HOW TO GET A PhD
Third edition
HOW TO GET A PhD
A handbook for students
and their supervisors

THIRD EDITION
revised and updated

ESTELLE M. PHILLIPS
and
DEREK S. PUGH

OPEN UNIVERSITY PRESS
Buckingham · Philadelphia
CONTENTS

Preface to the third edition xv

1 Becoming a postgraduate 1
   The nature of postgraduate education 1
   The psychology of being a postgraduate 4
   The aims of this book 4
   Action summary 5

2 Getting into the system 6
   Choosing the institution and field of study 6
   Distance supervision? 8
   Choosing your work context 10
   Selecting your supervisor 11
   Becoming a research student 13
   Myths and realities of the system 14
      The ‘ivory tower’ 14
      Personal relationships 14
      Teamworking 15
      ‘Scientific method’ 16
   Action summary 18

3 The nature of the PhD qualification 19
   The meaning of a doctorate 19
### HOW TO GET A PhD

- Becoming a fully professional researcher  
- Differences between the MPhil and the PhD  
- Aims of students  
- Aims of supervisors  
- Aims of examiners  
- Aims of universities and research councils  
- Mismatches and problems  
- Action summary

### 4 How not to get a PhD

- Not wanting a PhD  
- Not understanding the nature of a PhD by overestimating what is required  
- Not understanding the nature of a PhD by underestimating what is required  
- Not having a supervisor who knows what a PhD requires  
- Losing contact with your supervisor  
- Not having a thesis  
- Taking a new job before finishing  
- Action summary

### 5 How to do research

- Characteristics of research  
- Intelligence-gathering – the ‘what’ questions  
- Research – the ‘why’ questions  
- Characteristics of good research  
  - *Research is based on an open system of thought*  
  - *Researchers examine data critically*  
  - *Researchers generalize and specify the limits on their generalizations*  
- Basic types of research  
  - *Exploratory research*  
  - *Testing-out research*  
  - *Problem-solving research*  
- Which type of research for the PhD?  
- The craft of doing research  
- Self-help and peer support groups  
  - *Electronic peer groups*  
- Action summary
6 The form of a PhD thesis
Understanding the PhD form 58
Background theory 59
Focal theory 60
Data theory 61
Contribution 61
The concept of originality 63
Detailed structure and choice of chapter headings 65
Writing the thesis 66
Action summary 72

7 The PhD process
Psychological aspects 75
Enthusiasm 75
Isolation 75
Increasing interest in work 77
Transfer of dependence from the supervisor to the work 77
Boredom 79
Frustration 80
A job to be finished 81
Euphoria 83
Others ‘getting in first’ 83
Practical aspects 85
Time management 85
The duration of the process 87
The stages of the process 89
Redefining long-term and short-term goals 91
The importance of deadlines 93
To publish or not to publish prior to submission? 95
Teaching whilst studying for a PhD 97
Casual teaching 97
Teaching assistantships 98
Action summary 98

8 How to manage your supervisor
What supervisors expect of their doctoral students 100
Supervisors expect their students to be independent 100
Supervisors expect their students to produce written work that is not just a first draft 102
HOW TO GET A PhD

Supervisors expect to have regular meetings with their research students 103
Supervisors expect their research students to be honest when reporting on their progress 104
Supervisors expect their students to follow the advice that they give, when it has been given at the request of the postgraduate 105
Supervisors expect their students to be excited about their work, able to surprise them and fun to be with! 105

The need to educate your supervisor 107
How to reduce the communication barrier 109
  Improving tutorials 110
Changing supervisors 113
Joint supervision 116
Inappropriate personal relationships in supervision 118
Action summary 119

9 How to survive in a predominantly British, white, male, full-time academic environment 121
Part-time students 121
Overseas students 123
Ethnic minorities 129
  Racial harassment 131
Women students 132
  Difficulties concerning legitimacy of topics and methodology 133
  Problems of communication, debate and feedback 134
  Scarcity of academic role models 135
  Sexual harassment and exploitation 137
Gay and lesbian students 140
  Heterosexist harassment 140
Mature students 141
Students with disabilities 143
  Harassment of people with a disability 143
Action summary 144

10 The formal procedures 147
Registration 147
Grants and research support 149
Upgrading to doctoral student status 150
The examination system 150
  Giving notice of submission 150
  The appointment of examiners 151
  Submitting the thesis 151
  The oral examination – the ‘viva’ 152
  Preparing for the viva 153
  The results of the examination 155
The appeals procedures 158
Litigation 159
Action summary 160

11 How to supervise and examine 161
What students expect of their supervisors 161
  Students expect to be supervised 162
  Students expect supervisors to read their work well in advance 164
  Students expect their supervisors to be available when needed 165
  Students expect their supervisors to be friendly, open and supportive 166
  Students expect their supervisors to be constructively critical 167
  Students expect their supervisors to have a good knowledge of the research area 168
  Students expect their supervisors to structure the tutorial so that it is relatively easy to exchange ideas 169
  Students expect their supervisors to have sufficient interest in their research to put more information in the students’ path 171
  Students expect supervisors to be sufficiently involved in their success to help them get a good job at the end of it all! 171
Establishing a role model 172
Teaching the craft of research 173
  Giving effective feedback 173
  Introducing a structured ‘weaning’ programme 179
Maintaining a helpful ‘psychological contract’ 182
Encouraging students’ academic role development 184
Supervising your research assistant 185
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes of good supervision</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to examine</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The oral examination</em></td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action summary</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Institutional responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing support to students</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A structured induction procedure</em></td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities for departments to support doctoral research activity</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A handbook for university research degree students</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language support where necessary</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing resources for supervisors</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The training of supervisors</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching credit for doctoral supervision</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty/departmental doctoral research tutor</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing appropriate regulations</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring of students’ progress</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upgrading from MPhil to PhD registration</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appointment of external examiners</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing a forum for review of the PhD</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The PhD as a series of projects</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual copyright and appropriate recognition for doctoral students’ work</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The PhD in a practice-based discipline</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Departmental responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing a departmental research tutor</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving the selection of students into the department</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of supervisors</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing guidelines on appropriate supervisory behaviour</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support groups for research students</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considering and, if appropriate, establishing a doctoral programme</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The American doctoral programme</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The scientific research programme</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The doctoral cohort system</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

The gratifying response to the previous editions of this book, and the increasing number of translations into other languages testify to the need of research students and their supervisors to understand the processes of effective doctoral education. This need is reinforced in view of the considerable institutional change taking place in the higher education system. Since our first edition opened up the subject for debate, a number of other books have entered the field. The Open University has presented a tutorial pack on doctoral research and in the University of Manchester a study guide to this book has been developed. It is therefore appropriate to offer a third edition, revised and updated to the present situation.

One comment made in the generally favourable reviews of the first edition deserves attention here. In our analysis of the complex tasks of PhD study, we describe the difficulties which may be encountered. This is in order to enable both students and supervisors to avoid such problems or to overcome them. It has been suggested that this inevitably gives too great a focus on the 'pathologies' of the doctoral process. We fear that this may be true, and so we should like to reiterate here the positive aspects of being a PhD student. The joys of doing research are considerable, and anyone in a position to carry out research is indeed privileged. Feelings of exploration, excitement, challenge, involvement and passion are
frequent and are commented on in this book. The enormous feeling of achievement on the award of the degree lasts for many throughout their whole lives. Clearly the process is very rewarding otherwise so many would not have carried it through to success.

This book has grown out of EMP’s own PhD research, a continuing series of studies of research students, our experience of supervising and examining doctoral students and the seminar on the process of PhD-getting conducted by DSP for a number of years at the London Business School and subsequently by both of us at the Open University. We should like to acknowledge the help of all those who contributed to those activities over the years and who form the ‘cast of characters’ in this book. We learned a lot from all of them and we are most grateful.

A number of colleagues and students commented on the first edition of this book. We should like to thank Dr Rachel Asch, Professor David Blackburn, Professor Sidney Greenbaum, Dr Jean Hartley, Professor David Hickson, Dr Paul Long, Dr Simon Marvin, Dr Helena Pugh, Natalie Pugh and Martin Sullivan. For the second edition Ann Melling of the Open University Business School was extremely helpful in translating disks between the authors’ incompatible word processing systems.

For the third edition we benefitted from membership of the National Postgraduate Network’s Internet conference. This helped to keep us in touch with the concerns of current doctoral students. Jane Iremonger and Sarah Wilcox at the Royal College of Art, Dr Beryl Graham at the University of Sunderland and Erica Halvorsen at the Association of University Teachers sent us useful material. Professor David Guest and Dr Diana Leonard were both very helpful in answering some questions at short notice. Sue Marshall at the Open University Business School gave background support. We are grateful to all of them.

Finally, our most heartfelt thanks go to Natalie Pugh for her continuous support and hospitality which made the writing of all three editions of this book, necessarily within strict deadlines, a comfortable rather than a stressful experience.
This book is a handbook and a survival manual for PhD students. If you are intending to embark on a research degree it will introduce you to the system and, by increasing your understanding, help you to improve your choice of university, college, department and supervisor.

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

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

### The nature of postgraduate education

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

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

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

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

The overall university framework for research students ensures that there is a basic similarity for all doctoral candidates as they progress through their studies. But there are also some notable differences between the research cultures of university disciplines, particularly between the culture of the laboratory-based sciences and that of the humanities and social sciences. To a considerable extent they stem from the large capital investment in equipment and materials required in scientific research. The supervisor in science has to take the lead in obtaining the physical resources and
the research personnel required. A studentship may be allocated, and a doctoral student recruited, specifically to work on a designated line of research. In this situation the ‘apprenticeship’ aspect of being a doctoral student is emphasized. The student’s research topic will be clearly defined to fit in with the innovative thrust of the supervisor’s research programme, and this will set limits to the level of research creativity that can be shown. The student will be required to do ‘dogsbody’ work in the laboratory or on the computer as part of professional training. In these situations there develops what might be called a ‘joint ownership’ of the doctoral research between the supervisor and the student. The supervisor will have a strong interest in getting the research work done and using the results obtained. Joint papers will be the norm. The danger to watch for in this culture is the exploitation of the student, leading to the feeling of being just an extra pair of hands for the supervisor’s research. It must be remembered that there has to be a sufficient amount of autonomy for the student to be able to make an original contribution. It is this which justifies the award of the PhD degree.

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

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

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

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

The aims of this book

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

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

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

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

### Action summary

1. Be aware that in doctoral education you are under your own management and have the responsibility for determining what is required as well as for carrying it out.
2. You will experience periods of self-doubt which you must come through with the clear aim of becoming a competent professional researcher.
3. Read this book for insights into the PhD research learning process, to help you manage it better.