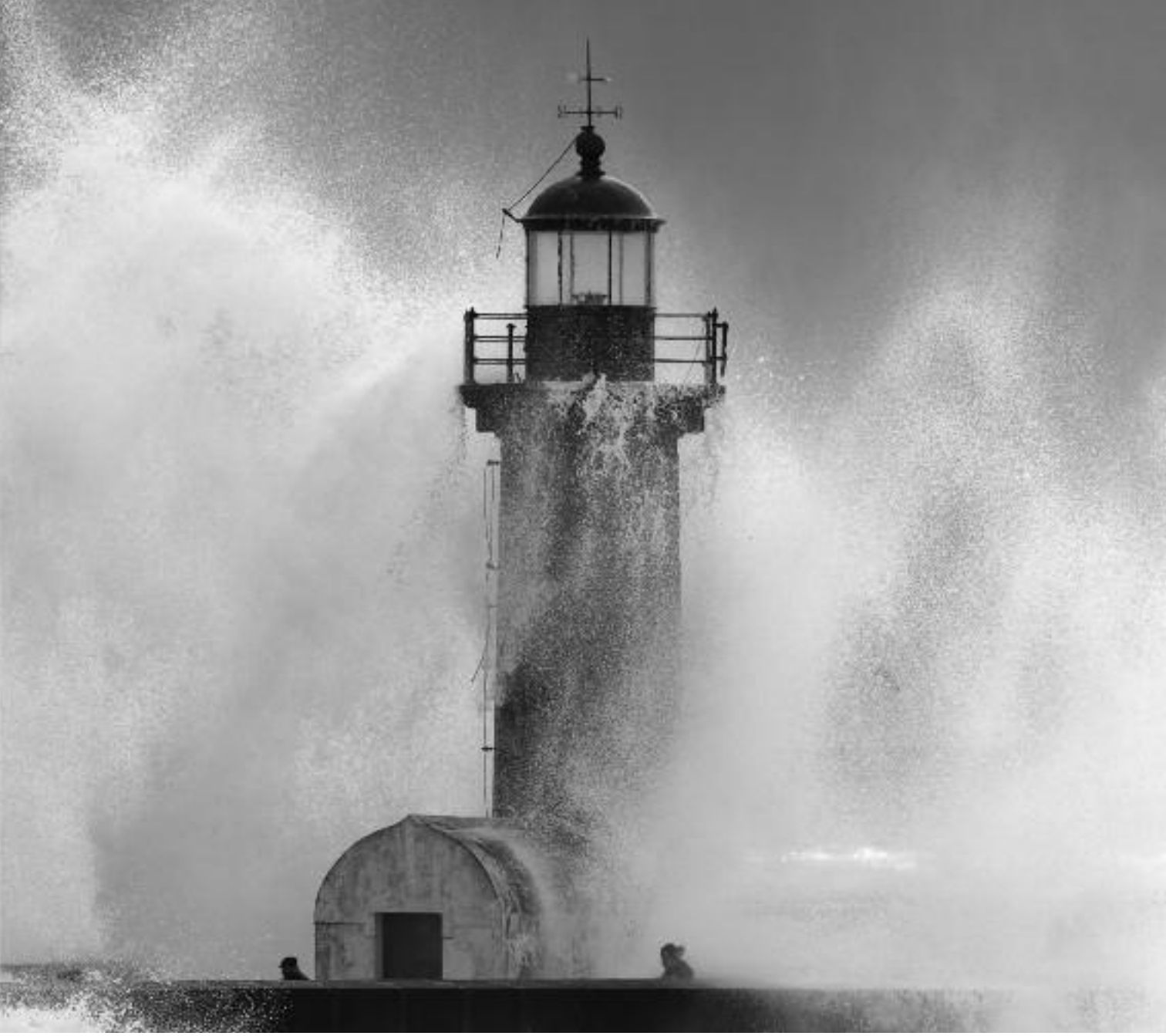
On the Motivation to Change the Czech Academic Environment

Given your very critical view of the Czech environment, what are your future plans? What do you want to do when you finish your PhD, will you move abroad?
I wanted to study abroad. I was offered to stay when I was at that study stay, but I already promised to return to my university job in the Czech Republic. And my partner was not very enthusiastic about moving abroad, he doesn't like travelling, he doesn't speak foreign languages. He works with numbers. "Why would you move abroad? You can compute it all at home (laugh)." I'm just joking, he's a great support. If I was absolutely certain I wanted to stay abroad, I'm sure he would join me, even though he would be very reluctant. But I was not certain, because my great ambition is to help change the Czech academic environment. When all people with a vision leave for better conditions, nothing will ever change here. It is very important that Czech students return to their country and share their experience learnt abroad, so that we don't lag behind.

Does it mean you would like to focus on teaching in future, rather than research?
Ideally, I would like to do both to the same extent. Inspire students and get inspired by them, pick the most enthusiastic of them and engage them in my research. This is not a common practice at our universities. That's what I would like to change. That's why I didn't want to take a job at the Academy of Sciences. I feel that more focus on teaching is badly needed.

Zdislava

Zdislava works at a university, enjoying both research and focused teaching. She understands education not only as an indispensable part of her university work, but also as a precondition for continuity in science. She also provides consultation services, which lets her use her research experience in practice. She loves the mixture of research and its application in real life. Zdislava felt she lost touch with research to some extent during her two maternity leaves, and it was rather difficult to return to the academic community.



„Mentoring was just what I needed in that situation."

Mentoring as a Way to Specialisation

Did you have any experience with mentoring when you joined our programme?
I didn't; it was completely new to me. But I followed your website and I occasionally read your newsletter, so I knew about the mentoring programme for secondary school students. My ideas about mentoring were largely influenced by what you offered to those secondary school students. I presumed I would meet someone more experienced, someone who had gone through what I was going through at the moment.

Could you be more specific? What was it?
I was just returning to work after my second maternity leave, and I was a fresh PhD, because I earned the degree just before I gave birth to my second baby. I wrote one article a year when I was on maternity leave to keep up, but it didn't work very well.
I thought that I would join a project when I come back, that I would do something meaningful, real research. But soon I found myself totally swamped with paperwork, and the only moment we were discussing research was when someone was scolding us for not having written an article. I questioned my decision to return to work. My younger child was supposed to go to the kindergarten but he was sick all the time. I couldn't find a good solution. I was getting emotional. When I was at work, I felt guilty for not being at home; and when I was at home, I wanted to go to work (smile). I was having a hard time, and I didn't have the time to stop and think about what's going on.
And then suddenly I received your newsletter about mentoring, and I thought it might be the right opportunity to solve my situation. I got to a dead end and I needed a new impetus, so I thought I would give it a try.

Did you set up any specific goal?
I hoped the programme could help me clearly define what I'm doing at work, what topic I'm doing, and what outcome I plan to reach. I had a vision that I would collect new data and process it, ideally within the team I was in. The team was newly established and there was a great hope that it would work better.

And did you succeed?
Not entirely, but I certainly got much closer. I defined the things that I am willing and able to do at our department, and what I am not willing and able to do. Until then, I felt I was doing something all the time, but I couldn't see any palpable effect. I did a lot of administrative work and teaching, but it all led nowhere, because I was asked to teach different courses, there was no logic. Now we have a research

grant, my colleagues and I managed to write two chapters for a book, things are beginning to make sense. And I can finally say: this is my topic, the topic I work on, and this is not my topic, so I will not do it. I finally specialise in something, that's what I missed just after my PhD.

On the Need to Map the Academic World and Share Experience

How did your mentor help you with your specialisation?
The very first discussion we had was crucial. She gave me very detailed information about what to avoid, because it inevitably leads to failure, and what to try, because you can get resources or have your work published. She told me which grant options to focus on and which to avoid, because I could hardly meet their conditions with small children. She recommended not to look for an entirely new topic, but rather to continue research that has already been done. She made me understand that some of the roads I was taking simply couldn't work.

Did you prefer a female mentor?
I think I did. I felt that a woman who has children, must have faced the same challenges, and she would be able to tell me about how to manage both work and family. I felt she would understand my situation. It was the case with my dissertation advisor, and it was very pleasant. Her kids were grown up at that time, but she could remember what it was like, and when I apologised I couldn't come because my kid was sick, she accepted it.
When I was looking for a mentor, I wanted someone who also does social science.

But your boss is female too. Why didn't you discuss these things with her?
I thought about that a lot. I tried to discuss it with her, but I felt that either I couldn't make the question clear or she couldn't understand what I wanted. It was as if we spoke different languages.
I asked about practical down-to-earth things, but her answers related to the expert aspects of our work. But I know she is very good at handling these practical aspects. I didn't want to push her. I respect her very much, and I felt that the fault was mine, that I couldn't say exactly what I needed. There are other people in our department who could answer my questions, but they are not willing to share their experience. I suppose they see it as their "know-how" and they are afraid of competitors. My mentor invited me to a conference where I met a colleague from my department. She was very surprised to see me there. And that's exactly what I'm talking about – if we could discuss things naturally, we wouldn't need third parties to help us communicate.

Were you afraid to address your mentor?
I was at first, I didn't want to bother her. But then I told myself that she could have refused if she wanted

to. It is clear that the mentee benefits more than the mentor, but I thought that if she accepted, it was because she wanted to do it. She confirmed it when she said she liked discussing the position of mothers in research, because she could help other people avoid some of the mistakes she had made.

You said that you profited from the first consultation. How did your collaboration continue?
It was great. She is from the same field and she studies similar topics, so she could give me valuable advice on how to build a reputation in the field. Two months after our first meeting she invited me to Prague to a conference organised by an expert association. She introduced me to everybody, and she opened my door to the community. This would have never happened to me at our school. She told me what institutions to consider for collaboration, what associations to check out. It changed my life, and when you look at it, she only spent a few hours with me.

What did you like the most about your mentor?
The most inspirational thing is that she does research very properly, the whole process, from the data to the presentation. She has results she can be proud of. I admire her way of doing research. I think this is the way research should be done, and she does it. In my department, people don't share their experience, everybody guards their information and their opportunities. That's silly. I came to the conclusion that her way of doing things was the right one, and I want to do it that way too. I want to share my experience with my colleagues and the students I supervise. That's why I teach. If I just wanted to do research, I would go to the Academy. But I'm at the university where my mission is to pass my knowledge on.

You took several courses within the programme. Which of them did you find the most useful?
I loved the time management course. It took me a long time to learn to deal with the flexible working hours. I'm a terrible procrastinator, I would much rather read articles than prepare for my classes. At the course, we filled a chart which made me see quite clearly that I make almost all the time management errors that exist (laugh). And it really helped me improve it a lot.
I also liked the course on our strengths and weaknesses. The effect might seem somewhat illogical, because it helped me finally stop clinching to the idea that I have to improve in the areas that I perceive as weak. I always tried to do that and it never worked. So, these two courses were very helpful. There were many things that I sort of knew or figured out, but the courses gave me a couple of hours to process all this information. Moreover, I loved meeting the other mentees. I found one of the participants particularly inspirational, she went to study abroad and she took her husband and kid along. She made me realise that I don't need automatically to delete all the emails offering international stays, I don't have to just say I don't have the time or it would be difficult with the kids. It was incredibly important for me to meet someone who had done it.

Were there any general effects of the programme?
It helped me identify the things I disliked at work, it taught me to unveil the things that look great at first sight, but in fact they involve 90% of paperwork, and only the remaining bit is about meaningful research. My mentor told me: "Always have a good look at the description of your position within the project, your duties, what will be expected of you. Read the task descriptions carefully." It sounds rather trivial, but it is crucial. It helped me set the goals I want to pursue.

And what are they?
I want to do more research and less teaching. I want to teach only the things that I consider important, things I understand, things I can pass on to my students. I don't want to do teaching only as a tedious job.

How does that correspond with your nearest plans? Do you plan to become an associate professor?
I can feel the push to habilitate as an associate professor. The university expects you to develop your career. I do want to do research, but I can't say whether I want another degree. I have seen a habilitation interview recently. It was a colleague of mine whom I respect greatly, his work and his books. It was such a humiliating sight, it made me feel like I never want to go through something like that in my life. The committee included people who had no idea what he was talking about, some of their questions were completely out-of-place. It was a very unpleasant experience. It reminded me of a detective story that takes place at the university in Olomouc. It is about the backstage politicking related to the process of awarding associate professorship. This was just the same, but it wasn't fiction. I simply don't feel inclined to get immersed in this. I think I can be pretty assertive, but this would be too much for me. Maybe when the kids grow up. Now I prefer reading Thomas the Tank Engine to my kids rather than studying scientific articles. This way I would become an associate professor when I'm fifty, but I would not lose the good feeling about my work. So, if there's no push to move upwards, I will focus on the development of my research skills, rather than on my academic career development. I might finally enjoy doing real research.

What does it mean to "do research"?
It means looking for new solutions in everyday situations, testing and expanding the options that are offered to people in such situations. I'm talking about applied research; when you invent, design and test a practical and practicable solution. For me, it has to involve real people, a story, a personal history, a response from the people involved. You collect several thousand cases, and then you analyse it. The application level is very important for me.
It is rather difficult to find sources of money for applied research in the social sciences. I would find it reasonable to say that it is a thoroughly tested product of science, that it is a result of a social research, some-

thing that can be just as valuable for the institution, as when biologists have their article published in Nature.
But everybody seems to think that an article about mutations in earthworms in a high-impact journal is much more of an achievement than when you work with real people and produce something that can substantially improve the quality of their lives. As if there was no science outside the natural sciences. In the end, you only get scolded for not having enough impact.

I presume you're talking about remuneration…
Sure. I don't want to earn more than biologists, I just want the same; so that when I read adverts for unskilled positions in three-shift system, I don't have to tell myself they will earn more money than myself. When people say that those who can't do, teach, I'm sure they're talking just about the same thing, because most people eventually get to the end of their rope, and they find a job which will let them support their family. I can understand them. I would really like to have my salary raised above the national average. I'm not leaving the academic community, but I maintain a part-time commercial job. And this is not only the case of the academic staff. When I look at our secretary, who is really central to the department; whenever she's on holiday the whole department is in disarray; and she's earning next to nothing, while she could gain her weight in gold in a private company.

So, you don't consider leaving entirely?
I didn't go to the university to earn a fortune. If I wanted to make a lot of money in my field, I would have stayed in Prague and done corporate consulting. It might not be as much fun, but it would certainly let me live a more comfortable life. But research quenches my need for self-appraisal (laugh). I am ambitious, I need to feel the high prestige of the work I do. I'm the oldest of several siblings, a typical case, I need to reach new targets all the time.

Let's go back a bit. What did you expect when you started your PhD studies?
I started my PhD and at the same time I started to work. It was all just as it should be. I had to read articles, I had to keep up-to-date. I was happy about it.
My naïve idea was that when I finish my PhD, the constant urge to publish articles will stop, that I will get rid of the regular questions: "When are you going to finish it?" I thought I would do the same, only it will not be as stressful; that I would do fieldwork, research, do some teaching, read and write articles. This illusion vaporised after I returned from my maternity leave. Nothing of the sort happened, not nearly. But I still hope I can make at least some of it come true.

Is it that hope that keeps you in research?
I think so. I know I would be loath to give up the hands-on part of the work, the interpersonal interactions.

I could easily do without that academic part of it, although it might make me feel like I'm losing an opportunity for achievement. But I would certainly miss that much less than the applied part. I think if the situation remains the same even when my kids grow up, I might lean towards leaving. We will see.

What would you recommend to people who study for PhD, or who have just finished, and wonder what to do next?

It is certainly good to keep in mind that every situation in life involves many different layers and aspects which interact. So, when you feel there's something wrong, you should try to identify the layer or aspect that causes the problem. That's what the initial workshop helped me see. It helped me identify exactly the things that don't work, the things I need to change. It is ironic, because I do the same exercises regularly with my clients, but I couldn't do it for myself.

Also, you should exploit all the professional and scientific opportunities during your PhD study. It can come in handy when you finish. While you're a student, you have your activities set out before you. It is only after you finish you PhD that you experience the vagueness and uncertainty.

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Mentoring:
co v příručkách nenajdete

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Martina Fucimanová

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