



HOW TO SUPERVISE (AND BE SUPERVISED) ON A RESEARCH DEGREE

Tips and tools for supervisors and students



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Chapter 9:

What to expect

Help and support from professional services - non-academic

Along with support that is provided by your supervisors, for your academic needs, there is also a range of other help and support available to you on your way through your PhD (or other research degree) journey. In addition to your supervisor(s), there will be assistance available from your institution's Professional Services team. Sometimes this is provided by the offices of either an institutional level, or faculty (or school) level Graduate School. However, there are various models of support across UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and so you will need to check to see which model is applied in your own institution. Nevertheless, somewhere in your institution a range of support provisions specifically for you will be available. This chapter will seek to explore some of the most relevant and important of these, from the stage of initially thinking about

undertaking a postgraduate research degree, through to moving on from your studies into the workplace armed with your award.

Before you begin – identifying an institution and applying to study

Help will be available to you in various written and online forms, in respect of your initial considerations of where to undertake your research degree studies. Institutions are able to provide advice and guidance about their research areas, the type of institution they are, and their approaches to research degree studies, along with a range of other relevant matters. They are also geared up to helping you with aspects of the application process itself. There is usually a dedicated area of the university web site that is devoted to Postgraduate Research students, and this will contain a great deal of helpful information relating to the application process as well as the more general aspects of your present and future studies.

These university web pages contain all the academic information you will need in order to ensure that you meet the basic entry requirements, and they usually contain information and links to funded studentship competitions and associated opportunities, some of these may be offered by the institution itself while others are linked to external providers. There will be details available on the application process, fees, registration, induction, training, supervision, monitoring and progression, as well as support for mental health and wellbeing, and for special education needs. There will be a range of documents (which are important, if sometimes a bit dry and dense) relating to codes of practice, policies, ethics, quality assurance, and the ways that students' voices can be heard, both in the form of representation and, if required, via a complaints procedure. In sum, a comprehensive suite of advice and information will almost certainly be available to you.

In all these matters, you should rest assured that the chief aim of all staff involved in your PhD studies (which actually amounts to a fairly large number of people), no matter which institution you choose to attend, is to help you navigate your

way through your studies and on to the successful attainment of your research degree. Often, the advice and information available is practically oriented, and it usually contains a list of contacts and other relevant information and forms for specific purposes that are normally clearly labelled. These will include links to both internal and external support and advice where this is thought to be useful to students and prospective students.

At first sight, the information available might appear to be somewhat bureaucratic and can sometimes be discounted as not being relevant. This is not the case, and the investment of a modest amount of time to become familiar with the basic content of these pages at an early stage, and to note the sorts of information they contain, can save a significant amount of time and effort later on. This is especially important when you are looking for that one piece of advice or information that you are sure must exist, somewhere.

Within these pages there are likely to be a number of key documents and guidance information that you should read

in detail both before joining an institution and in the first few months after having joined. You will quickly learn which areas of the website should be visited frequently and which sections should simply be noted for future reference. It is likely that the most relevant areas of the site will be clearly signposted in the form of appropriate section headings, such as; 'Before you Apply,' and 'induction', and so on.

We would also encourage you to note that these resources and documents, and indeed the existence of the entity known as the Graduate School (or its equivalent by another name), are there to help you. These provisions are not intended to put unnecessary or overly burdensome extra requirements in the way of you getting on to/with the really 'fun stuff', your research. Instead, they are intended to help you navigate your way easily and successfully through the university's processes (e.g. to apply to study, or to seek funding to attend a conference etc), and also to give you some basic information on how your studies will be organised and run.

Applying for admission and for studentships

The first thing you have to decide is your area of study, and the second is likely to be the institution (or a shortlist of institutions) in which you wish to undertake your degree. Following this, you can then begin the application process for a place. This can be done in advance of you knowing the final results of an undergraduate degree programme, but quite often these days, the application will be done after graduating and while undertaking a Master's level degree. However, there still remain a good number of students who take a break from academic study before deciding to return for a doctoral degree after a few years (and sometimes after many years).

Normally, prospective students will have identified someone who they wish to act as their Director of Studies, and not infrequently this is the result of initial informal contact with an academic member of staff or someone in the Graduate School Office, who may be able to introduce you to academics who are researching in your chosen area of study.

With all these preliminary things decided, your thoughts will almost inevitably then turn more directly to the question of 'how to pay for this?'. Traditionally, annual fee charges for UK research degrees have actually been quite modest when compared to the actual costs incurred by the university in supporting PGR students through their journeys. Nevertheless, the fee is only part of the financial equation to take into account, because a student also needs to survive during their period of studies, and perhaps even to have a bit of a social life while doing so! In addition, they could have other commitments that also need to be taken into account. Therefore, it is important to try to 'weigh up the full cost' of the PhD before embarking upon it – and this includes social and other costs, as well as impacts on family etc. This point is not being made in order to put you off – far from it – but simply to say that it is necessary for you to enter the journey with your eyes wide open, and to factor in the various elements that comprise the 'cost' of advance level research studies, which are more than financial alone.

Usefully, but depending on the time of year that you begin the process of applying for a university place, there are likely to be a number of studentship competitions that are available, to which a prospective student may apply. Normally, a good number of these competitions commence formally in September or October each year, for entry the following September/October, but the application process can take many months. Therefore, it is best not to place all your eggs in a single basket, and also to look ahead and prepare as well in advance as possible for any likely application you may wish to make.

Many of the studentship opportunities in the UK are actually UK Government funded provisions of one sort or another. Not infrequently, these are discharged through UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and the various Research Councils that operate across the UK, such as the EPSRC (Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council), ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council), AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) etc). In many cases, these opportunities provide full scholarships that amount to a non-repayable grant in the region of £70,000,

spread over a 3.5 year period. This money is meant to cover the student fees, a modest stipend (c. £13k per annum at the time of writing in 2021, and possibly an element for equipment, training and development needs, sometimes known as the Research Training Support Grant (RTSG)).

However, there are also a number of institution-level scholarships/studentships that can be made available, many of which provide partial funding towards the full financial cost that you will incur. These institutional studentships vary considerably in value and duration, so you will need to check carefully the fine detail of what the studentship will cover, and any attendant terms and conditions.

Beyond this, there are part- or full-funded studentships that are also available, which can be allied to businesses, companies, charities, bequests, and so on. For example, the Carnegie Trust provides an annual studentship competition and awards highly sought-after, and highly competitive full studentships. In the case of industry-

provided studentships, you might well find that the award is related to a specific topic of research investigation that needs to be undertaken rather than giving you a completely free hand to choose your own research topic. So once again, look at these carefully as they may require you to make presentations or formal reports to the funder on the way through the degree and/or at the end.

Then, there is also the option to cover the cost of your research degree as a 'self-payer'. While there are many self-funding students in UK Higher Education, it is not unusual for these students to opt for part-time study rather than full-time, so that they can continue to provide an income to help cover their other living costs and commitments while studying. While this is often a pragmatic and necessary approach, and can be undertaken very successfully, the part-time route necessarily extends the period of studies significantly, and so requires careful thought (and ideally the positive support of your employer, if necessary) before embarking on it. However, some institutions do allow for a change in study mode, either from full time to part time, or from part time to full time, if a

student's circumstances change. Rarely, though, will a funded studentship permit a change from full-time to part-time, although this can occasionally happen when certain personal circumstances dictate that this is a necessity and where the funding body is prepared to accept the change.

It is worth noting that international student fees are likely to be considerably higher than the 'home' fees paid by UK nationals. Interestingly, there is a fee differentiation across the countries comprising the UK at the undergraduate level, but this differentiation does not currently exist at the PGR level. In all cases, the fee level and any additional costs associated with the fee (e.g. laboratory or fieldwork fees/costs) should be checked carefully in advance. Information about these important matters should be available and clearly stated in institutional websites and prospectuses for PGR studies.

It should be noted that not all studentship awards will cover the full fee cost of international students and therefore either the student or some other body will need to cover the difference between the home fee and the international fee.

Others, though, will not provide resources to cover any part of the international fee but will instead provide what is known as a 'stipend-only award', which helps cover living costs and other expenses. Those studentships that will cover full international fees and a full stipend as well, can be relatively hard to find and are likely to be highly competitive. At the other extreme, there are a number of studentships that do not accept applications from international students at all. A further complication currently exists in the UK in respect of BREXIT, and it is not yet fully clear (at the time of writing) how studentship providers will classify European citizens in the future, but it is likely that they will no longer be charged the 'home fee' rate.

There are also a number of alternative funding sources available, from some unexpected places. It is worth checking out these 'alternative funding' opportunities, and the Graduate School might be in a position to point you to some sources of information about these. Some of these have very specific requirements, so, if you happen to be the second daughter of the MacKenzie Clan, and have lived for a time in Benbecula, then who knows, you might be in luck!

All students, whether as part of an application process for a studentship or as a self-payer, will formally need to apply for a place to study at the institution of your choice. This will often entail an interview/discussion of some sort together with the completion of the admission request document, which students normally submit with input from their prospective Director of Studies. This will require the identification of the subject area, the supervisory team, details of the research topic, and a range of other important information. The application form will be submitted for approval to the university committee responsible for postgraduate research student admissions, and a decision will be taken about whether or not to offer a place, as well as any conditions that may need to be applied, e.g. confirmation of the undergraduate degree classification or the successful completion of an English Language competency requirements (e.g. IELTS). In addition, if there are any issues relating to international students' visa applications or requirements, these are often identified in the application form and, if the application for a place is approved on academic grounds, then help will almost

certainly be provided thereafter with the visa application process etc.

As an aside, while on the subject of covering the costs of your studies, there is often the possibility (although it cannot be guaranteed) of a student being able to undertake some paid work in respect of contributions to teaching (or other relevant form of academic-based work) while undertaking a PhD, in the institution in which they are undertaking their studies. However, most institutions strongly advise that there should be no more than a few hours of such activity undertaken per week (a maximum of 6 hours is an oft-quoted level) when also seeking to undertake full-time PhD studies. Anything more than this can create a considerable and unhelpful intrusion in your academic work, and so needs to be carefully managed. Some institutions, and indeed some discipline areas within institutions, are in a better position than others to make such opportunities available to interested students, and so it is worth looking into the matter carefully.

Early days as a research student

Without repeating the advice and information contained in other sections of this short book, it is worth highlighting briefly a few things that you might need to engage with, or consider finding out about, early in your time as a PGR student.

The first of these (aside from introductory meetings and the engagement with your supervisory team), is likely to be the highly important Induction meetings and associated events, which will usually be set up by the Graduate School (or equivalent office) in your institution. This induction event is not always mandatory, but it would be wise not to miss it, in our experience. However, in some institutions research degree studies (particularly at the doctoral level), can start at any time of the year rather than only at one or two set annual entry points, so your induction may actually be a few weeks to a few months after you have started. In these cases, you might well find some pre-recorded basic introductory material available in the Graduate School webpages or the PGR students VLE (Virtual Learning

Environment), which you should review. Regardless of when it happens, the induction offers an introduction to your place of study, to fellow students, to staff/colleagues who will be working with you on your journey through your degree, and to a range of essential information for your studies. In other words, it provides your initial group of contacts, in the widest sense, in your chosen university/institution. It also tends to give you some helpful starter information about what to expect in your institution, both in the early stages of your studies and then into the further years. It covers processes, forms, policies, and a range of other useful information, and often will include an opportunity to meet students who are further on in their own studies, in order that you can hear from them and ask questions about what research-student life will really be like.

In addition to this induction, it is likely that your supervisor(s) will arrange more localised induction and/or introductions to colleagues and other students who will be working with you over the next few years in your general discipline (and probably departmental) area. Once again, the initial

contacts that this facilitates are important, and will help set you off on your journey in a good way.

As you become familiar with your new surroundings and get to know both the institution and your departmental context a bit more, it is also worthwhile finding out whether there are any departmental seminars and meetings available on a routine basis, or even seminar series in cognate discipline areas. Once again, early engagement with these opportunities to connect with your fellow researchers is a very good way to get to know colleagues and potential future collaborators. It will also help establish a network of additional assistance and support. In short, while not volunteering to become too heavily involved from the word 'go', do find out what opportunities are available to engage with the broader research active staff community in your institution. We are sure that you will be made to feel very welcome.

There will then likely be an opportunity made available (and once again, this could be mandatory in some institutions) to sign up to attend a student conference that may take place

at some stage in your first year (and possibly in subsequent years). This will be a further opportunity to find your feet and perhaps to have the chance to begin to share something about your own research interests with your fellow students. If something like this is available in your institution, then it is well worth attending.

Tools and resources for managing the journey through a research degree

In most institutions, once you become a registered student you will be given a student email address, a student ID number, and a student identification card. These will give you access to a dedicated PGR student area of the VLE, where contact and communication can be made with respect to issues of student progression and other important notices and opportunities. This will also give you access to library resources and IT services, as well as a range of student support and study aids.

The student journey for a PGR student is quite often closely managed and monitored, at an institutional level, by a key

academic committee. In the case of the University of the Highlands and Islands, this is known as the Research Degrees Committee. This body will normally comprise of experienced academic and professional services staff from a range of different disciplinary areas and research-related backgrounds. Their job is to ensure that all matters related to PGR students' needs and smooth progression – including degree approvals, re-approvals, and quality assurance – are maintained in good and appropriate order. Quite often, PGR students are directly represented on a body such as this, as well as having representation in the institution's Students Union/Representative Council (albeit these can often have a fairly heavy focus on undergraduate provisions and only relatively modest provisions for PGRs).

Quality Assurance and the student experience

Quality Assurance is an important factor in respect of the student experience of their degree studies, at any level of study, no matter whether it is a taught course or research-based. Therefore, there will also be some engagement with the student body through internal quality assurance and

assessment means, and also engagement with relevant external QA processes. In Scotland, standards are assured and maintained by the Quality Assurance Agency for Scotland (QAA (Scotland)). Parallel bodies exist and operate in the other nations that comprise the broader UK. In addition, there are a number of UK-wide quality assurance exercises that are available for institutions to engage with, such as the Postgraduate Research (Student) Experience Survey (PRES – run by the Higher Education Authority). These help an institution understand the student experience of their provisions at the research degree level, and thereafter to make improvements as and when required – most often in discussion and partnership with the student representatives and the PGR student body.

Basic provisions for study (practical things, like workspace etc.)

If there is one thing that universities are good at, it is understanding what it takes to try to provide a good and effective environment for students to be able to undertake their research degree studies. At the doctoral level, there

are certain basic provisions that ought to be available to you, and if they are not available then you should ask why not? These facilities include the provision of a suitable desk/work space and/or laboratory space and equipment for you to be able to engage in your research studies effectively. This includes, for example, access to library resources (often electronic-based but also physical), and access to buildings and other relevant facilities. In the case of library and building access, these will often be arranged on the same basis as for a member of academic staff rather than as an undergraduate student. In addition, you will be given access to computer infrastructure and data storage provisions that are suitable for research degree studies, but do bear in mind that you are responsible for complying with the university's and Government's legal provisions with respect to the safe storage and appropriate use of (and access to) research data.

Not infrequently, research degree students (typically at the doctoral level and sometimes at the research Master's level) are invited to a range of staff-based events, which will include the aforementioned research seminars and internal

conferences and workshops, but could also include staff meetings, webinars, some training events, etc. In sum, while doctoral level students will occupy a slightly curious position of not quite being a student and not quite being an academic member of staff, you are likely to find that the academic staff will view and treat you more like the latter than the former. In other words, you are likely to be considered from the start as being a valued and valuable part of the academic team, albeit as a junior researcher, not least because of the recognition of your peers that you will be undertaking research that will be at the cutting edge of the discipline area. It is no wonder, when looking at things through this lens, that research degree students are so highly prized in academia!

Beyond the basic provisions that should be available to all doctoral level research students, it is worth exploring with your supervisor exactly what sorts of things your RTSG may be used to provide for you (if you are lucky enough to have such a provision within your funding). In other words, if you hold a studentship or scholarship, you may have access to a number of additional benefits with respect to equipment,

training, and travel support etc. But all students should have access to at least a minimum level and standard of such provisions. You are not likely to get an office all to yourself, and you might have to share a desk or work on a hot-desk basis, perhaps in an open-plan, research degree student study area, but the provisions made for you need to be adequate and appropriate for your studies. Therefore, if there is something not being provided but which you need in order to undertake your research successfully, simply ask. It is highly likely that your Director of Studies and/or Graduate School contact, will do whatever they can to sort something out with/for you.

Training and development

There is regular training available for both students and supervisory staff, which is quite often arranged or provided by the Graduate School. In the case of students, this begins with the initial induction as already covered, but soon thereafter it extends into a range of generic research skills options and then provision for training in specific and specialist research-related needs that you may have. While

your training and development needs will normally be discussed and agreed with your Director of Studies in an ongoing way, there is also likely to be a more formal assessment of your requirements in these areas at the start of each new year of your studies.

In addition, your institution will also provide a range of training for your supervisors, to make sure that they are kept up to date with the latest information about supervisory issues and techniques, and are thereby equipped to provide the best supervisory experience for you that they can. Often, this training for supervisors is mandatory for a supervisor every few years (even for very experienced supervisory staff). This follows on from some initial mandatory training for new supervisors, which can also be accompanied by opportunities for peer-to-peer mentoring on an ongoing basis (both as a mentee and a mentor). These training and development approaches are taken in order to ensure that you will receive broadly consistent and high quality supervision during your time as a student, no matter where you are located and no matter what is the subject of your research degree studies.

Quite often, the Graduate School office will provide a list of training opportunities that are available to you, as a student, to sign-up to attend. These are posted on the website and the VLE, and also communicated through email and other alerts. In addition, most universities are now partnered with others in a range of collaborations, and this frequently means that training opportunities are also available at other institutions, on a national or regional basis. The trick nowadays, perhaps, is to get the correct balance between undertaking the training that is necessary and helpful for you to progress through your PhD successfully, and possibly avoid undertaking a bit too much training in areas that are interesting but perhaps not directly relevant to completing your studies. Such opportunities, though perhaps tempting, can act as a slight distraction from your main priority, which is to secure your research degree. This is where the guidance and support of your supervisors (and particularly your DoS) is especially valuable. You should do what you can to grab hold of the many and various opportunities that will be available to you, but you cannot afford to become too distracted from achieving your ultimate goal.

How to supervise (and be supervised on) a research degree

It is likely that if you are being supported in your studies through a funded studentship, there will be some financial provision made within this for training, development and support needs on an annual basis. This will help cover the costs of some forms of training and/or attendance at conferences and such like. However, all students, whether externally funded via studentships or not, will have access to training opportunities as part of the fee they pay for engaging with the degree. Sometimes, this may extend to the provision of partial financial assistance with the cost of travel to conferences. The funds can be modest, but a modest contribution can often mark the difference between being able to attend or not.

In addition, there are usually some discretionary funds available to help students who may find themselves in temporary financial difficulty, and there is likely to be some form of student hardship support that can be applied for, if required. Again, the Graduate School should be able to advise.

Student progress monitoring

Most institutions will ask research students and their supervisors to work within a Progress Monitoring Framework (or a similar scheme, known by another name in your institution). This sets out a broad framework for conducting research degree studies, and it is divided into broad periods of time within which a variety of elements of your degree studies need to be undertaken and completed. Your progress can then be reviewed and assessed against those markers through regular reports that have to be prepared and submitted for review to the Graduate School, for consideration by the university's (or faculty's/school's) overseeing body for research degrees. These reports offer a formal opportunity for students and their supervisors to make periodic assessments of progress. These reports are used to confirm (with hindsight) what has been achieved in the previous few months (usually 6 or 12 months) since the last report, and then look ahead to the next period of time, in order to articulate a plan for development of the research. Some institutions require only a formal report every 12 months, while others combine a less formal 6 months report

with a formal and more comprehensive annual report. There are various models and approaches taken to this across UK Higher Education, but some form of formal reporting is usually mandatory.

Frequently in the Science, Health, and Engineering areas, students will produce and present a GANTT chart of expected work tasks against a timetable of progress, whereas reports in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences areas are often more descriptive and text-based. You should use whatever approach is required or expected by your institution and/or discipline area, and your DoS, as well as officers in the Graduate School Office, will work with you to ensure that this is done timeously and correctly.

These reports and opportunities for progress monitoring, should not be viewed with any sense of fear, but they should be treated seriously and diligently. Within the reports, you will be able to address a range of successes, challenges, future opportunities, training needs, and other relevant factors affecting your progression. It is also likely that some of these reports will be required in order for the university to

approve your progression from, say, a probationary period in your first year of study into a fully-fledged PhD student status. Major transition points can also involve the need for you to make a presentation to a slightly wider team of experts than your supervisors alone. This may lead to the production of a report that can help you and your supervisors engage in further fine-tuning of your studies, and thereby give you even greater chance of achieving your research goals in a timely way. It should be noted therefore, that as daunting as this may sound, and while not underplaying the importance of these provisions, they are all tailored to help you progress successfully through your research degree.

Progress monitoring can be helpful to the supervisory arrangement too, in terms of providing a formal occasion, routinely, whereby both student and supervisor can reflect on their own approaches and expectations, and make any adjustments that may be necessary. In most cases, though, this form of engagement and adjustment is simply part of an ongoing activity, which runs throughout the normal course of the research degree. However, if there

are issues that emerge that might need some additional help and support, then the routine monitoring reports can also provide an opportunity to bring these to light and take appropriate actions to help resolve the matter.

Dealing with difficult issues and situations

While on the matter of student progress, it is worth spending a little time looking at how we might deal with the difficult personal issues and circumstances that can sometimes emerge during the course of a student's time pursuing their degree. To begin with, it is probably worth stating that it is seldom a good thing to let small niggles in a relationship (even if between a supervisor and a student) fester and become deeper bruises or wounds. After all, the PhD is a process that involves the engagement and interaction of human beings, and things do not always work out ideally with all relationships. Therefore, rather than waiting for the opportunity of a formal report in order to air any differences of opinion that may occasionally arise, it is strongly encouraged that these non-academic matters are dealt with through a different means than the formal academic

progress reporting process. These should be addressed in a discrete, timely, and yet direct way.

It is perhaps worth making an extra point here, which goes beyond straightforward academic performance and progression monitoring issues. It is occasionally the case that a modest difference of academic opinion or disagreement can take place between a student and a member of the supervisory team. This is normal, and it simply reflects the fact that everyone involved in the research degree process is passionate about what they are doing, and academics are not famed for holding back their views. When handled well, these occasional differences of opinion can actually be a good and healthy thing, both for the student and the supervisor, not least if it leads to the further refining and strengthening of a position on a research matter.

However, at a personal level, it can also sometimes be the case that you, as a student, may find yourself having to deal with a somewhat discrete and personal matter that you would not wish to discuss or share with your DoS or any

other member of the supervisory team. In these sorts of situations, it is quite likely to be the case that your university will have allocated you to an experienced academic who is not a member of your core supervisory team and is therefore independent of it. Indeed, this individual might be working within a completely different academic field. However, their main purpose is not to provide specialist academic guidance for your degree studies, but instead to act as a confidant in the provision of academic-related, and sometimes more personal advice and support, if that should be required. In the University of the Highlands and Islands these individuals are known as Third Party Advisors (TPA). However, beyond these highly useful people, your institution will also have other professional services and pastoral support arrangements in place, which you will be able to access for help and support if you should require it. Quite often, in the University of the Highlands and Islands, TPAs are able to provide a bit of help and support that simply gives an extra boost of confidence that a student may require from time to time, in order to get over a stumbling block of one sort or another.

In our experience, this has often helped to avoid the relatively small issues that can sometimes occur from becoming major challenges and unnecessary impediments to progress. The conversations held between the student and the TPA are confidential, but the TPA can be asked to raise points of concern or issues in a sensitive way with university officers or supervisors, with the permission of the student. However, their main aim is to listen and provide an impartial ear, and thereby to 'hear' the students' concerns and help to provide additional non-specific academic or process-related advice.

Likewise, officers in the Graduate School office (or its equivalent) are also available to help with these matters, and to help address any factual questions relating to student activities or to point students in the direction of some more specialist help and advice that may be required. There will also be a formal and informal complaints procedure available if necessary, in the unusual event that a situation takes a more serious turn for the worse and needs to be dealt with in that way. Once again, the Graduate School or Student Support Services Team (or

equivalent) will be there to help advise you on this, if it should be needed, which it rarely is, thankfully.

Sometimes, a change in membership of the supervisory team can be needed, either because a member of staff leaves to take up a position elsewhere, or for some other reason. The Graduate School Office, the DoS and other supervisors will work with you to help you during this time in order to help achieve the minimum disruption possible to your studies while a replacement/successor is identified (in discussion and agreement with you) and put in place.

Ultimately, if required, there are also processes in place within your institution to help students terminate their studies early, if required, and to do so in the most positive and constructive way possible. Indeed, there are many things that can happen during the course of a research degree, and especially one that is the length of a doctorate, and occasionally these can mean that a student is not able to complete their studies at all, and they have to withdraw. There are also occasions where a temporary suspension of studies is all that is required in order to address a particular

issue and then for the student to be able to pick up their studies again, once the issue has been resolved. These sorts of situations can exist where, for example, a student suffers a health condition that requires an operation that will necessitate a period of recuperation and non-engagement with the PhD, but it can be for a range of reasons.

In sum, the provisions for PhD studies are ordered, but also relatively flexible. It is understood that life continues to take place while you are on the journey, and the institution will be well aware of the sorts of things that can happen, so will do everything possible to help you in any such difficult and challenging personal times that you may face.

Mental good health and wellbeing, and Special Education Needs

It is always important to ensure that students' needs are met in respect of their academic requirements, but it is also understood in present day Higher Education that it is equally important to ensure that there are proper provisions made to help students deal with the emotional and

psychological aspects of long-term engagement with intensive research degree studies. For this reason, any institution that you attend is likely to have a number of resources available for you to access in order to help keep yourself in a state of good mental health. At a minimum, these will include access to a student counselling service as well as to other professional health-related services.

However, if it should be the case that you require a more direct and a deeper level of support that needs to be provided via the NHS, then you need to know that the fact that you are engaged in research degree studies is unlikely to give you a fast-track route into therapeutic care and support. While this is unfortunate, and there are actions underway across the sector to try to ensure that the special requirements of research degree students are taken into account and addressed as quickly as possible, you do need to bear this current situation in mind. Unfortunately, it has to be said that engagement with doctoral studies is not likely to be an entirely stress-free time. This being said, stress that can be caused by the need to work hard and to regular deadlines, as well as the need to trouble-shoot all manner

of issues that come about when undertaking research, can help develop useful resilience, fortitude, patience, creativity and flexibility, which are not unimportant personal (or research) attributes.

Institutions will also endeavour to help students stay connected with each other, and thereby to form mutually supportive groups, which often span a range of discipline areas rather than being restricted to only one, or even only to single cognate areas. It is up to you to decide how much, or how little, you wish to engage with these opportunities. As a PhD/research degree student, you are expected to take responsibility for your own time and activities, and so there are very few things that are mandatory. However, you will be strongly encouraged to keep yourself connected through the provisions that are made available for you to engage with, and thereby avoid falling into the trap of being too isolated and solely focussed on your own niche area of research activity and interest. In other words, it is important to keep things in balance, and to enjoy an appropriate and healthy social life too.

When it comes to Special Education Needs, it has to be said that provisions in UK institutions are greatly improved on what they have been in the past. There is also, however, the practical issue to be acknowledged, that research degree students are working at the highest level of academic endeavour in very specialist fields of study. This may mean that the generic provisions that are available for cohorts of undergraduate students are not always going to be able to meet your own specific academic support needs as fully as might be preferred at the doctoral level. An example might be with respect to very highly specialised assistance with scientific writing that is required for a PhD. Nevertheless, institutions are good at dealing with a growing range of special educational needs, and they will seek to tailor their support in order to meet your own needs as far as they can.

Regrettably, for one reason or another, a number of students do not declare having special educational requirements at the point of application, and so can be part way through their studies before making such a declaration. At a minimum, this creates a delay in providing effective

support to help meet those needs, which is regrettable. Clearly, it is up to an individual to decide if and when to declare that they have a special education need, but we would suggest that it is likely to be most helpful to consider making supervisors and the Graduate School aware of this as early in the process as possible, (even as early as the initial application stage). The answers given by a student with any special needs will not be used to the disadvantage of that student but will instead allow the institution to engage with them in planning for their support and thereby allow the institution to put a good number of special provisions in place so that the student can be properly and effectively supported, right from the word 'go'.

Careers support and placements

Many research degree students do not go on to pursue a formal academic career in a Higher Education Institution. Institutions are aware of this, and so their provisions for careers advice and guidance, and also opportunities for research students to spend some time on a relevant placement, are becoming increasingly common, especially

at the doctoral level. Details about such opportunities may not be available at the time of your registration to study for your degree, not least because these often emerge suddenly, as one-off situations rather than being annual vacancies, and thereby these are beyond an individual university's control. However, information and advice about these opportunities will be circulated to students by the Graduate School office and/or their supervisors when they do arise. It is then up to the student, in discussion and agreement with their supervisors, to decide whether to apply and what to apply for. It is worth bearing in mind, though, that doctoral-level placements are often competitive and highly prized, but they are not always valuable for all PhD students, not least because they extend the time it then takes a student to complete their degree.

An important part of your time spent in your doctoral studies will be in building ties, connections and networks. Your supervisors and other members of the professional services will help support you in accessing these networks, but it is up to you to develop and thereafter maintain these. In doing so, this can be one of the best ways available to secure the

job of your dreams following the successful completion of your research degree. Indeed, engaging in research leading to the co-authoring of academic papers is not an unimportant way of being introduced to the future marketplace, not least for those aspiring to a future career in academic-related positions.

Further Reading

This book has been written more as a 'road map' of the supervision experiences, to guide the process and suggest ideas. It was not intended to provide a comprehensive, fully referenced account of supervision. For those readers who now would like to investigate the subject in more depth, the following three publications are recommended, although of course there will be other relevant literature, and new resources become available regularly.

For the supervisor:

Delamont, S., Atkinson, P. and Parry, O. (2004). *Supervising the doctorate: A guided to success*. Open University Press. ISBN 0-335-21263-8

For the student being supervised:

Phillips, E. M. and Pugh, D. S. (1994). *How to get a PhD: A handbook for students and their supervisors*. Open University Press. ISBN 0-335-19214-9.

For the educationalist wishing to delve more deeply into the background research and analysis of research supervision as an academic:

An excellent resource of the systematic analysis is this annotated bibliography.

Taylor, S. (Ed.) (2019). *The Research Supervisor's Bibliography*. Third Edition. The UK Council for Graduate Education. <https://supervision.ukcge.ac.uk/cms/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Research-Supervisors-Bibliography-Third-Edition-Taylor-UKCGE-Research-Supervisors-Network-Resource.pdf>