Managing the Expectations of Doctoral Students and Their Supervisors: A UK Perspective

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The management of expectations in doctoral education relates to the negotiation and agreement of a learning contract denoting actions and initiatives between a student and a supervisor. A learning contract is a set of understandings of what things, actions and initiatives might reasonably be expected from whom, in the course of learning, where there is a natural power imbalance. This is important so that both scholarly and material progress can be made along all points of the doctoral learning experience, i.e., that learning is personalised, professional and productive towards an original contribution of knowledge. It is the evidencing of this continual learning process through research that is deemed to be doctoral at the final examination stage. A doctoral student is a learner on the highest degree pathway that is available at all UK universities. This typically results in a thesis, marking the end point of being supervised whereupon an assessment or examination takes place, which, in UK universities, is called a viva voce (Latin: the living voice). This is a verbal account or defence of the thesis document by the student, made to two or three examiners who comprise the examination team. In the UK, the viva examination is a private event, while elsewhere, for example, across Europe and North America, the examination can be a public event. A student on a doctoral programme usually has a period of registration that is 3 years full-time or 6 years part-time. Other terms that can be used interchangeably around doctoral supervision are candidate (for the student) and candidature, which is their period of registration. Supervisors also have roles denoted as the Director of Studies (DoS) or Principal Investigator (PI). The supervision team is led by a Director of Studies (or PI) who is often the most experienced scholar who teaches, guides and mentors their student's learning through the research they conduct. There are usually at least two supervisors in a supervision team in the UK, but there can be more as required depending upon the specialisms and topics being researched. Expectations formed by either the student or the supervisor(s) can be about physical resources to embark upon a passage of learning through a doctoral programme, or more typically, the discussion of expectations relates to managing the behaviours of students and supervisors in their respective roles. Managed expectations help to achieve a balance between the intellectual sharing of expertise by the supervisor with the self-directed initiatives for learning, which are taken by the student. The aim of managing expectations is to help a student move from dependence in their learning at the start of their programme to becoming an independent doctoral-level scholar who, once graduated as doctor, can act autonomously to conduct their own research, or even embark upon supervising others' research in the future.

Keywords: expectations ; doctoral student ; postgraduate research supervision ; learning

To explain some strategies and offer the best advice for managing the expectations of doctoral students and their supervisors, this entry paper is structured around three core domains for effective, ongoing doctoral supervision. That is, this paper focuses on managing expectations around the following:

- **Topic selection:** A discussion about methodological choices and intellectual freedoms;
- **Contact and involvement:** Degrees of contact in the learning relationship;
- **Thesis/dissertation:** Producing a thesis that is worthy of examination.

The case for managing the expectations of both doctoral students and supervisors during the course of research is well established as being institutionally good practice, as it relates to the flow and openness of communication in learning and therefore affects the quality of experience of being either (a) a doctoral student or (b) the supervisor of doctoral students. Managing the expectations of learners is not a new concept, nor is that of professionalising supervision practice to enhance the quality of the student experience; however, since the 2000s, there has been an increasing return to Higher Education from the undergraduate ranks to postgraduate, and in particular, postgraduate research and doctoral studies. This increase in returning student numbers has brought with it raised expectations from learners about the kind of student experience they might have upon reconnecting with Higher Education in doctoral studies. This has generated ongoing research into student satisfaction, differentiated learning and learning...
contracts [14] and especially in managing expectations around doctoral learning [15][16][17][18]. This educational research has informed doctoral training for academic colleagues becoming involved in supervision [19][20][21], as well as for students at the start of their programmes at induction [22][23]. For example, the research conducted by George Brown and Madeleine Atkins in 1988 [24], with their Role Perception Scale for doctoral learning, is as relevant today as it was 35 years ago. It is still being recommended by the UK Council for Graduate Education [25] (UKCGE) to all of the research funding councils across the United Kingdom through the UKRI [26] (UK Research and Innovation) as a means to improve the quality of student learning experience in the doctoral programmes that UKRI supports in their formal partnerships [27].

The research conducted by Hopwood et al. [28] into *The Hidden Realities of Life as a Doctoral Student* reveals how coming to know a student's pressures in life and their preferences for learning is as important as it is for students coming to appreciate their supervisor’s needs and timescales, so that each can be the most effective for each other in the doctoral journey. Hopwood and colleagues [28] show us that ‘nothing is normal’ in student life and that therefore, it is good advice for a supervisor not to make any assumptions or stereotypical expectations about what ‘a normal’ doctoral student may be able to do. Hopwood et al.’s [28] conclusions (p. 229) clearly point to why establishing common ground for expectations is important for each and every doctoral student. They found the following:

i. The everyday lives of doctoral students vary greatly from individual to individual—there is no ‘normal’ student;

ii. For particular students, working patterns and time spent on other activities vary from week to week: there is no ‘normal’ week;

iii. Although often rumoured to be isolating, doctoral experiences can involve interactions with a wide range of people. These are not guaranteed and reflect institutional provisions and students’ own agency in making them happen. There is no ‘normal’ pattern for interacting with others—interactions vary from person to person and from week to week;

iv. While it is ‘normal’ to experience challenges or difficulties on a regular basis during the doctorate, particularly in relation to time and emotions, responses to these challenges vary between students from week to week for particular individuals—there is no ‘normal’ response."

References


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