

## PhD Supervision Philosophy & Expectations

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PLEASE MAKE SURE YOU HAVE READ THIS ENTIRE SECTION BEFORE CONSIDERING BECOMING A PHD STUDENT UNDER MY SUPERVISION

After you have read everything and if you find my supervision philosophy acceptable and you are prepared to meet the expectations set up below (and meet the qualification criteria).

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To understand my supervision philosophy, you will have to understand the UK and US PhD systems.

### **1. The UK system**

In the UK, particularly in business disciplines, courses and modules taken during the course of MPhil/PhD are to aid the student in doing the dissertation. The UK does not emphasize subject specialism in terms of breadth of the subject. Instead, the depth of the particular research area the student is undertaking is emphasized. For example, if you are doing a PhD in Marketing, you will not be expected to have advanced knowledge in BtoB Marketing, Channels, Communications, Pricing and all major aspects of Marketing (although you should have some knowledge of it). Instead, you focus on your area of research and delve deeply into it.

Also, there are no expectations during the course of doing a PhD that a student should undertake any other activities e.g. reviewing papers, publishing papers with your supervisor, organizing conferences, teaching, or other research-led activities (although students are encouraged to present his/her dissertation to conferences). Indeed, the UK system provides a lot of freedom to the student and believes that the student should be independent and able to do research independently and that the student completes a dissertation at the end. The supervisor will provide guidance but the dissertation is one that should be constructed by the student. This has both advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is that a student could be creative and innovative in his/her thinking, unencumbered by any prevailing agenda or paradigm in terms of the direction his/her work is taking. The student could be left

alone to research and construct new knowledge that would advance the field. The disadvantage is that students who have not had sufficient training may feel less confident and may spend a lot of time muddling around, unsure of themselves, not taking risks for fear of rejection and be thought stupid etc. and supervisors may not be equipped to manage the emotional and mental pressures the student is under.

## **2. The US system**

The US style emphasizes rigorous method training at the beginning. To enter, one is usually required to take a GMAT and have very good undergraduate qualifications. The first two years of a PhD is entirely focused on methodology and subject training. The student is required to be skilled in a broad range of methodologies as well as being a subject specialist across his/her domain. At the end of the two year training, the student sits for a comprehensive exam ('the comp') which lasts 2-3 days. Only if the student is able to pass that exam will s/he be able to do a dissertation. Across the US, attrition is high – only 30% make it past the comp. Students that pass the comp are usually termed ABD (All-but-dissertation), unofficial term for graduate student who has completed all Ph.D. coursework, but has yet to defend his or her dissertation. The dissertation would normally take 3 years.

In the US, there is an expectation that the student will write papers with the supervisor as co-authors, review papers and do other research-led activities with the supervisor and for the supervisor, within reasonable limits. The student often graduates with a CV that already has 2-3 publications, 3-4 conference proceedings. In other words, the supervisor helps the student in building his/her CV for an academic career, and the supervisor gains the benefit of having a research assistant, thereby improving the supervisor's research productivity. There is also an implicit duty of the supervisor to help his/her student with placement i.e. the student's first job as an academic.

## **3. My PhD supervision philosophy**

I subscribe to a 'mid-atlantic' PhD system. I believe that students studying their PhD should have rigorous method and subject training to become specialists in their subjects as well as in research which I think the UK system often does not adequately provide. However, I disagree with the US system of high GMAT (and barriers) to do research. I also disagree with the rigidity of the US system. I believe the UK system fosters creativity and innovation in research and also preserves the dignity, respect and independence of PhD students. However, I acknowledge that not everyone knows what to do with that independence and some students prefer to have more guidance.

Hence, I spend much more time BEFORE a student begins his/her PhD with me to set up the expectations i.e. to ensure that the interests of the student are aligned with mine. Only after both of us are satisfied that we are suitable for each other will we proceed. However, every student goes through his/her PhD in a different way. Some are more confident and some less so. I will try to ensure that there is a balance of independence and guidance.

## PhD Process

A typical PhD process from the beginning to the end goes like this:

1. You send me your CV
2. I assess your capabilities and also the match of your skill sets with what the team is needing.
3. If you are a good fit, I will interview you face-to-face, through skype or phone
4. If everything is agreeable, you apply officially and get your references and research proposal ready
5. If you are accepted, you will get your letter of offer and scholarship letter (if applicable)
6. You start your MPhil with me, usually around October
7. You will discuss the courses to take beforehand and your courses will proceed through the first (and possibly second) semester.
8. You will be assigned a whole list of readings which you would need to complete
9. Sometime around March/April, you would do a presentation on 'the state of the art and research in [your domain area]
10. Sometime around May/June, you defend your full research proposal, submit a systematic literature review and a roadmap to completion
11. You get upgraded to PhD
12. You continue to collect your data, read, and learn for 2 years. For a PhD with me, you are usually expected to do both a qualitative and a quantitative research
13. At the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year, you may convert to 'writing up' stage and complete your PhD in your 4<sup>th</sup> year.

### **4. Entry requirements & Criteria to do PhD with me**

The skill to be a top student at undergraduate (or masters) level may not be the same skills required to be a good researcher. Hence, I disagree with the current high barriers of entry to do research (i.e. high qualification to enrol in the MPhil/PhD programme). I believe one discovers if one is a good researcher along the course of doing research which is why enrolling in an MPhil/PhD with an exit of an MPhil is a good idea particularly when you decide that you don't like research or find that you are not as motivated to do it. I think good researchers require a curious and enquiring mind, like to challenging traditional answers, like to read and learn, and have a genuine thirst to impart their learning either through teaching or writing papers. You can find good researchers amongst practitioners, students, ...anywhere. However, not everyone is motivated by research so if you think it's not for you, might as well be honest about it and just do the MPhil.

By having high entry barriers, we miss out on potential researchers that did not excel academically but possess good skills to do research. This is why I think we should take in more students to do MPhil, and that attrition at MPhil level should be high – to provide opportunities for more students to do research and allow only those who truly want to, and are qualified to, to proceed to PhD.

That said, I do believe that being able to communicate and write well is essential for a PhD student. This is why I will insist on English language requirement of IELTS of 7.0 and above or equivalent. The

intellectual challenge towards getting a PhD is hard enough without having to deal with poor English and communication as well.

So here's the criteria to do a PhD with me.

You should have had a first class degree or a second class upper degree (GPA 3.0 and above) for your undergraduate degree at a UK-equivalent university.

You should have excellent English language skills (IELTS 7.0 and above) and have demonstrated the ability to write well

I tend to be better with PhD students who have had substantial working experience, preferably at senior management level. Having taken the same route myself, I find that I can relate to the struggles of a practitioner-PhD student and encourage practitioners to pursue research and an academic career. So if you do not have high academic qualifications but is currently in a senior management position as a practitioner, you may also apply.

You must be curious, have an enquiring mind and love to read and learn

You must be able to write well and think about abstractions, rather than just do the concrete.

## **5. Research Proposal**

If you wish to be my student, I expect you to have constructed a research proposal (go to [www.ireneng.com](http://www.ireneng.com) for a sample research proposal). The proposal serves to demonstrate that:

- (a) you are able to communicate effectively in English through writing
- (b) you have thought about the research you might want to do
- (c) you have looked up and evaluated research papers relevant to your research area
- (d) you have given some thought to the research area you wish to participate in
- (e) your research interests and mine converge
- (f) you are able to formulate an argument about existing literature and where, potentially the research gap may be

Hence, I expect the research proposal to:

- (a) be written by yourself without assistance from anyone else
- (b) have not been edited by anyone else as I wish to gauge your English standard

It is not compulsory to actually do the research that you have outlined in your proposal. This means that you may wish to change topic or choose to research a different research question (although in the same area). Your research proposal merely serves to inform me of the area you are interested in (and

demonstrate what I have outlined above). You will, however, need to firm up your research question and what your dissertation will be about before the end of the first year.

#### Basic Research for PhD, Applied Research for EngD

I believe that a PhD dissertation means there is a strong BASIC/THEORETICAL contribution in the research as opposed to APPLIED research. Hence, even if you are hoping to collect data from your home country or from a company, it must be an issue that can be applied generally and that the contribution of the research is a BASIC/THEORETICAL research contribution to the field. I will not accept any student interested in doing applied research where the contribution is only to your home country, or its specific context. This is not because applied research is no good but rather that academic research is about basic research that is publishable in top journals (applied research often do not make it to the top journals). Basic research is hard, requires ORIGINAL contribution TO THE FIELD and often does not leverage on your existing circumstances. You must be prepared to let your biography go and start from the beginning, at the bottom. At some point, you may find that your circumstances may be useful for the research (e.g. you might have access to companies/data in your own company or home country) but that is incidental and should not be the driving factor of your research.

Some students may choose to send a research proposal that says 'this research is important because it has not been done in such-and-such a country or such-and-such a context'. This is what I term as venue-driven research. My response is to quote David Stewart:

"Venue driven research bears the burden of making the case that venue should matter for some important reason and then demonstrate that the expected differences is present for the reason posited. This is a high hurdle."

David Stewart, Former Journal of Marketing Editor (JM, Oct 2002, p.4)

I discourage students from doing venue-driven research although it is still possible but you would have to convince me.

I would accept applied research for EngD students although I am generally reluctant to take EngD students as I am more inclined to build capacity and work with PhD students who are genuinely interested in being research academics.

#### **6. Subject Specialism**

I believe that being a subject specialist is important because understanding the links across the subject and indeed, between subjects result in opportunities to discover important and good research questions within one's own domain. Also, being a subject specialist allows greater opportunities as you are then able to teach, at advanced level, on a broad range of subjects. As a subject expert, the opportunities for consulting are also higher. Finally, subject specialism instils confidence in the student.

However, this is not a major priority in doing a PhD with me. I expect my students to seek out advanced level knowledge and be a subject specialist on their own initiative because there are just so many benefits in doing so and they can do it without my help.

## **7. Training**

Training not only imparts skills, it imparts confidence, which is essential for a PhD student. I believe that my students should be trained in both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This is not merely to aid their own research but also for their future academic careers. By being adept in several methodologies (and understand the implicit assumptions, philosophies and weaknesses), they are able to assess, critique and evaluate the merit of research done by others, which is needed to advance their academic careers, when they sit on editorial boards, or supervise their future PhD students. I expect all my PhD students to graduate having done both a quantitative and qualitative study within their dissertations.

## **8. Intellectual Development**

I believe my task is to train a researcher for an academic career. I understand that there are many students whose motivations to get a PhD are not research related. Some are looking for credibility in teaching or hope to be working in industry. If your motivation to do a PhD is not to build a research career in academia, I would encourage you to look for someone else as your supervisor. This is because my own motivation to invest my own time and energy (over 3 years) is to see my students flourish in an academic career, sharing the passion I have for research. I like to think that my task is to ensure that you graduate as an independent researcher, an academic capable of critical intellectual thought, writing high quality research papers and with a strong CV towards getting a good academic job worldwide. Towards that end, I would expect my students to write papers with me (for conference and publication) along the course of his/her PhD. Students would also review papers – I consider this as an essential part of the training to think critically in evaluating research papers.

What this means is that you will need to work harder and do more than the average UK PhD student. The reward is a strong CV, and in my opinion, a better foundation towards excelling in your academic career and you will be far more confident of your research abilities. If this is not what you want, then it's better to find someone else. Truth be told, there are easier ways to get a PhD than with me. I do promise though, that if you put in the work, the rewards for all that hard work will come later.

## **9. Length/Duration of PhD**

If you would like the quickest way towards getting a PhD with just enough effort, I will not be a suitable supervisor for you. To benefit from my supervision you must be dedicated and committed towards research. You must be prepared to go past the normal 3 years of getting a PhD because of that commitment and because you want to be absolutely ready at the end of the PhD to do independent research and you should refuse to complete your studies until you have reached that point. This is why I advise my students be mentally prepared to spend up to 5 years because it may take that long. The

reminder here is that you are not graduating to get a job but to graduate with enough in your research arsenal for a full career in academia.

## **10. Expectations**

Supervisors have a duty of care, and I take supervision very seriously. Once I take you on, I deem it to be my duty to ensure that you graduate with a PhD so you know why I go through so much trouble writing all this down and setting up expectations etc. I will do my duty just as I would expect you to do yours i.e. work hard.

### **IMPORTANT**

Here are my specific expectations:

Along the course of your PhD, as part of your training and part of building your CV, I expect you to have worked with me on at least 1-2 journal papers and 1-2 conference proceedings. These may or may not be directly relevant to your PhD dissertation.

I also expect your PhD dissertation to be of high quality i.e. the dissertation must result in at least 2 publishable journal papers. I will, of course, help you to do this but you **MUST** consider this point as it's very important. It's very easy, when you're into your 3rd year, to think that you have done enough, and that my standards are too high. This will not be acceptable. If you become my student, you must trust that I will graduate you with a PhD but only when I think you have achieved that standard and not when you think you have achieved it.

## **11. How to achieve the expectations**

Read – A LOT. Journal papers, books etc. You must love to read and love to learn.

Think and Reflect –It's not merely reading that is important. It's thinking, absorbing and contesting what you're reading and learning. Are the answers too simplistic? Challenge them. Be confident.

Don't be afraid to ask. Don't be afraid if you don't know. Don't be afraid to sound stupid. – hey, you're a PhD student. If you don't ask now, when are you going to ask? You're not a professor. Yet. Ask away. I always believe that the tragic aspect of being a professor is that people are less forgiving if you don't know.

Only submit the **BEST** work you've done (within reasonable time of course).

**DO NOT** lapse into doing something and then submitting, adding to it based on my comments and submitting again – this is unacceptable. To cultivate independent research, you should not be doing the research according to my standard but **TO YOUR OWN STANDARD**. Clearly, you must improve your standards but to do that, you must do each piece of work to the best of your standard at that time so that when I correct it, you realise your mistakes and your standards can then be raised. This is what I call stretching your boundaries and raising your own bar. You can only do that if you have already stretched

it to the maximum according to what you are capable of. Then I come in and suggest improvements and lo and behold, when you realise your mistakes, your bar is raised!

Talk, debate and discuss. With your coursemates. With me. Always good to listen to yourself when you argue a point. It helps formulate your thoughts and makes you a better writer and thinker. In discussions with me, challenge what I say until you are satisfied that my arguments are sound. In challenging me, you compel yourself to think critically.

Write, write and write. Keep writing your thoughts down about your research. They will come in useful to piece together your dissertation or be a start of another paper.

Take on the work I give you. This includes papers to review, papers to edit/format, writing grant proposals, bids, organizing seminars or conferences etc. I am always careful in giving out work and I try to make sure that you do have time for it and that the work I give you is part of your training as well.

Discuss the modules/courses that you need to take and participate in them fully. We would usually sit down before the start of the academic year to discuss what modules/courses would be useful for your training. Some courses you need to participate fully (i.e. complete with assessments) and some courses you might only need to audit.

Expect to work with me on journal and conference papers. This is part of your training. If you are working as an RA i.e. you are not a co-author for the paper, you will be paid extra and you will have the right to decline the work (unless you are already an RA for me). If you are working as a co-author, this would constitute part of your training and you will therefore not be paid extra.

Keep a log of our meetings/discussions, your submissions to me, and the work you have done. This is so that it would be easier to submit the supervision report that is to be signed by both of us for the school's records.

Expect that it will be really really tough. I do mean really tough. I expect your work to eventually produce quality research that is world class. To be a world class researcher means very tough training. Remember that this is a PhD. It isn't just reading and understanding and applying and scoring high marks (like the way it is in undergrad or masters). You need to construct new knowledge and contribute something to your field beyond what the community already know. That means something beyond all that you've read. There is no answer 'out there'. The only answer is in your head. Something only you thought of. Something original. This will be your biggest intellectual challenge. There will be many moments where you think you might not be able to do it. That perhaps, you think you don't have it in you. You must believe you can and you will.

Keep lines of communication open. Have problems coping? Under stress? Feel that I'm piling it on too hard or feeling overwhelmed? Come and talk to me about it. There is a difference between being tough and being harsh. I am tough on you because it's the only way you will grow to be a top-class researcher. However, I am also fair and I think finding ways to cope helps you think better. We can both work out the pressures. Don't forget – I went through it too!



**MOST IMPORTANT:** I expect my PhD students to really push their thinking – to be better than me, better than what they think they can do – challenge the team, challenge me and constantly contest what we know.

## **12. My promise**

Here's my promise to you:

Before you choose me as your supervisor, it would be a good idea to talk to my existing PhD students. As the Chinese proverb says, "To know the road ahead, ask those coming back." My students can tell you how life is as a PhD student, how it's like working with me.

I will provide you with a reading list to start you off on your research. However, I would expect that you supplement that with additional reading, particularly in your area of research.

I will mark/correct your work as soon as I can – this is usually within 2 weeks of submission.

I will provide you guidelines where you might have gone wrong. I will not, however, read everything you write nor will I point you on any specific route towards your PhD. That's for you to decide.

I will be available to talk to you whenever you wish to talk – either in person, or on skype. I do have many university commitments so it is always better to set an appointment time so that we won't be interrupted.

My duty is to graduate you with an MPhil or a PhD. So no matter how tough it is, rest assured that I will support you through it. So tough it out.

My PhD students and I come together to talk research very often. We share the passion of the research so to do research with me, you must have the same passion (i.e. we can talk about our research all the time including social gatherings!). Over the years of working together, I like to think that we have formed a bond of friendship and mutual understanding.