

Concern Over Completion Rates

This case study was originally developed by:

Erika Martens, Academic Development Unit, LaTrobe University

© Copyright FIRST Consortium 2001

Results of exit interviews in Health Sciences

I had two supervisors, my principal supervisor had a PhD. The other didn't. My supervisors didn't know each other very well and it took a long time to find a spot in all our diaries for meetings. Then when I got there it took half the meeting for me to get them up to date again. After a while, I hardly saw the principal supervisor and lost a lot of time with the other one. She seemed very uncomfortable with me and took ages to give me my stuff back. Then the only comments on my drafts were spelling and punctuation errors. It took me a long time before I was able to change supervisors. I found there was nobody in the department who had the ability to define my area and to force me to set a crisp research question until my last supervisor came into the department. She has a lot of experience in writing papers and has a PhD close to the area I work in. In the last year with her I did more than in the previous 3 with my other supervisors.

My supervisor was really good. He was caring and very supportive. He was the only lecturer who was willing to take on my slightly strange and outlandish topic. It took him a fair while to get into it and I had to give him lots of reading, so he could inform himself a bit. He had a lot of other students and he did that for all of them. He was fairly slow giving back comments on drafts, because he had such a big load of postgraduates. When I got into trouble with my methodology, it took him a while to find somebody who could advise me. He was very sad when I gave up.

My department doesn't have a student voice. Many research students are professionals in their own right and have families. Nevertheless, the department still expects us all to be there all day or to be able to attend during working hours without much prior warning. I found it really hard to find out what research really is. My professional background doesn't have a research component and I lost a lot of time understanding what to do. I only understood after my first chapter was finally finished, but this was well into the second year.

I have always been pretty good at academic stuff and I had a research job before I got to university. It was frustrating, however, not to have any theses in my field to model myself on. It is such a tall order to be the first in a new area. Most of the staff hadn't done any research and the few who had, had done their research in other fields or so long ago, that they didn't know either. Nevertheless, I was pushed to set a high standard. My supervisors are probably more worried about the result than I. They took months to find suitable examiners. Even though I was supported by my supervisors, some of the older staff didn't really know what to do with me. I have heard that in some schools students are funded to go to conferences to give papers. Staff in my school always claimed that they get no money to go themselves and expect postgrads to pay for interlibrary loans of periodicals and monographs from overseas.

Results of exit interviews in Humanities/ Social Sciences

I was never able to find my supervisor. When he wasn't on leave, he was busy doing his research at home. During the semester I had to 'book' a time weeks in advance. Often I had forgotten what I was so enthusiastic or worried about by the time I finally could see him. I was shocked when he told me after 3 years that I wasn't progressing well and that he would recommend that I give up my Masters. I thought that I had done quite well.

I was my supervisor's first candidate and we basically did the thing together. We were peers more than anything else. The good thing was that we could be honest with each other. When I wasn't getting enough input she'd look around for somebody I could speak to. Towards the end of my candidature I had to look around myself for some people who could be my examiners. I found five. When two from my list declined and one was sick my thesis went to somebody who didn't have a clue about my theoretical approach and suggested I rewrite the whole thing! Thank God, the Professor of my school found a third examiner in Sweden who not only passed it but recommended that I publish it!

My supervisor took me on even though he wasn't interested in my topic. At the time I thought this wouldn't matter, but I soon found out that he would not read the things he needed to in order to assess my material. He nevertheless commented on what I was doing, mostly negatively. I had to switch supervisors three times during my candidature: once because my supervisor had to go on leave overseas, once because my supervisor left because she took up a better job in a different university, and once because I couldn't get on with the supervisor I was given after the first one left. The school had no policy on selection of supervisors and I was simply handed around until I made a fuss and insisted I work with the best person around. After reading and searching for 3 years, I was pushed by my new supervisor to write a paper for a conference at my own university. The discussion and comments on that paper were so interesting that I suddenly had my research question. From then on I made quite speedy progress. Why didn't this happen a bit earlier?

Postgraduate students in this department are just as low as undergraduates. The staff don't want to know about them. We aren't allowed to use their tea room, we have no representative on the school committee and when we have postgraduate research seminars, they whinge that they have to attend. Some of them even bring their marking along to impress us with how busy they are! I find it is unfair that students who are supervised by the 'big shots' in the departments are getting more support and encouragement (ie. Travel funds, co-publication offers, conference support, tutoring opportunities) than those who are part-time and who are not supervised by one of the two Professors.