How to supervise a PhD

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Supervising a research higher degree is the most advanced level of teaching in our education system. It is certainly one of the most complex areas as shown by the very high drop-out rate of students at this level. It is also one of the least discussed. It is important for the staff as well as the students involved to be able to systematically and deliberately experience, and get some discussion of principles going.

This essay is an attempt to think systematically through this area using problems, in the light of my own experience as supervisor and examiner, and of colleagues' other than my own through the process. It is focused on the pure research PhD, though many items apply (with differences of scale) to research Masters and to the research component in master's plus-thesis, graduate programmes.

1. The nature of the task

There is a mystique about the PhD which has been observed by many students (I think this has to be a flawlessly perfect research, the definitive statement on an academic topic. On their side, many students don't see supervision as teaching. The research degree gets stuck up in the self-image of 'research itself', and the student is supposed to absorb the necessary knowledge by a sort of osmotic activity. The PhD is a great mind.

The students have no need for the self-de-humanising. The PhD is not meant to be flawless and definitive. It is a research training. It is a 'mirror-piece' in the old gilded sense of the carefully-done job which shows that an apprenticeship is now qualified to practice his/her trade. PhD theses have always limpid scopes, are never definitive, and are subject to mis-quotations. If examiners did not recognize this, no thesis would ever be passed. But it is also the case that a PhD is a flawlessly perfect research, but to produce research that is adequate, in quality and amount, to justify the award of a degree. It is impossible to tell in advance how much this will cost. Of course it is true that just one person is the candidate. But the situation is not as individualistic as it looks. The supervision relationship simply one-to-one. The thesis process is to realize the good compromises between the student and the supervisor. At the same time, there are 'moments' in the dialectic that are common to most research projects. And the higher degree framework (but not always) that have always to be done. It is often very useful to students to be told that such and such a development can be expected. Accordingly, this section is a commentary on the nature of students who are involved, and on their own research. The nature of the student'll be generally be encountered in supervising a doctoral candidate. There are not necessarily disengaged from the student. But research幨will sort themselves out neatly into stages.

Defining the topic

Deciding what the research is to be about can take a surprising amount of time. Often it takes the first year of candidature to move from graduate student doing an essay in one topic to designing the student's research project in the second year. Even so, this is not so very early in the candidate's development, and the dissertation of the student's research should be as good as the supervisor knows how to make it, within the limits set by the student. Some of the resources that the higher degree framework provides depends on how much the research project does, like spending a lot of time and the public's money. For them it is important for the supervisor to tell the student, when the student has been told, and to bear some of this time in mind. The fact is that the student needs to think about what he is doing, and to have something to say about it. The student is never going to be able to get the right balance. The student needs to think about what he is doing, and to have something to say about it. The student is never going to be able to get the right balance.

2. Moments of the project

PhD projects take many different shapes, and one of the problems of being a supervisor is that each one has to be worked out separately. It seems as if one is always starting from scratch. And the student can have a very little idea of what is in store for them.

There is a good reason for this. A creative mind can always find new ways of doing research (following well-established methods) involves a diacritical - an argument by analogy to other and particular investigations, a back-and forth of theory and evidence; between formulation and criticism, and often has to follow its own logic. If we know its course, we will not be nearly as surprised as it is the start point to write a chapter outline, i.e. the plan of the thesis. This is a mistake, to begin without a plan. There is a sense of the most fruitful lines of enquiry. What is needed is a plan. For instance, what archives will be searched, what debates in the literature will be dissected, what interviews will be done and how they will be analyzed. This plan should begin to change as the research advances, by agreement between student and supervisor.

Estimating the time for each step is very important for two reasons. First, to get the scale of the whole project right. A lot of students take too long to find the right scale, and are then not told how much time will later. There is therefore a possible mistake (with a longer time) than to settle early on a false trail. Some other students arrive in the PhD with a cut-and-dried plan from the start. (The North American custom of setting a thesis proposal or a rough working, a broad estimate of the project, and putting down a plan for the direction.)

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From draft to final submission

The first draft completed, everyone has a great high, but still work to be done. At this point the supervisor has to start looking at it from the examiner's point of view. Sometimes only a few lines, spouses

critical comments from the examiner, the university is in a difficult position and it may be necessary to advice the examiner; the supervisor will have to suggest who.

If more than one examiner is taking part, the supervisor is in a difficult position of having to measure agreement between their comments. For the higher the number of examiners, the higher will certainly insist on a rewrite. The supervisor's shortest path to getting the examiner's comments is likely to involve the requirement and get a clear specification of what the supervisor is to convert into a book and, if so, what advice can be given. The examiner can help by advising what conferences to present them at, what journals to submit to. If the new material is unexplored, the supervisor might reasonably steal a bit of the university's resources and give a paper or two on the subject (it is most to be useful). The university's advantage to have a university's graduate's work.)

3. The 'supervising' relationship

The commonest complaint of PhD students is that they never get to talk to their supervisors. The commonest complaint of supervisors is that their PhD students never come to talk to them.

When the reports come in there may be more to do. If the examiners are unanimous in their opinion, it is sweet; but often they are not. If the thesis is not ready for the final version, the student is embarrassed to show half-baked plans or rough-draft writing. Or perhaps the examiner; the supervisor will have to say so.

Discernment

I count this as part of the job though it is not formally anything to do with the degree. If the thesis is a worthwhile 'contribution to knowledge', as most PhD students move to do specifically, then it is obvious that it ought to be published. The supervisor is in the best position to give advice on how to do this. In some cases a thesis can be converted into a book; and if so, some advice may be wanted on what publisher to approach, and how to set about the conversion, most theses being unpublishable in their raw form. If the raw form, or parts of it, can be converted into papers; the examiner or the supervisor can help by advising what conferences to present them at, what journals to submit to. If the new material is unexplored, the supervisor might reasonably steal a bit of the university's resources and give a paper or two on the subject (it is most to be useful). The university's advantage to have a university's graduate's work.)

4. Final thoughts

All this sounds like a lot of trouble, and some people wonder at how the examiners' deadlines are so different, and so are supervisors. Some people might find it easier. It is good for the intellectual collaboration of those who have to do it, but it is not easy. It has its problems, many of which can be seen in the head of the examiner in criticism.

The supervisor has to be an expert in finding a name for the first draft. There will be times when less will do — if writing-up is going well it may be better to wait till a chapter is finished. The important thing is never to let matters drift, to lose contact without reason for it.

Much of the text is concerned with the time, the examiner's satisfaction of the degree.

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