

**SURVIVING** and  
**THRIVING**  
in **ACADEMIA**

# SUPERVISING DOCTORAL CANDIDATES



EDITED BY  
CHRIS ROLPH

# SUPERVISING DOCTORAL CANDIDATES

*Surviving and Thriving in Academia* provides short, accessible books for navigating the many challenges, responsibilities and opportunities of academic careers. This series is particularly dedicated to supporting the professional journeys of early- and mid-career academics and doctoral students, but will present books of use to scholars at all stages in their careers. Books within this series draw on real-life examples from international scholars, offering practical advice and a supportive and encouraging tone throughout.

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**CHRIS ROLPH**

*Nottingham Trent University, UK*



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# INTRODUCTION

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This book has been written by 22 authors from 11 countries on 5 continents. It is deliberately and necessarily eclectic, seeking neither to generalise from specific examples nor to normalise to a meaningless average. Instead, it presents glimpses of the richness that abounds in doctoral supervision around the globe. Despite the diversity and difference, there are common threads – one being the notion of the journey made by doctoral candidates and the guiding nature of supervisors who walk alongside their protégés every step of the way. Almost every chapter picks up this recurring motif, along with the implications of stamina and struggle, dark valleys, monotonous plains and joyous mountaintop moments. The contents are arranged in an approximation of this journey, noting key milestones along the way.

Given the range of contexts and disciplines from which contributors speak there are diverse institutional regulations which apply to doctoral study, and consequently variations in the language that is used. Authors speak from personal experience but have generally avoided discussing location-specific structures and practices, and stuck to UK conventions for labelling: thesis (rather than dissertation) for the written work,

and academic colleagues rather than faculty. We often use the generic term *doctoral candidates* in recognition of the variety of doctorates and types of student; the ambition is to be inclusive of full- and part-time studies, professional and distance doctorates, as well as the more traditional PhD. It will be for readers to decide if and how much the examples in these chapters can be applied to their own particular situations.

We hope that our readers will include early career academics: those colleagues who are finding their feet in the academic world and, in all likelihood, have only recently been awarded their own doctorate. A longstanding but unwritten assumption of the academy has been that the experience of being supervised through a doctorate is both necessary and sufficient for someone to take on doctoral candidates and become a supervisor themselves. In recent years universities have begun to pay more attention to the quality of teaching and learning, and the support their students are given, provoked to some degree by neoliberal quality metrics – but this has mainly revolved around the huge undergraduate population. The experiences of doctoral candidates, and the skills and qualities that are needed in their supervisors, have received much less attention, though the moral imperative is no less.

Even for skilled and experienced lecturers, the pedagogy of 1:1 (or 2:1) supervision may present new challenges, as they will need to be guide, mentor, expert, critic, coach and more as the doctoral study progresses. Our hope is that the chapters that follow will help academic colleagues to approach supervision with a recognition of the breadth of practice that exists, along with examples and suggestions that may promote and provoke their own professional development. This is not a handbook or definitive guide, but a collection of insights that are intended to be illustrative and supportive. The doctorate may be the highest accredited qualification one can achieve,

but it does not represent an end to the learning process. On the contrary, taking the next step and supervising doctoral students can itself present a steep learning curve, and we hope this book will provide some support to those taking on that challenge.

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# IDENTIFYING THE TOPIC AT THE START OF THE RESEARCH JOURNEY

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How does a student choose a topic for a graduate or doctoral thesis? And how can academics be good supervisors, guiding the student throughout the process of researching and writing their chosen topic? These are questions that should interest both the supervisor and the potential candidate. Each of them approaches from their own point of view, but ultimately only a common path can lead to a good outcome. There are two approaches that we can apply and analyse when choosing a topic for a graduate or doctoral thesis. One is from the supervisor, and the other is from the student – the doctoral candidate – but both approaches are equally important.

In choosing a particular study programme, we have already decided on our specific professional path to a certain degree. We choose our academic pathway according to our wishes, interests, or perhaps other incentives that might be family inheritance, financial circumstances, or even strategically according to the requirements of the labour market. The reason we choose certain academic institutions may have

roots in our childhood. Maybe we don't always see the links between childhood and growing up, but if you consider the games you played as a child, there might already be indications of the profession you have chosen. From my personal experience, this hypothesis was certainly true. As a child, I always pretended to be a teacher, a dentist or a pharmacist. Today, I am a teacher, I graduated in biology and chemistry and I work in the Teacher Education Department. Close analysis shows that the scientific fields of all these professions are very closely related, and what was once my childhood game is now my profession.

We say that we are born with character, but also with predispositions and inclinations, and perhaps somewhere in our DNA there are genes that predispose us towards future occupations. The genetic structure, our genotype, guides us through life and determines the paths we will choose privately and professionally. Of course, not everything is so simple: environmental factors are equally important, sometimes even decisive, and they are likely to prevail over internal ones. We should therefore take account of life and family situations, including the potential financial situations of ourselves and our parents, which ultimately shape our life path. Some of us will follow the professional path of our parents, continuing the family tradition, so it is not unusual for children in the family of doctors to decide to study medicine, or for others to grow up with the knowledge that one day they will take over the leadership of the family business. All of this may or may not have an impact on our choice of study and ultimately our thesis topic. However, it is not out of the question to recall these events from early childhood and look for a link with present-day preferences, ambitions and desires. The root of this thinking can be found in rational choice theory. This theory is often also called rational action theory or choice theory, and it is based on the assumption that a person

chooses a path that best suits his personality and personal preferences. Each academic programme offers several options, and you will choose the one that will primarily be based on your interests and desires, but also on your competencies and abilities. Writing a PhD thesis will take more than several months. If there is a need to conduct research or do experimental work in the laboratory, we will need even more time. That is why it is extremely important that the chosen topic is from an area that truly interests and motivates PhD candidates to move forward especially in difficult moments.

Throughout life, people of the same or similar character and mindset, similar life philosophy and interests, are attracted to one another and happy to socialise together. Similarly, on our doctoral journey, we will probably choose a supervisor that fits these criteria. It can be assumed that a common-interest research area is the starting point for the doctoral candidate and supervisor collaboration, but personality and personal approach to work, ways of solving problems and finding solutions are of great importance too. However, the supervisor's perceptions of the interested candidate are no less important: how well the supervisor gets to know the student during classes, and whether the student is thought to be a good PhD candidate. The research results and the presentation during the viva voce will speak for the team – the candidate and the supervisors, so mutual confidence is important.

If this were an easy process, everyone would be doing it. As everyone who has supervised a student knows, managing a graduate or doctoral thesis is a very responsible and demanding process. The first conversation between the supervisor and the doctoral candidate is extremely important. It is a conversation where the supervisor and the candidate not only get to know each other personally but also evaluate each other. They both wonder if this cooperation will succeed, if it

will go smoothly or if it will encounter problems and complications on its way. Anyone who thinks that everything will go smoothly is very much mistaken. In everything of value, everything that you put effort into, it is normal to expect obstacles that need to be understood as challenges which make you better, even more persistent and dedicated to your goal.

A conversation in a pleasant environment, outside the classroom, which is relaxed and informal, brings new insights where both the supervisor and the candidate create a completely new image of each other. It is important to be honest and talk openly. This applies to both the candidate and the supervisor. Through conversation, it is very important for the supervisor to find out which areas the doctoral candidate is interested in, otherwise, if he assigns a topic that is neither attractive nor interesting to the candidate, the desired result of a well-written thesis, submitted on time, will be missing. Every supervisor has a wide range of topics in their area of teaching, and expertise to offer to an interested doctoral candidate. During initial conversations, the supervisor should ask for the doctoral candidate's opinion on topics of future research, to begin to understand their vision and aspirations. This is the time to discuss the thesis proposal. With an open but intense conversation, the path for future research together can be established. The supervisor should follow the interests and desires of the doctoral candidate, which will influence and increase enthusiasm and motivation for future work, and the implementation of research will be simpler and more pleasant, which ultimately facilitates the writing and publication of a potential paper.

During our years of education, we acquire a wide range of knowledge, skills and abilities, and we meet professors with different profiles, professions and teaching methods. That is why it is extremely important to think about future paths as

the time to choose the doctoral topic approaches, as this will lead to someone's professional development. Ultimately, that choice will mark their professional career, and consequently will have a great impact on their private life and family as well. At the first meeting with a potential doctoral candidate, we should initiate this conversation. Undergraduate study offers a wide range of topics and research for students to engage in. Graduate study begins to direct and narrows that choice, while a doctoral thesis is concrete and focused, and makes the author an expert in a specific field. Thinking about choosing a topic should be profound, and strategically planned, but on the other hand also relaxing because stress and pressure can cause dissatisfaction and even anxiety and consequently lead us in a completely different direction.

That second direction doesn't necessarily have to be wrong, but it may be more difficult, more demanding, or simply not suit our character, abilities or desires. There are individuals who know exactly what they want to do as adults and from the beginning of their education, and they tread that marked path – but it is not uncommon for someone to have interests in several different areas of research. There are those who will follow trends, current or attractive events, or labour market demands, and consequently choose a topic that doesn't fit their personality, abilities or skills, though they will see opportunity for prosperity and advancement. This is a path full of challenges, and therefore more demanding in terms of commitment, dedication and constant learning. Indeed, there are self-assessment mechanisms which help students to choose the right path that matches their current desires, interests and needs, but we must not forget that their future occupation should also bring satisfaction and an incentive for constant improvement and advancement. The worst option would be for a candidate to choose a topic that they think they *ought* to choose. They may do so because a topic is current, or because

it is controversial, or because people close to them think they should deal with it. Before deciding on such a topic, it is definitely advisable that the candidate makes a list of terms and concepts that can be associated with the possible topic and compare them with their wishes and interests. Supervisors should advise a candidate to take the time to compile such a list. It should not be done in 5 minutes or half an hour, but in relaxing moments, without pressure and stress, considering previous education, previous activities and projects the candidate enjoyed participating in, but also imagining where the candidate sees themselves in 5 or 10 years. Hasty decisions are not good.

Before the final decision on a future candidate's thesis topic, it is important for the supervisor to have space and time to decide in which direction they will lead and supervise a doctoral candidate. One of the first steps should definitely be to decide on the field you want your doctoral candidate to work in. This should certainly be a unique topic, but also a topic that will give both the supervisor and the doctoral candidate an opportunity to grow in a professional partnership. As a person with some experience, the supervisor should ask if this topic will be relevant in 5 or 10 years. After the supervisor makes a decision about the right topic, the first assignment for the PhD candidate is to find out what is known so far about that particular topic. The results of this research and the conclusions obtained should be critically and logically analysed by both the supervisor and doctoral candidate. As a team, they should think about how research results will be quoted in the future, whether they will be appropriate for and accepted in the academic community, and what impact their results might have on society or the economy.

A PhD student is often expected to attend workshops, seminars or scientific conferences. These are extraordinary opportunities to network with colleagues and experts from the

chosen field, and they also open up new opportunities for candidate's professional development. A good supervisor should be able to offer these possibilities to his doctoral candidate. PhD students should invest time and inform themselves in any possible ways that the supervisor considers relevant. Another important thing to consider is how much a doctoral candidate's research could contribute to new knowledge in that particular field. That's the time to create a new list of keywords that represent future concepts you want to explore more closely and deeply. Read them together, then use the brainstorming method to expand this area and finally come to an answer, is the topic well chosen for your PhD candidate?

Here are some pieces of advice that supervisors should give doctoral candidates before the final decision on choosing the PhD thesis:

- If a doctoral candidate hesitates on a proposed thesis topic, it can be helpful for them to make a list of PROS and CONS. Writing this list will prompt thoughts about what can be new knowledge can be gained by venturing into an area that may be hitherto unknown, which certainly represents a challenge. Challenges are what motivates us and candidates may discover a completely new self, a new person, new passions, new interests that will motivate them to make even greater strides in their professional life. Once a candidate decides on a particular topic, if they don't feel satisfied and excited about this choice and decision, something is wrong. Once the supervisor and doctoral candidate have agreed about choosing a topic, the candidate should feel excited for one of two possible reasons. They might be excited about the selection because they will be doing something that they sincerely love, and that will push them forward so tasks will be more easily completed. In this case,

they are likely to tackle challenges enthusiastically, knowing that this brings the goals and ambitions closer. Alternatively, the candidate may be excited because they have embarked on a path that may not be a particular favourite, but which offers the possibility of employment and well-paid work.

- Do not forget that the chosen topic thesis will be in the candidate's CV. When hiring, the thesis will be important to a potential employer, especially if it is closely or directly related to the employer's area of work. This can increase potential chances of getting a job, especially if a person has no work experience. Employers are always interested in young people ready for challenges, eager for further learning and improvement, where subject knowledge, skills and competences, as well as presentation skills, are extremely important. Therefore, it is important when searching for a topic, to think about the candidate's research skills that they may need for a future job. These skills can be acquired by working, for example, as a teaching or laboratory assistant, or demonstrator at a university, and even by volunteering in organisations of different profiles. Students should not turn down such opportunities because they offer the chance to become familiar with the methodology and institutional organisation, develop new skills, and gain invaluable experience. In the end, employers always prefer people who have some work experience. Also, candidates should research the labour market to find out which professions and profiles are in demand. This may not be the ultimate factor, but it certainly should not be ignored. Ultimately, we all work for money that will provide us and our families with a decent life, and doing a job that is unfulfilling brings dissatisfaction that is often reflected in private life – though sometimes it is