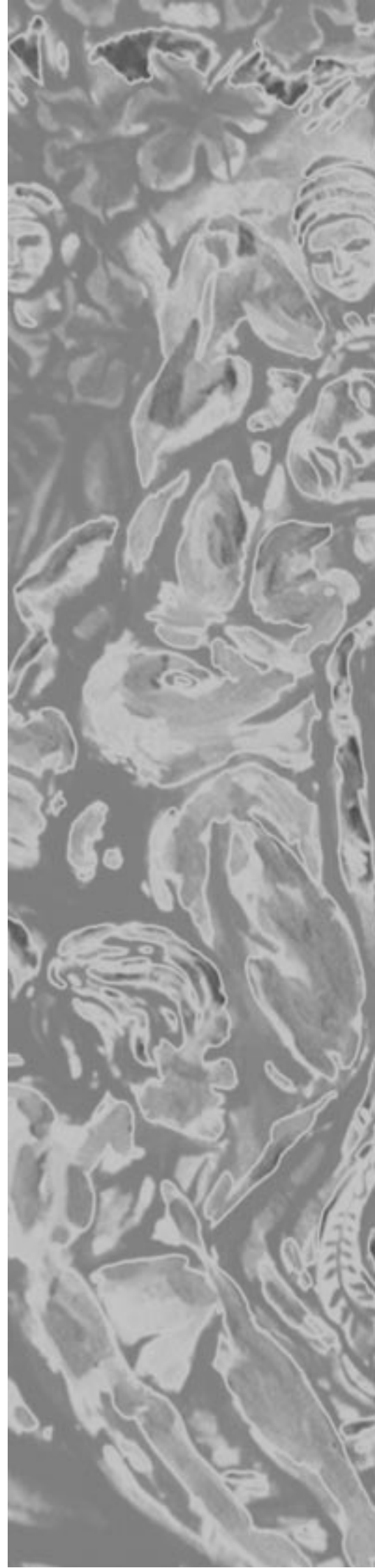


# Doing a Postgraduate Research Degree

A RESEARCH GUIDE

**UCE**  
University  
*of*  
Central England  
*in*  
Birmingham

**Rt*i***  
the research training initiative



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Published by the Research Training Initiative

First Published in 1996

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Available from Birmingham Institute of Art and Design,  
University of Central England, Gosta Green, Birmingham, B4 7DX

ISBN: 1-900813-01-7

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Designed by Jaisha Patel

## Acknowledgments

The editors are grateful to the following individuals for the advice and support given to the project: Brian Allison, De Monfort University; Richard Biddiscombe, University of Birmingham; Margaret Bruce, University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology; Tom Fisher, Sheffield Hallam University; Carole Gray, Gray's School of Art, The Robert Gordon University; John Hockey, Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education; Bob Jerrard, University of Central England; Huw Jones, Middlesex University; Stephen Potter, Open University; Mike Press, Sheffield Hallam University; Alec Robertson, De Montfort University; Pam Schenk, University of Central England; John Swift, University of Central England; Susan Tebby, De Montfort University; and Matthew Turner, Napier University.

Thanks must also go to the staff and students of Birmingham Institute of Art and Design for talking freely of their experiences and needs as postgraduate supervisors and students.

## Background to the project

Recent years have seen a considerably greater emphasis on the importance of good research training and supervision across all disciplines in higher education. Art and design, which lacks the established research traditions common in many other disciplines, is faced with particular problems. There is currently a lack of expertise and supervisory experience in the field, art and design has yet to develop a distinctive academic research culture, and methodological debate is at a formative stage. This is not to say that art and design students are not engaged in research activities. Indeed, they are often engaged in quite sophisticated research at a number of levels, dealing with issues of technology, materials, meaning and communication. However, the lack of developed research perspectives on art and design practice means that much of this kind of activity is not accorded value as research, and as a consequence is not developed systematically to its full potential. It is evident that there is qualitative difference between the pattern of art and design education, which has traditionally ended at Masters level, and the new impetus to pursue research at doctoral level.

One of the most important questions, therefore, is what kind of training is appropriate to postgraduate research in art and design. Although there is a plethora of literature on research, not enough of it is specifically geared to the needs of higher degree students in art and design. In many instances research literature borrowed from other disciplines will prove appropriate to the particular project in hand (though of course it may not). For example, the commitment of art and design students to practical activity needs to be catered for by research training. A practice-based PhD necessitates a different approach to research, and a greater receptiveness to art and design specific research outcomes. Additionally, if the field of art and design is to develop its own distinctive intellectual coherence, then a reflection upon methodology is essential. It is in response to the research training needs of postgraduates in art and design that the Research Training Initiative was formulated, and this series of research guides subsequently published. They are not intended as an exhaustive guide to postgraduate research in art and design, and they certainly do not represent the last word in the debate on the nature of research and training in art and design.

Our aim is rather more modest; to introduce students to the idea of research in art and design, some of the skills they will need to pursue a research project successfully, and some of the resources that may be of use on the way.

### **How to use this guide**

Postgraduate research in art and design is at an important developmental stage. It is important to value the innovations of art and design methodology, whilst at the same time recognising the considerable commonality with research as conducted in other, more established fields of study. This perspective is central to the approach developed in this series of research guides, and we have attempted to maintain a balance between novelty and commonality throughout. The guides are therefore not intended as a prescription for how art and design research should be done, nor a definitive account of some generic research methodology.

The series has four main aims:

- to provide an indication of the nature of postgraduate research in art and design, and the shape of a research degree
- to provide a guide to generic research skills
- to provide a source of information and reference
- to provide a stimulus for debate around the nature and purpose of research in art and design, and the importance of research education and training

The six guides that make up this series are not intended to be used in any particular sequence, though obviously some apply to specific stages in a research programme. The guides provide a companion to the student's own notes on research planning, design and methodology, and a source of reference. Students may wish to refer to the material at various points during the course of their registration, rather than simply read once and file. It is also clear to us that no one publication or series of publications can cater for the full range of postgraduate training needs, even within a single field of study. The publications therefore provide extensive lists of further reading for each area, encouraging students to chart their own individual research programme.

## Introduction

Studying for a postgraduate research degree is a unique educational experience. Most students will find there is very little in their previous educational experience that can be compared with the experience of doing postgraduate research. Postgraduate research demands an extremely high level of investment, both personal and intellectual, and the postgraduate researcher is expected from the outset to assume a considerable degree of responsibility for his or her own learning. Each research degree represents a unique programme of work. To complete a PhD it is necessary by definition to explore avenues of enquiry that have not been explored before. It is for this reason that, as well as being the most demanding, *postgraduate research can be one of the most rewarding educational experiences.*

Students often have very little idea of what a research degree involves, as a consequence many of the expectations they have of the early stages of a research programme are formed in a vacuum. It is unsurprising therefore that many students report an initial sense of disappointment or disorientation early on in their period of registration, feelings increased in many instances by the isolation and lack of peer support for researchers. The aim of this guide is to offer an overview of the process of undertaking a postgraduate research degree. It is hoped that this will enable students to have a clearer vision of the journey they are about to begin. It is not intended as a substitute for information from the supervisor; indeed it should be regarded as a series of issues that the student themselves will need to consider and follow up, within the framework of supervision, during the time of their registration.

The guide is organised under the following seven headings:

- Becoming a Postgraduate
- The Research Proposal
- Transfer to PhD
- Submission and Examination
- Student/Supervisor Relationship
- The Research Environment
- Further Reading

## **Becoming a Postgraduate**

It is almost inevitably the case that in opting to study for an MPhil or PhD you will be embarking on your first major piece of research work. It is unlikely that you will have had previous experience of organising a timetable of work over the three or more years necessary for PhD, or have pursued your interest in a particular topic through to the publication of an original contribution to the understanding of that topic. It is therefore useful to understand something of the shape of a postgraduate research degree, and some of the principal stages or milestones, in order to plan your work over the period of the registration, and to be able to assess progress.

It is generally considered that for a full-time student, a PhD should take between three and four years to complete, and for a part-time student between five and six years. The research councils currently fund full-time students for three years (though the number of completions within the three-year time-scale is currently less than fifty percent). The overall time-scale is important to bear in mind whilst formulating the research proposal. If a project does not appear at the outset to be realistically achievable within such a time-scale, then it may well be over ambitious for a PhD programme.

See also *Designing and Managing a Research Project: A Research Guide*, (Section One)

The period of the research degree usually consists of the following four stages: enrolment; registration; transfer; submission and examination. In some cases, what I refer to as distinct stages, enrolment and registration, may effectively take place simultaneously. Similarly, for those students who register and complete either MPhil or PhD direct, the transfer stage does not apply.

Enrolment is the point at which the individual becomes a research student. This does not, however, mean that a particular programme of research needs to have been endorsed. It merely implies that the student is considered suitable to undertake such work. Putting together a research proposal which satisfies the university's research degrees committee is then the responsibility of the student, with support and advice from his or her supervisor. The student becomes formally registered when a programme of research has been approved. At some universities the candidate is expected to orally defend the proposal at faculty level prior to it being seen by the university research degrees committee.

I have chosen to make a distinction between enrolment and registration because it is important to realise that it is not necessary to have a fully worked out research problem and programme of work prior to approaching a particular institution. Some students may have identified a specific topic for research in their own experience of art and design practice, or whilst studying at Masters level. All that is then required is to find suitable institutional and supervisory support. For others it may be necessary to do some preliminary research and reading in a general area of interest, and under the guidance of a supervisor; before a research problem can be formulated.

In some instances it is the supervisor, rather than the student who is the source of the research problem. It is common for universities to advertise for research assistants to work on specific projects, which later develop into PhD programmes. Less common in art and design, though a standard approach in the sciences, is for several research students to be working on one part of large research project, coordinated by one or more supervisors.

## The Research Proposal

In a recently published consultative document on good practice in postgraduate research, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council outline five key issues that should be considered when selecting an individual for a research degree.\* Although only a small amount of research in art and design is conducted under the auspices of the EPSRC, these five issues are sufficiently generic to be applicable in all disciplines, and as such provide a framework for thinking about the suitability of any research proposal:

- viability of the project
- availability of resources
- academic ability and motivation of the student
- adequacy of supervision
- adequacy of the research environment

It is obviously of considerable importance that the research proposal is a viable prospect. One of the most frequent comments made by supervisors on draft research proposals concerns the over-ambitious nature of the project. It must be remembered that although a PhD does require a significant contribution to knowledge, the contribution may be relatively small in relation to the state of knowledge in the field as a whole. A PhD project should be realistically achievable in the three to four year (full-time) time-scale. The proposal needs to have sufficient depth to allow a contribution to knowledge to emerge, but not so much scope that it cannot realistically be achieved in a reasonable time-scale. It is also important to consider the intellectual coherence of the proposal, for example is the proposed methodology appropriate for answering the research question posed, and its relation to existing work. *Research does not occur in a vacuum, but builds gradually on existing knowledge.*

\* EPSRC (1995)  
*Postgraduate Research:  
A Guide to good  
practice in engineering  
and physical sciences.*

See also National  
Postgraduate  
Committee (1994)  
*Guidelines on  
Accommodation and  
Facilities for  
Postgraduate Research.*

Obviously the viability of any project will need to be discussed in depth between supervisor and student, and the supervisor's experience of research and knowledge of the subject area should enable them to advise the student on the achievability of their proposed project, and any potential pitfalls.

It is important for research students to consider the various resources they will need to complete the research. If, for example, the project requires archival research, are the archives accessible, does the student have sufficient funds to travel to them enough times to make the project realisable? Does the student have access to word processing facilities? Are the library facilities good enough to support the proposal? If the proposal involves practical art or design work, do they have the requisite materials and a suitable space to work? Although in many instances these are questions which need to be answered at an institutional level, it is extremely important for the student to make sure that they have available what they need; three or more years work depend on it. These issues may be particularly acute for part-time and self-funding students, and should be given due consideration at the time of registration.

In putting together a research proposal candidates will be expected show that they have the academic ability to carry the project through to successful completion. This can be assessed in two principal ways. Most commonly, prospective research students will be expected to have achieved an undergraduate, or in many instances, preferably taught postgraduate, degree in the same or related area as the proposed research. Additionally an academic reference may be required. It is also possible (and this is quite common in art and design) to demonstrate the ability to carry out a programme of research on the basis of significant experience in the area of proposed research, for example fine art or design practice, or design management experience in industry.

The level of qualifications and experience will determine whether or not a programme of related studies, or a taught research methods course is necessary to support the proposal. In most instances, unless this has been covered at masters level, the latter is desirable, particularly if the student can tailor his or her attendance at sessions to suit their particular project, and that it does not create an excessive workload. It is common practice for students to attend parts of research methods courses aimed at masters level, and not to be assessed formally on them.

*Good supervision is the cornerstone of good practice in postgraduate research.*

A research proposal is unlikely to be accepted if this cannot be demonstrated. One of the main qualifications a supervisor needs is to have supervised at least one student to completion successfully. This is usually a requirement in most universities, with new staff teamed with experienced supervisors to gain the requisite experience. It is also worth noting that some institutions are introducing training courses for supervisors, which may prove an alternative route to becoming a supervisor; or, more likely, a useful complement to actual supervisory experience.

It is increasingly common to think in terms of a supervisory team, rather than the single supervisor. This can be particularly valuable in that it can be a means of combining subject specialist knowledge with supervisory experience, without this having to be found in the same person. This may be particularly useful in some areas of art and design research, where subject specialist knowledge could be provided by someone outside of academia, combined with a supervisor based in the university who knows about the process of doing a research degree.

This may also appeal to the criteria of 'relevance' that the research councils and other funding sources demand. It is likely that the experienced academic would be the main supervisor, available on a week to week basis, with a second supervisor providing specialist knowledge at key stages in the research. Some universities require a rationale for the composition of the supervisory team to be stated. A team approach to supervision can also provide continuity if one supervisor is unavailable for some time, or pulls out of the supervision altogether, for whatever reason.

The adequacy of the research environment will depend to some extent on the individual student. Some students may need a greater degree of peer support; other students may only want to meet with other students in order to discuss the research itself. The kind of research environment that is provided at a particular institution may well be something the student should consider before making a commitment to that institution. It is also important to consider the wider research environment, does the area of research have a number of journals and conferences to provide an outlet for the research findings? Is there an national or international community of researchers working in the particular field? The answers to these questions and their significance will depend on the particular project. The benefits of an active research environment are discussed below.

### **Transfer to PhD**

A large proportion of students register for MPhil in the first instance, and then, provided satisfactory progress is made, transfer to PhD. This usually occurs 12-18 months from the start of registration for full-time students, and by the end of the second year for part-time students, though the particular point at which to apply varies for each individual student, and the progress that has been achieved.

It is important to realise that upgrading to PhD is not automatic, and that it is the student's responsibility to present a case for transfer. This usually involves producing a report of between 3000 and 6000 words, outlining the progress made over the first phase of the programme. In traditional academic disciplines this will generally involve the completion of the literature review, and the identification of the research problem in relation to the literature, effectively a draft of the first chapter. However, although a critical review of existing literature remains important in art and design PhD's, for some registrations it may be a critical review of practice which is the source of a research topic. In other instances there may be no established body of literature that exists, or the research topic may necessitate drawing on a range of more disparate sources.

The transfer report will also be expected to give *a clear indication of the contribution to knowledge that is likely to emerge*. This will be the most significant factor in deciding whether or not the project is suitable for upgrading. Some institutions also have an oral examination of the candidate, involving someone outside of the supervisory team, as part of the transfer process.

If the initial registration involved the student taking some taught components, for example a research methods course, then transfer will also be dependent on the satisfactory completion of these.

The process of transfer highlights all the critical elements of the research:

- the clarity of student vision
- the proper and effective composition of the supervisory team
- the coherence of the advice offered to the student
- the mechanisms in place to ensure harmony between members of the supervisory team and regular communication
- a clearly agreed means of evaluating the work achieved
- a clear understanding of the expected roles to be adopted by team members

Observation of transfer reports over a number of years suggests it is possible to identify three types of transfer. Needless to say, these are only typifications for the purpose of illustration. Most transfers exhibit characteristics from one or more of the types suggested:

### **The ‘straight though’**

The programme of work is envisaged as a seamless task, and it is declared that each part is of equal status and cannot be analytically prioritised. It is usually supervisors who offer this version. There may be a distinct disinclination to open discussion of specialist research to a non-specialist audience. However, this can be a risky strategy. *Non-specialist advice often raises very salient and significant questions that one’s colleagues within a discipline would be embarrassed to raise with a supervisor.*

See also *The Structure of Research Degrees in Art and Design: Possible Models in Designing and Managing a Research Project: A Research Guide.*

### **The ‘two part’ thesis**

This is often evident in scientific and engineering applications (but widespread in social science and humanities also). A preliminary piece of work (like the design and construction of a particular apparatus, or a mapping of the field) is deemed to be necessary before the doctoral programme can be undertaken. There is a clear expectation of what the doctoral programme will look like, but a requirement to undertake preliminary work.

Transfer reports from such programmes are, of necessity, very varied in their approach, but normally exhibit a clear understanding of what has been accomplished and the problems to be surmounted.

### **The ‘exploratory’ thesis**

It is sometimes argued that if one knows the shape of the work before it starts, one is in danger of working in predetermined ways and reaching stale and unexciting results. To avoid such risk some supervisors and students are reluctant to speculate ahead of field work what the thesis will contain. Within the restrictions of research degree regulations supervisors advise students to offer a fairly broad and standard format for MPhil and to reserve ‘the real argument’ until transfer.

Transfer reports composed from such a starting point usually show an enthusiasm (and relief) for a theoretical and methodological breakthrough accomplished prior to transfer.

## Submission and Examination

All institutions have regulations regarding the submission of theses. It is important, as well as considering the substantial work of the thesis, to consider the form of presentation. Particular regulations about the binding of the thesis, the spacing of text on the page, the wording on the title page, must all be observed.

For many submissions in art and design there is also the question of whether or not creative or visual work is part of the submission. It is usual to insist on a permanent and publicly accessible form for each part of the submission. For sculptural work, for example, this could involve a photographic record of the work bound into the thesis. In other instances a video recording may be suitable. If the research is wholly or partly of a practical nature it is important that these considerations are addressed early on in the research programme, and not left until the last stages.

The examination process is normally in two stages. Once the thesis has been submitted, the examiners are sent a copy and asked to prepare a preliminary report. This is to indicate whether the thesis provisionally fulfils the requirements of the degree. It is possible for the thesis to be referred for further work at this stage, however, if there is disagreement it is usual to proceed to the second stage. The second stage of the examination procedure is an oral examination of the candidate. The oral examination is intended to confirm that the thesis is the candidate's own work, and that they are able satisfactorily to defend their analysis of the findings of the research and the methods used. The oral examination is also intended to test the student's knowledge of the field beyond the narrow topic of the thesis.

Of course, the most desirable outcome of the examination process is a straightforward acceptance of the thesis. However, it is quite common for the examiners to recommend that the thesis be accepted subject to minor amendments, with detailed guidance on these amendments being given. Provided the student completes these within a specified time limit the thesis is accepted without any re-examination.

See also *Presenting Research Findings: A Research Guide* and *Research Perspectives in Art and Design: Case Studies*

If the examiners ask for major revisions then this will involve the student going through the examination process a second time, though this will not necessarily require a second viva. It is also possible in the case of a submission for PhD, that the examiners recommend the award of an MPhil. This would indicate that the thesis was such that it was deemed unlikely of being revised in such a way as to make it suitable for PhD.

### **Student/Supervisor Relationship**

The relationship between student and supervisor is crucial to the success of all research degree registrations. It is therefore of some considerable importance that students have some idea of the role of the supervisor and some of the ways in which this may be interpreted by different supervisors. It is also important for students to realise that they are not merely on the receiving end of supervision, but must, if they are to receive maximum benefit from it, play an active role in defining the supervisory relationship. There are benefits in the supervisory relationship for both parties. Students receive expert guidance in a particular field of study; supervisors will update and extend their knowledge of the field through their privileged position in relation to the student's research. Successful supervision is also a mark of academic success. Many students and supervisors emphasise the personal rewards that they derive from the relationship, which is often one of personal friendship as well as a professional arrangement.

There are three key areas in which a student can expect supervisory support, each of which may vary depending on the particular supervisory style adopted:

- expert subject knowledge
- guidance in the management of the research
- pastoral support

It is obviously important that within their supervisory team the student has someone who can offer specialist subject knowledge (though this need not be the principal supervisor).

Depending on the previous experience of the candidate and the nature of the research, the supervisor may be expected to provide a guided reading programme in the initial stages of the project. In most instances the key to the supervisory relationship is an interactive discussion of the research, based on the regular submission of work by the student. The amount of work and deadlines for submission are obviously a matter for negotiation. For researchers in art and design this dialogue may take place around practical research outcomes, though in many instances writing still occupies a key place in the research process, even where it is subordinate to art and design practice.

The degree to which the supervisor will want to manage the research programme is dependent on supervisory style, and may be a point of negotiation between student and supervisor. Some supervisors, particularly in the early stages of the research programme, tend to adopt a hands-on approach, whereas others leave the timing of the stages of the research very much up to the student. It is often noted that students tend to rush into the data collection stage of the research before they have defined the research problem sufficiently clearly, and this could become a point of conflict over the management of the research. It is important that supervisors advise students on potential pitfalls, though ultimately the responsibility for the project belongs with the student. It is good practice for a record of supervisory meetings to be kept, detailing any key decisions that have been made about the research programme.

There can be considerable variation in the degree of pastoral responsibility that the supervisor feels for the student, and this will depend greatly on the age and experience of both. However, given that postgraduate research is a long term, and at times stressful, process it is valuable for the student to have someone who they can turn to for advice. The difficulties of maintaining the momentum of a part-time registration over five or six years may be insurmountable for most students without the support that is provided by a sympathetic, and at times enthusiastic, supervisor. The availability of the supervisor for meetings is also important to consider in this respect.

It is important to realise that the 'culture of supervision' is crucial to the style of output of a research programme. In some disciplines the culture is sufficiently strong to make alternative formats almost unthinkable. The culture of supervision entails styles of working. Among these, three types are worth considering:

### **'dominant supervision'**

The director of studies insists that s/he is the centre of the network. Second supervisors are occasionally shown the work as a formality when absolutely necessary, and may not be shown the final text.

### **'prima inter pares'**

The director of studies provides the focus for the work. The student is directed to second supervisors for specialist advice, which is respected for its discipline authority.

The burden of co-ordination still falls on the director of studies but she takes advice from her co-supervisors.

### **'collaborative supervision'**

The student meets each supervisor on a regular basis and a record of the meetings is circulated around the team. The supervisors meet when appropriate (and feasible, given that they may be geographically dispersed) and comment to each other and the student on at least a semi-annual basis their views on progress in the programme and solutions to any problems which are signalled.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the supervisory relationship is not settled once and for all at the outset. If the research and the supervision are successful, then the relationship is an evolving one. The student should move from an initial dependence on the supervisor to independence, indeed to a position where the supervisor stands to learn as much from the student as the student has learnt from them. The award of the PhD is a recognition that the student is capable of supervising their own research, and that they are accepted as having an independent and equal contribution to make to the field of study.

## The Research Environment

One of the most common complaints from students is the sense of isolation that accompanies postgraduate research. This problem may be particularly acute in art and design, where until recently there has been only a very small number of higher degree registrations as well as a relative lack of institutional and peer support for researchers.

It is important that postgraduate researchers develop a broader awareness of, and contact with, research communities beyond the student/supervisor relationship, crucial though that is. There are principally two kinds of research environment that students can benefit from. Firstly, *students benefit from being part of a community of research students*. This does not need to be discipline specific, indeed many students feel that they benefit from contact with research students outside of their narrow area of specialism. Active involvement in this kind of research environment will benefit students in a number of ways, by providing: general peer support for sharing experiences of postgraduate life; a broader perspective on the nature of research and the framing of one's own topic; opportunities to enhance communication skills in presenting research to an interested, though not specialist, audience. This kind of research environment is best provided within institutions, though electronic communication can facilitate a wider base for such peer support. Many supervisors emphasise the additional social function that is fulfilled by taught research methods courses, or research colloquia.

The second kind of research environment is the community of researchers working in the particular field of study. Although art and design does not have the longer research tradition common in other disciplines, recent years have seen considerable development in this area. There are a range of national and international journals, regular conferences, supporting networks and even electronic discussion lists. It is important that research students also involve themselves in this kind of research environment, particularly through conference attendance, and begin to consider their own work as a contribution to debate at this level.

## Further Reading

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Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (1995) *Postgraduate Research: A guide to good practice in engineering and physical sciences*. Swindon: EPSRC.

Hetrick, S., & Trafford, V. (1995) The Mutuality of Expectations: Mapping the Perceptions of Dissertation Supervisors and Candidates in a Postgraduate Department of a New University. *Research Student Supervision: Management and Practice*. Conference Proceedings, University of Bristol, 1-2 August 1995.

Consideration of the differences in expectations of postgraduate students and supervisors, and the potential for conflict that may be present from the beginning of the supervisory process.

Hockey, J. (1995) *Supervisor's Troubles: A Contractual Solution in Social Science PhD. Research Student Supervision: Management and Practice*. Conference Proceedings, University of Bristol, 1-2 August 1995.

Exploration of the use of a written contract as a means of avoiding or resolving conflict between supervisor and student. Although based on research in the social sciences, the approach may be of use across other disciplines.

Hockey, J. (1995) *Getting Too Close: A Problem and Possible Solution in Social Science PhD Supervision*. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 23(2): 199-210.

Explores the conflict between the intellectual and pastoral responsibilities of the supervisor. Considers the problem of over-involvement, and proposes pastoral skills training for supervisors.

McWilliam, E. (1993) "Post" haste: plodding research and galloping theory. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 19(3): 199-205.

Explores the experience of doing original research over several years in a time of rapid theoretical change in education and the social sciences. Apparent speed of theoretical advance versus the time taken for empirical research.

National Postgraduate Committee (1992) *Guidelines on Codes of Practice for Postgraduate Research*. Troon: NPC.

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Phillips, E.M. & Pugh, D.S. (1994) *How to Get a Ph.D: A Handbook for Students and their Supervisors*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Emphasis on the experience of being a postgraduate student or supervisor and common problems. Includes a section on the experience of postgraduate study for women and students from ethnic minorities.

Salmon, P. (1992) *Achieving a PhD: Ten students' experience*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.

The author's reflections on ten of her students' experiences studying for PhD. Strong emphasis on humanistic and qualitative research in the social sciences. Argues strongly for one particular version of the relationship between student and supervisor, and researcher and subject.

Skuse, T. (1995) Peer Support for Postgraduate Students. *Research Student Supervision: Management and Practice*. Conference Proceedings, University of Bristol, 1-2 August 1995.

One student's experience of setting up a national network of research students in a particular research field (Network for Postgraduate Research into Adolescence). Intended as a non discipline specific model for postgraduate peer support.

**Notes**

Notes

ISBN 1-900813-01-7

