

10 truths a PhD supervisor will never tell you

THE timeshighereducation.com/features/10-truths-a-phd-supervisor-will-never-tell-you/2005513.article

July 10, 2013



My father used to tell a joke, over and over again. It was a classic outback Australian, Slim Dusty joke that – like the best dad jokes – I can't remember. But I do recall the punchline. "Who called the cook a bastard?" To which the answer was, "Who called the bastard a cook?"

This riposte often comes to mind during discussions about doctoral supervision and candidature management. Discussions go on (and on and on) about quality, rigour, ethics and preparedness. Postgraduates are monitored, measured and ridiculed for their lack of readiness or their slow progress towards completion. But inconsistencies and problems with supervisors and supervision are marginalised. In response, I think of my father's one-liner: Who called the supervisor a bastard? Who called the bastard a supervisor?

To my mind, I never received any satisfactory, effective or useful supervision for my doctorate, research master's or two coursework master's that contained sizeable dissertation components. I found the supervisors remote and odd. A couple of them tried to block the submission of the theses to my institution. Indeed, on three separate occasions in my career, academics informed me that if I submitted this thesis, it would fail. The results that followed these warnings were a master of arts passed with distinction, a master of education with first-

class honours and a dean's award, and a PhD passed without correction. I was left with the impression that these supervisors had no idea what they were doing. The worst supervisors share three unforgivable characteristics:

1. They do not read your writing
2. They never attend supervisory meetings
3. They are selfish, career-obsessed bastards

I am now an experienced supervisor and examiner, but I still remember my own disappointments. For the doctoral students who follow, I want to activate and align these personal events with the candidatures I have managed since that time. Particularly, I wish to share with the next generation of academics some lessons that I have learned about supervisors.

Explore PhD and early career jobs

As a prospective PhD student, you are precious. Institutions want you – they gain funding, credibility and profile through your presence. Do not let them treat you like an inconvenient, incompetent fool. Do your research. Ask questions. Use these 10 truths to assist your decision.



1. The key predictor of a supervisor's ability to guide a postgraduate to completion is a good record of having done so

Ensure that at least one member of your supervisory team is a very experienced supervisor. Anyone can be appointed to supervise. Very few have the ability, persistence, vision, respect and doggedness to move a diversity of students through the examination process. Ensure that the department and university you are considering assign supervisors on the basis of intellectual ability rather than available workload. Supervising students to completion is incredibly difficult. The final few months require complete commitment from both supervisor and postgraduate. Make sure that you are being guided by a supervisor who understands the nature of effective supervision and has proved it through successful completions.

2. You choose the supervisor. Do not let the institution overrule your choice

As a postgraduate who is about to dedicate three or four years to an institution, you have the right to select a supervisor with whom you feel comfortable. Yet increasingly, as the postgraduate bureaucracy in universities increases, administrators and managers “match” a prospective candidate with a supervisor. Do not let this happen. Do research on the available staff. Talk directly with individual academics. Ascertain their willingness to supervise you, and then inform the graduate centre or faculty graduate administrators of their commitment.

3. Stars are attractive but may be distant. Pick a well-regarded supervisor who does not spend too much time away

It may seem a tough, unusual or impossible task to find a supervisor who has a strong profile but rarely goes away on research leave or disappears to attend conferences. Postgraduates need to be supervised by people with an international reputation whose name carries weight when they write references. But they must not be jet-setting professors, frequently leaving the campus and missing supervisory meetings to advance their own career. They must be established and well known, but available to supervise you rather than continually declining your requests for meetings because they are travelling to Oslo, Luanda or Hong Kong.

4. Bureaucratic immunity is vital. Look for a supervisor who will protect you from ‘the system’

There is an excessive amount of university doctoral administration. I understand and welcome the value in checking the ethical expenditure of public money; a programme of study submitted in the first year and an annual progress report through the candidature will accomplish this task. But now we have to deliver milestone reports, public confirmations of candidature sessions, biannual progress reports, annual oral presentations of research and – in some universities – complete a form that must be signed off at the conclusion of every supervisory meeting.

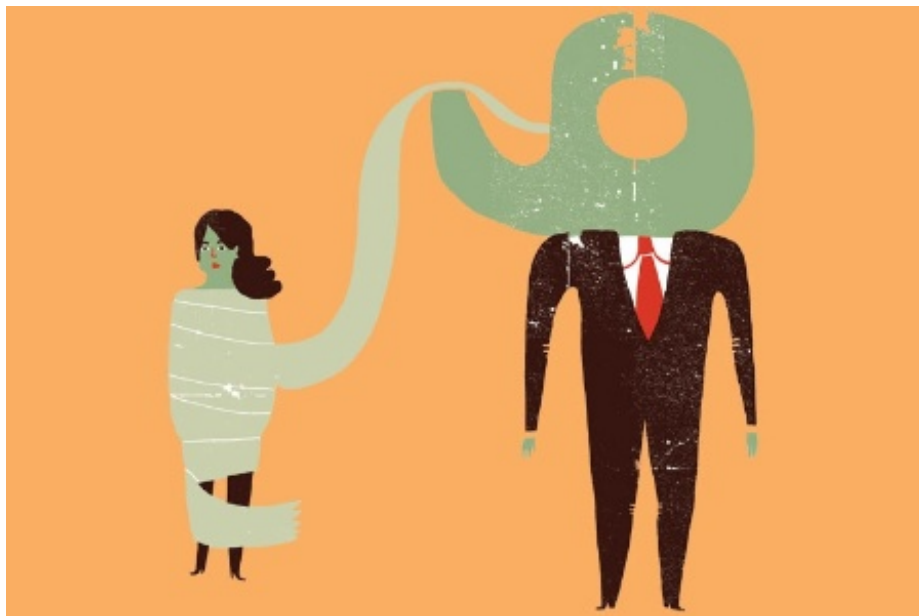
Every moment a student is filling in a form is one less moment they are reading a book or article, or writing a key page in their doctorate. Time is finite. Bureaucracy is infinite. A good supervisor will protect you from the excesses of supervisory administration.

The irony of many graduate centres is that they initiate incredibly high demands on students and supervisors yet are incredibly lax during crucial periods of the candidature when a rapid administrative response is required. One of my postgraduates had to wait 16 months for a decision on her doctorate. Two examiners had returned timely reports and passed with minor corrections. The third academic, however, did not examine the thesis, did not submit any paperwork and did not respond to any communications. I sent email after email – made phone call after phone call – to the graduate centre trying to facilitate a resolution to this examination. Finally, after a rather intensive period of nagging, a decision was reached to accept the two reports and no longer wait for the third. The question remains – why did the graduate centre take 16 months to make this decision? If I had not phoned and emailed administrators, would

they have forgotten about this student? A good supervisor must be an advocate for the postgraduate through the increasingly bureaucratised doctoral candidature.

5. Byline bandits abound. Study a potential supervisor's work

Does your prospective supervisor write with PhD students? Good. Do they write almost exclusively with their PhD students? Not so good – in fact, alarm bells should start ringing. Supervision is a partnership. If your prospective supervisor appears to be adding his or her name to students' publications and writing very little independently, be concerned. Some supervisors claim co-authorship of every publication written during the candidature. Do not think that this is right, assumed, proper or the default setting. The authorship of papers should be discussed. My rule is clear: if I write it, it is mine. If you write it, it is yours. If we write it together, we share the authorship. It is important that every postgraduate finishes the candidature with as many publications as possible. Ask supervisors how they will enhance and facilitate your research and publishing career. Remember, you are a PhD student. Your supervisor should assist you to become an independent scholar, not make you into their unpaid research assistant.



6. Be wary of co-supervisors

Most institutions insist on at least two supervisors for every student. This system was introduced not for scholarly reasons but to allay administrative fears. There is a concern that a supervisor might leave the institution, stranding the student, or that the supervisor and student might have a disagreement, again leaving the student without support.

These arguments are like grounding all aircraft because there are occasional crashes. Too often I see an academic “added” to the team to beef up his or her workload. I have been in a university meeting where research-active professors were “added” to a supervisory panel not because they were excellent supervisors (far from it) but rather because they needed to boost their profile for the research assessment exercise.

Certainly there are many occasions where a co-supervisor is incredibly valuable, but this must be determined by their research contribution to the topic rather than by institutional convenience. I once supervised a fine thesis about Russian television. I had the expertise in television studies; a colleague held expertise in Russian studies and the Russian language. It was a great team. We met weekly as a group, with specialist meetings held with either of us as required to complete the doctorate. The candidate submitted in the minimum time.

At times, an inexperienced co-supervisor is added to a team to gain “experience”. That is, perhaps, understandable. But damage can be done to students through bad advice. I know of a disturbing case in which an inexperienced co-supervisor chose a relatively junior friend to examine a doctorate. Before the senior co-supervisor had been informed, this prospective external examiner had been approached and had agreed, and the paperwork had been submitted. Two years later, the candidate is still progressing with corrections. Each time he submits revisions that supposedly verify the concerns expressed during the oral examination, he is presented with another list because the inexperienced supervisor agreed to “corrections to the satisfaction of the examiner”. This problem was caused by an overconfident but inexperienced co-supervisor being added to the team and then going on to appoint an overconfident but inexperienced examiner.

Sometimes – in fact frequently – less is more. A strong relationship with a well-qualified, experienced and committed supervisor will ensure that the postgraduate will produce a strong thesis with minimum delay.

7. A supervisor who is active in the area of your doctorate can help to turbocharge your work

Occasionally students select a “name” rather than a “name in the field”. The appropriateness of a supervisor’s field of research is critical because it can save you considerable time. Supervisors who are reading, thinking and writing in the field can locate a gap in your scholarly literature and – at speed – provide you with five names to lift that section. A generalist will not be able to provide this service. As the length of candidatures – or more precisely the financial support for candidatures – shrinks and three years becomes the goal, your supervisor can save you time through sharing not only their experience but also their expertise.

8. A candidature that involves teaching can help to get a career off the ground

In Australia, teaching with your supervisor is often the default pattern, and it is a good one. In the UK, tutoring is less likely to emerge because of budgetary restraints. But a postgraduate who does not teach through the candidature is unprepared to assume a full-time teaching post. Many doctoral candidates are already academics and are returning to study. Others work in a diversity of professions and have no intention of taking a job in a university. Therefore, this “truth” is not relevant. But for those seeking a career in academia who intend to use the doctorate as a springboard, teaching experience is crucial. A postgraduate may see themselves as a serious researcher. But it is teaching that will get them their first post (and

probably their second and third). The ultimate supervisor is also an outstanding teacher who will train their postgraduates in writing curricula, managing assessment and creating innovative learning moments in a classroom. None of these skills is required for or developed by a doctorate. You can be supervised well without these teaching experiences. However, if you have a choice, select the supervisor who can “add value” to your candidature.

One of my proudest moments emerged in a tutors’ meeting for my large first-year course at Murdoch University: creative industries. I apologised to my tutors for the hard work and low pay that was a characteristic of sessional university employment. Mike Kent – who is now Dr Mike Kent and a tenured lecturer in internet studies at Curtin University – stated that the pay was an extra. He was being trained to teach. That was the value from the process. I still think tutors should be paid more, but I valued – and value – Mike’s insight.

9. Weekly supervisory meetings are the best pattern

There are two realities of candidature management. First, the longer the candidature, the less likely you are to finish. Second, a postgraduate who suspends from a candidature is less likely to submit a doctorate.

The key attribute of students who finish is that they are passionately connected to their thesis and remain engaged with their research and their supervisor. I have always deployed weekly meetings as the best pattern for supervision to nurture this connection.

There are reasons for this. Some postgraduates lack time-management skills and would prefer to be partying, facebooking or tweeting, rather than reading, thinking and writing. If students know that written work is expected each week, and they have to sit in an office with a supervisor who is evaluating their work, that stress creates productive writing and research. So if a meeting is held on a Thursday, then on Tuesday a student panics and does some work. Yet if meetings are fortnightly, this stress-based productivity is halved. It is better to provide a tight accountability structure for students. Weekly meetings accomplish this task.

10. Invest your trust only in decent and reliable people who will repay it, not betray it

This truth may seem self-evident. But supervisors – like all academics – are people first. If the prospective supervisor needs a personality replacement, lacks the life skills to manage a trip to the supermarket or requires electronic tagging so that he (or she) does not sleep with the spouses of colleagues, then make another choice. Supervisors should be functional humans. They can be – and should be – quirky, imaginative and original. That non-standard thinking will assist your project. But if there is a whiff of social or sexual impropriety, or if there are challenges with personal hygiene, back away in a hurry. At times during your candidature you will have to rely on this person. You will be sobbing in their office. You will need to lean on them. You must have the belief that they can help you through a crisis and not manipulate you during a moment of vulnerability.

I knew a supervisor whose idea of supervision was a once-a-semester meeting in a bar where he would order three bottles of red wine and start drinking. The meeting ended when the wine finished. Another supervisor selected his postgraduates on the likelihood that the students would sleep with him. Yet another was so completely fixated by her version of feminism that all the doctorates completed under her supervision ended up looking incredibly similar. Any deviation from a particular political perspective would result in screaming matches in her office. This was not only unpleasant but destructive to the students' careers.

The key truth and guiding principle is evident

Do not select a supervisor who needs you more than you need him or her. Gather information. Arm yourself with these 10 truths. Ask questions. Make a choice with insight, rather than respond – with gratitude – to the offer of a place or supervision.

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