

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR DOCTORATE

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GETTING THE MOST OUT
OF YOUR DOCTORATE:
THE IMPORTANCE OF
SUPERVISION,
NETWORKING, AND
BECOMING A GLOBAL
ACADEMIC

Edited by

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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FOREWORD

How fortunate am I to have had an opportunity to read this internationally authored book and to learn of the insights and strategies outlined for candidates considering or currently undertaking a doctorate. The book offers a wealth of guidance from Chapter 1 on identifying strategies for selecting a supervisor through to Chapter 8 on life after the PhD.

I have been researching various aspects of doctoral education for many years with a particular interest in supervisory practices and examination. On a personal note, one of the many things I have found of great interest at the international level is that no matter in which country, system, or discipline the supervisor and candidate are operating, many of the experiences are very similar. This leads me to conclude that much of the supervisory relationship is about the human factors. In fact, research by authors such as [Janssen \(2005\)](#) and [Lee, Dennis, and Campbell \(2007\)](#) highlight the critical importance of the affective, personal aspects of supervision. No wonder the word “tricky” is one I use a lot when talking about the supervisory relationships because it involves human beings working and learning from – and with – one another. This book aligns with what I have learned over my years researching doctoral education, that the process is tricky, yet one can navigate with the right guidance and tips.

Throughout the book I noted a strong emphasis on investigation and “doing one’s homework,” or as my brother-in-

law would say from his army background “time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted.” And what better message could one pass on to candidates who are undertaking a program aimed at educating them to think like researchers? From my own experience of being a mature-age doctoral candidate there was one potential supervisor I really wanted on my team because he was an expert on the context in which I was researching. But he was a very, very busy man and, understandably, kept saying he couldn’t take me on as a candidate. However, I knew his expertise would be invaluable so eventually we agreed, given that I had a very supportive team of other supervisors, that he would join the supervisory group on the condition that we would only meet once a semester. These meetings were wonderful. I would prepare very carefully to ensure that every moment counted and as I walked out after my hour of learning I had enough knowledge and enthusiasm to go on with for the next six months. Mind you, this would not have been possible without my other wonderfully supportive and differently skilled supervisory panel members, but it highlights the importance of knowing what you want out of your doctoral education and having the confidence to get it.

Other entries in the book have a clear focus on the concept that becoming a researcher doesn’t just happen in isolation but is located within a globalized environment (for example Chapter 7). In fact, the international nature of the doctorate was a strong theme in many of the chapters, such as Chapters 5 and 6 on networking as well as being reflected in the location of the authors who came from Australasia, North America, Europe, the UK, and Asia. Networking doesn’t come naturally to some, but it is fascinating just how much we rely on “who we know” rather than “what we know” when setting up research projects. One thing I enjoy at conferences is being able to introduce candidates to experts in

the field, often researchers they have been citing, and more importantly, letting the researcher know that there is an early career researcher joining their area of interest.

Another aspect of this book which I really appreciated was the number of times that the positives and negatives of various situations were raised, but, in most cases, such as in Chapter 4, creative suggestions are then made on how to address any negative issues. The concept of thriving, not simply surviving, came through in most of the chapters – a concept dear to my heart. In one way it is easy to make the doctoral experience sound like “a struggle,” something one must “survive” and “conquer” rather than thinking of it as an opportunity to “transform,” “develop,” and “achieve.” I am constantly amazed by the number of times that a candidate will be really frustrated by one of their supervisors, and then a year or two after graduation hear them say something along the lines of “I couldn’t have done it without my supervisor, Tom.” I, in fact, had a similar experience in a masters coursework program where one lecturer drove me nuts during the semester but at the end of the course I was just amazed at what he had challenged me to learn. Gosh, learning is just so “tricky.”

Of particular interest to me as a researcher was the effective use of the research literature in many chapters. Such use reflects, in my mind, the growing body of knowledge we now have related to doctoral education and insights into the huge variation in candidates and supervisors, an issue clearly addressed in clarifying expectations in Chapters 2 and in Chapter 9. No longer is doctoral supervision a cottage industry, but rather a professional and exciting aspect of an academic’s life.

The notion of academia is another theme that was evident in the chapters. While certainly not suggesting that all doctoral graduates will move into academia, there were some very

creative and interesting strategies and ideas put forward for those interested in that future, as well as a future in many of the other professional areas where a doctoral graduate can thrive.

Lastly, a theme in the book that attracted my attention was that of the “others” who support, or sometimes hinder, candidature progress. Certainly, over the past ten years the research on the role and value of peers has grown substantially, as outlined in Chapter 3. In addition, in the book we learn of the importance of the support provided by such services as writing advice, the library, IT, and research skill development. The chapters in this well-crafted book strongly support the idea that it takes a university to graduate a doctoral candidate, not just a supervisor. Having said that, family and friends are absolutely critical. It brought me (and him) to tears when a male colleague undertaking his PhD part-time told me how when he went home the evening that he had submitted his PhD his young son said something like “This is terrific Dad, do you think now you might have time to put up the basketball ring we bought nearly three years ago?” Maintaining family, friends, and physical and mental health are just so important, we are more than just researchers, we are people.

I commend the editor and contributing authors on a very useful “how to” book aimed at assisting potential and current candidates in ensuring that their candidature is successful, fulfilling and rewarding. This is particularly important at a time where there are increasing numbers of candidates enrolling, as well as increasing numbers of graduates who will be employed in roles outside the academy, if they are not already employed in professional positions. I wish them all the best of luck.

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PART I



PREPARATION

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CHAPTER 1

SELECTING A SUPERVISOR

Ms Samantha Marangell, Dr Lilia Mantai
and Dr Mollie Dollinger

INTRODUCTION

A PhD journey can be a surprising, stressful, and satisfying process, and the most influential relationship during that time is undoubtedly with one's supervisor. There are numerous existing resources which discuss important factors a potential PhD student should consider when looking for a possible supervisor, including the supervisor's record and approach, but finding a supervisor with whom you'll have a reciprocal and beneficial relationship takes much more than a simple internet search. This chapter will address some of the less discussed factors that one should look for when selecting a supervisor. To achieve this we will draw on our own PhD experiences. It will help the hopeful PhD student maneuver the uncomfortable – and often overwhelming – waters of selecting a supervisor by pointing out the questions students forget to ask, the character traits they don't think to consider, and examples of supervision selection gone wrong. The four steps below will take you through (1) the often-confusing process of knowing where to start looking; (2) what to ask

when you meet for a phone or in-person interview; (3) examples to consider of types of supervisors that might not work for everyone; and (4) each student's role in the process. With these aspects in mind, you'll be well on your way to selecting the most suitable person with whom to share your PhD journey.

STEP 1: THE SPREADSHEET

A PhD can be three or four years of your life (though often more), and yet, many PhD students rarely spend long deciding on a supervisor. However, time, energy, organization, and even funds are all critical to finding that perfect supervisor. To begin this undertaking, we recommend doing something you will likely do many times during your PhD: open an excel spreadsheet. The headings will need to reflect your personal situation but can include the following:

- country/city;
- institution;
- ranking of institution by your field/discipline;
- name of potential supervisor;
- gender/age (if these things are preferences for you); and
- other notes.

If you already have a few universities in mind, you can start by searching through their list of academics (electronically, of course) to find those that match your field/interests. If you don't have universities selected (or if this isn't as essential to your decision), you can start your search by identifying authors of relevant journal articles in your field.

Once you populate this list with at least 10 potential supervisors you'll already begin to be able to see how they compare on paper. While the personality of your supervisor is important, and will be discussed in this chapter shortly, it's not the only deciding factor. Are you willing to move countries or cities? How much does the ranking of institution matter to you? Do you prefer to work with a younger female or an older male? These are questions of personal taste and preferences that should be carefully considered.

However, the most critical aspects of your decision will be less easy to record, and you'll likely need to do some investigating. For example, you may also want to include a heading on "current projects." To find this, try looking for their CV or personal website. You'll want to make sure their current projects align to your area, as often they may have studied a relevant topic 10 years ago, but it is not their focus anymore.

From current projects, you should also be able to begin to ascertain their funding base. Do they have national three to five year projects? Have they partnered with industry? Do they have any newspaper articles or media coverage on their research? All of this is most likely ideal. However, depending on who you are, it is also possible that this is the exact opposite of what you want. Some students prefer "high-flying" supervisors. The benefit to this is often more attention from others ("oh, you work with Professor Smith?!") and more connections when it comes time to publish or apply for jobs. However, the downside to this is you may get less face time and their feedback might be more superficial, as these are often very busy people. Another indicator of their success will be their *h-index*. Anyone above a 20 is a true voice in their field. If they are between 10 and 20, they may be up-and-comers (depending on the stage of their career). If they are less than 10,

they are likely just starting out and may serve you better as a co-supervisor. (Search for *h-index* using Google Scholar, though some older academics may not have a profile set up.)

Also, if you can afford it, it is a great idea to go to a conference where they are speaking, even with just a day pass (you can also offer to volunteer if you're a student). Try to see their session if you can, but also ask around about them. Ideally, see if you can pick up on their reputation. Do a lot of people know them? Did people seem impressed by their work? For a cheaper option, you can also try following them on Twitter or other social media to see if some of their personality begins to shine through. However, do not be too quick to judge; nothing replaces a face-to-face conversation for gauging whether you'll enjoy working with them for years (maybe even a lifetime). Which brings us to ...

STEP 2: CONVERSATIONS OVER COFFEE

Congratulations! By now you should have a handful of potential supervisors. This could be where your process ends. If you don't have a real opportunity to meet or have a phone call, trust your shortlisting process and hope for the best.

However, working with people in any context is an unpredictable adventure. Even if you think you and your supervisor of choice look like the perfect match on paper, you never know how you'll get along in person. So, we strongly recommend you find a way to meet with or at least talk to the people on your shortlist.

Ideally you will meet with them several times before you sign up to be supervised by them. The meetings will help you to assess what kind of people they are, how they work, and,

importantly, how they work with others (it could be you next!). These first meetings are all about asking the right questions to help you paint a picture of what the next few years with this person may be like. Questions you could ask in your first conversations (over coffee perhaps):

- What was your own experience of supervision like? *(Chances are they will do either the same or the opposite; you may be able to judge by the tone.)*
- What was your own PhD experience like? *(Again, you may be able to judge by their tone if they want you to have the same experience or not. It will probably tell you quite a bit about who they are, what their priorities are, and how they work, too.)*
- Who are the theorists/philosophers/researchers/writers who you found influential to your life and work? *(Ask this only if you are this way inclined and have already formed a bit of a view on theories and theorists that you'd like to influence your own work.)*
- What do you think are the top three success factors in the PhD? *(This will tell you an enormous amount and what they'll expect you to prioritize in your PhD experience, as well.)*
- What was your experience with previous PhD students, if you have had any?
- What would you expect from me (e.g., coming on campus every day, frequency of communication/meetings)?

Once you've gotten responses to these answers, you'll need to consider which aspects are more important to you than others. Consider the topics below, for example.

Age versus Experience?

You may have made up your mind on this in the shortlisting process, but if you are still unsure, we would recommend striking a good balance between the two. You may want a young supervisor who can relate to your concerns and with whom you can easily connect. However, when it comes to resolving a conflict, paperwork, politics, seniority, and so on, you may be better placed with an experienced or fairly well-established supervisor.

Availability?

This is a simple but very important consideration. Check with them about their mobility plans over the next few years. Do they plan on taking a sabbatical, a longer period for off-site study or research, parenting or long-service leave? Are they looking to change universities or even countries maybe? Can they fit you in with other PhD students they may have? Also consider their regular, weekly schedule. Are they often on campus or do they spend much time elsewhere? It's valuable to know where they spend their time and how long they plan on being around.

What Do Their Past and Present Supervisees Say about Them?

If you have a chance, check out the past PhD completions of your shortlisted supervisors. This information is often available on institutional websites. Past completions are a good sign that your potential supervisor is capable of getting someone through and is familiar with all the procedures and paperwork that are involved in the process.