

## ON BECOMING A RESEARCH STUDENT

This book is a handbook and a survival manual for PhD students. If you are intending to embark on a research degree it will introduce you to the system and, by increasing your understanding, help you to improve your choice of university, college, department and supervisor.

If you have just picked this book up and you are already a research student, then you should read it thoroughly – and hang on to it so that you can refer to it frequently. You will need to do this because we shall be discussing the skills and processes that are crucial to obtaining the PhD degree.

If you are a supervisor, or contemplating becoming one, the book is highly relevant to you too, because it deals with the educational processes that it is your responsibility to encourage for the successful completion of your students' research degrees.

If you are a senior academic administrator, the relevance of this book is that it provides a guide to procedures and systems concerned with research degrees which will enable you to evaluate the adequacy of the provision your university is making for research students.

The book focuses on process issues which are not discipline-specific. It cannot help you to design an investigation or an experiment as these activities require professional knowledge of your particular field. Similarly it does not deal with the financial difficulties of doctoral students, which will vary considerably depending on your circumstances. Nor does it consider factors impinging on you after you have completed your course such as the employment options available to PhDs. (Delamont and Atkinson 2004 discuss developing a postdoctoral research career.)

But the book does suggest that you ponder on some basic questions

before embarking on a course of study leading to the PhD degree. Do you want to spend three to four years of your life doing research on one topic? Will you be satisfied to live on a student grant for that time? Are you committed to a PhD or would a professional doctorate (e.g. EdD, EngD) suit you better? (The differences are discussed on pp. 196ff. of this book.) Are you able to tolerate regular periods of intellectual loneliness when only you are responsible for producing 'creative thoughts'? It is vital that you give a firm 'yes' in answer to all those questions. You must make the decision to study and work for your doctorate based on the sure knowledge that it is the right thing for *you*. If what you really want is to write a bestseller, then conducting research for a thesis is *not* the optimum way to go about it. Perhaps you don't really know what you want to do with the rest of your life and continuing in the university system seems a good way of putting off that decision. If this is so then you have chosen an extremely difficult way of solving your particular problem.

### ■ The nature of doctoral education

Acquiring the skills and understanding the processes necessary for success cannot be done at a single reading. As a research student you need continually to use the ideas in this book to develop your own insight into your own situation. In this way your professional learning will develop as it should – under your own management.

'Under your own management' is the key to the nature of doctoral education. In undergraduate education a great deal, in academic terms, is organized for the student. It may not have seemed like that to you at the time, because you were required to do a considerable amount of work, but, for example, syllabuses were laid down, textbooks were specified, practical sessions were designed, the examinations were organized to cover a set range of topics in questions of a known form, and so on. You could quite reasonably have complained if asked about an extraneous subject, 'But no one told me that I was supposed to learn that topic (or methodology or theory or historical period).' For the most part you were following an academic course set by your teachers.

In doctoral education, you have to take responsibility for managing your learning and for getting yourself a PhD. Of course, there will be people around to help you: – your supervisor(s), other academics in your department, fellow students and so on. Some of them will even tell you what, in their opinion, you have to do to obtain the degree, but the responsibility for determining what is required, as well as for carrying it out, remains firmly with you. And if it turns out that you need a particular topic or theory for your work, then it is no excuse to say, 'But nobody told me it was relevant.' It is your responsibility.

So you will not be traversing a set course laid out by others. You will be expected to initiate discussions, ask for the help that you need, argue about what you should be learning, and so on. You are under self-management, so it is no use sitting around waiting for somebody to tell you what to do next or, worse, complaining that nobody is telling you what to do next; in the postgraduate world these are opportunities, not deficiencies.

The overall university framework for research students ensures that there is a basic similarity for all doctoral candidates as they progress through their studies. But there are also some notable differences between the research cultures of university disciplines, particularly between the culture of the laboratory-based sciences and that of the humanities and social sciences. To a considerable extent they stem from the large capital investment in equipment and materials required in scientific research.

Supervisors in science have to take the lead in obtaining the physical resources and the research personnel required. A studentship may be allocated and a doctoral student recruited specifically to work on a designated line of research. In this situation the 'apprenticeship' aspect of being a doctoral student is emphasized. The student's research topic will be clearly defined to fit in with the innovative thrust of the supervisor's research programme, and this will set limits to the level of research creativity that can be shown. The student will be required to do 'dogsbody' work in the laboratory or on the computer as part of professional training. In these situations there develops what might be called a 'joint ownership' of the doctoral research between supervisors and the students. Supervisors will have a strong interest in getting the research work done and using the results obtained. Joint papers will be the norm. The danger to watch for in this culture is the exploitation of the student, leading to the feeling of being just an extra pair of hands for the supervisors' research. It must be remembered that there has to be a sufficient amount of autonomy for the student to be able to make an original contribution. It is this which justifies the award of the PhD degree.

In contrast, in the humanities and the social sciences students often come with their own topics within the field in which the supervisor is expert, and academics give a service of research supervision. Being busy people, supervisors often have to ration the amount of attention they can give. Research supervision has to compete with the supervisor's own current research (which can be considerably different), undergraduate teaching and administration. Supervisors will have only a general interest in the results of the student's research, and will act more as role models than as apprentice-masters. The danger to watch for in this culture is the neglect of the student for long periods of weeks, months, even years. It must be remembered that students need the regular support of supervisors if they are to develop sufficiently to achieve the PhD degree.

These descriptions are of extreme situations; there are many shades of grey in between. There are scientists who give an individual service to their doctoral students and social scientists who build up a team of students all working on related aspects of the same topic. You must work to understand the situation into which you are entering.

In recent years universities have found that it is not in a student's best interest to rely on only one supervisor for each student. Supervisory teams with two or three members are being established in many departments, with a lead (or main) supervisor and one or two associate supervisors. This team must contain a subject specialist and someone responsible for pastoral support. The team system can allow for new supervisors to learn how to supervise more effectively under the guidance of an experienced member of the department. Others involved in supervision, perhaps at times of upgrading or controversy, might be the departmental head and the research tutor.

### ■ The psychology of being a research student

New research students enter the system determined to make an outstanding contribution to their subject. By the time they start the final stages of thesis-writing for the degree they are determined to 'get it and forget it!' During the intervening years their enthusiasm has been dampened by the demands of having to concentrate on a specific topic and conduct routine and repetitive tasks in an atmosphere where nobody seems either to understand or to care about their work.

They come into the university or college knowing precisely who they are: successful and intelligent holders of well-earned qualifications. It is not long before they lose their initial confidence and begin to question their own self-image. This is the result of contacts (no matter how sporadic or from what distance) with academic discourse. Such contacts could come from members of staff, postgraduates who are further into their research than the first-year students, and papers published in journals or presented at conferences. These challenge the assumptions and conceptions that the young graduates had accepted as inviolable. From this period of self-doubt and questioning, the successful postgraduates emerge with a new identity as competent professionals, able to argue their viewpoint with anybody regardless of status, confident of their own knowledge but also aware of its boundaries. This new identity permits them to ask for information when they are aware that they don't know something and to express a lack of understanding when this is necessary, instead of pretending that there is no difficulty for fear of being thought stupid. To arrive at this point is what being a postgraduate research student is really all about.

## ■ The aims of this book

The necessity for personal academic initiative is the key cultural change that doctoral students will encounter compared with their undergraduate days. It requires a different style of operation, which is why it is not sufficient just to state the issue as we did in the previous sections. Students need information and insights to develop the capacity to operate successfully in the postgraduate environment. We have seen many students take long periods (one year or even two!) in adjusting to the environment, at considerable jeopardy to the achievement of their doctorates. Some students never come to terms with it and go away indignant, bitter – and without PhDs.

All new postgraduates have to be prepared to unlearn and rethink many of the doctrines which they have had to accept up to this point in their student career. A vital aspect of this rethinking is to take the initiative in discussing with your supervisor the whole range of your ideas, including any that might even appear to be ‘off-beat’ or ‘illegitimate’ but may in fact turn out to be surprisingly useful leads.

The first aim of this book is to explore such issues in a realistic way in order to help you understand and achieve the tasks necessary to complete the PhD successfully. Our second complementary aim is to help supervisory practice in managing the process better. The third aim is to put the whole activity in its context, since the recognition by universities of their institutional responsibilities in improving the effectiveness of doctoral education is a key factor in promoting necessary change.

In attempting to achieve these aims we shall be drawing on our experience in doctoral supervision and our systematic research into PhD education. We give real-life examples of students and their supervisors. The ratio of men to women in the illustrations is consistent with that in higher education today and covers a range of faculties including Arts, Business Studies, Science, Social Science, and Technology. We shall be examining the characteristics of the educational system, the nature of the PhD qualification, psychological aspects of the PhD process, and how to manage your supervisor, among many other practical topics.

On pp. 207ff at the end of the book we have included a self-diagnostic questionnaire on student progress to help you focus on issues that are relevant to you.

## ■ Action summary

- 1 Be aware that in doctoral education you are under your own management and have the responsibility for determining what is required as well as for carrying it out.

## 6 ■ HOW TO GET A PhD

- 2 You will experience periods of self-doubt which you must come through with the clear aim of becoming a competent professional researcher.
- 3 Read this book for insights into the PhD research learning process, to help you manage it better.