

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR DOCTORATE

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GETTING THE MOST OUT
OF YOUR DOCTORATE:
THE IMPORTANCE OF
SUPERVISION,
NETWORKING, AND
BECOMING A GLOBAL
ACADEMIC

Edited by

MOLLIE DOLLINGER

La Trobe University, Australia



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Vanessa Alexander is a Developmental Educator and has been working in the disability sector since 1994 with a focus on supporting individuals on the autism spectrum and their families. She has a masters degree in disability studies and is currently a Doctor of Education candidate.

Dr Kerry Bissaker is an Associate Professor in education at Flinders University, Australia. She researches in the area of teachers' professional learning, inclusive education, and innovative learning environments. She has a strong interest in high quality doctoral research supervision.

Dr Uwe Brandenburg is an Associate Professor at the Universitat Rovira i Virgili in Tarragona, Spain, and Managing Director of the Global Impact Institute. His research focuses on internationalization and impact on society.

Doris Yakun Chen is a Research Assistant at Beijing Normal University (China). Her research area is in higher education in China.

Dangeni is a Doctoral Researcher in the School of Education at the University of Glasgow, UK. Her doctoral research investigates Chinese students' experience of learning engagement and associated conceptual change among learners. Dangeni's research interests include international students,

student engagement in higher education, and language teacher education.

Divya Dawadi is a Government Officer in the Department of Education, Nepal. She was awarded an Australian Award doctoral scholarship to research models of inclusion for young children living with disability in Nepal.

Dr Mollie Dollinger is a Higher Education Researcher at La Trobe University, Australia. She received her PhD from The University of Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education in 2018. Her research interests include student–staff co-creation in higher education, doctoral education and training, and the student experience.

Dr DelyLazarte Elliot is a Senior Lecturer from the University of Glasgow, UK. Dely is primarily interested in researching doctoral student experience, particularly the cross-cultural facets of those whose experience involves undertaking an educational sojourn and how these impact on their academic performance and psychological wellbeing.

Lesley Henderson is a Lecturer and Researcher at Flinders University, Australia. Her areas of expertise are gifted education and learning. She is the National President of the Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented.

Professor Divya Jindal-Snape is Personal Chair of Education, Inclusion and Life Transitions and Director of Transformative Change: Educational and Life Transitions (TCELT) Research Centre at the University of Dundee (Scotland).

Madelaine-Marie Judd is the Student Partners Adviser at The University of Queensland, Australia, overseeing the large-scale implementation of the Student–Staff Partnership

Project approach. Her research focuses on cultural competency, strategic policy, student experience, and employability within higher education.

Dr Margaret Kiley is Visiting Fellow at the Research School of Humanities and the Arts at Australian National University, Australia. Margaret has been involved for many years in education at school and university levels in South Australia, Northern Territory, Indonesia, Australian Capital Territory, and England.

Professor Shelley Kinash is the Director, Advancement of Learning and Teaching at University of Southern Queensland. Her research focuses on student and graduate employability, student experience, and technology-enhanced learning.

Delin Kong is a Lecturer at Huazhong University of Science and Technology. His research focuses on second language acquisition and teachers' professional development.

Sue Kupke is an Education Leader for Lutheran Education in South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. She is completing her Doctorate of Education in the area of school culture having a strong interest in understanding what contributes to generating a Lutheran school culture.

Dr Lilia Mantai is Academic Lead in Course Enhancement at The University of Sydney Business School. She wrote her thesis on researcher identity development of doctoral students and social support. Lilia is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and Associate Editor for the Higher Education Research and Development journal.

Samantha Marangell is an Associate Lecturer at the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne. She is involved in research that

includes the university student experience, internationalization of higher education, and student wellbeing.

Dr Jessica M. McKeown is a Senior Learning Scientist at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, where she focuses on blending learning sciences and educational psychology principles within math and science curriculum. Jessica received her PhD from Indiana University in educational psychology in 2018.

Dr Jenna Mittelmeier is Lecturer in Education (International) at the University of Manchester (UK). Her research focuses on international students' transition experiences and social transitions in higher education.

Dr Ali Nawab was awarded an International Postgraduate Research Scholarship from the Australian Government to undertake doctoral research at Flinders University, Australia. He completed his PhD in the area of teachers' continuing professional development in a remote region of Pakistan. He is currently working as a principal of a school in southern Pakistan.

Kamal Pokhrel is a Government Officer in the Department of Education, Nepal. He studied on a Fellowship in Pennsylvania USA, prior to receiving an Australia Award doctoral scholarship to research parents of children living with a disability experiences of and involvement with education services and sectors in Nepal.

Professor Bart Rienties is Professor of Learning Analytics at the Institute of Educational Technology at The Open University (UK). He is Programme Director Learning Analytics within IET and Head of Data Wranglers. Bart is interested in broader internationalisation aspects of higher education.

Rui He is a Doctoral Researcher at the University of Glasgow, UK. Rui's research focuses on international student experience particularly the intercultural dimensions, communicative competence, learning and teaching of language and culture, and student mobility in higher education.

Jo Shearer is the Manager of Governance and Strategy for a non-government organization supporting children and people living with disability. She has an extensive career in the disability sector leading a range of research projects. Her doctoral research is focused on efficacy of graduating teachers to include students living with disability in their mainstream classrooms.

Helen Stephenson is a full-time Doctoral Candidate at Flinders University, Australia. She is researching pre-service teachers' experiences of work-integrated learning. She has developed expertise in hermeneutic phenomenology as an outcome of her doctoral research.

Dr Andi M. Strackeljahn is a Principal Digital Learning Consultant at Indiana University in the USA where she supports university faculty in the often uncomfortable and challenging transition to more student-centered learning.

Dr Kate Yue Zhang is Associate Professor of International Business at the American University of Paris (France). Her research interests focus on International Human Resources and international students in higher education.

Min Zou is a PhD Student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her research focuses on second language writing and critical thinking.

FOREWORD

How fortunate am I to have had an opportunity to read this internationally authored book and to learn of the insights and strategies outlined for candidates considering or currently undertaking a doctorate. The book offers a wealth of guidance from Chapter 1 on identifying strategies for selecting a supervisor through to Chapter 8 on life after the PhD.

I have been researching various aspects of doctoral education for many years with a particular interest in supervisory practices and examination. On a personal note, one of the many things I have found of great interest at the international level is that no matter in which country, system, or discipline the supervisor and candidate are operating, many of the experiences are very similar. This leads me to conclude that much of the supervisory relationship is about the human factors. In fact, research by authors such as Janssen (2005) and Lee, Dennis, and Campbell (2007) highlight the critical importance of the affective, personal aspects of supervision. No wonder the word “tricky” is one I use a lot when talking about the supervisory relationships because it involves human beings working and learning from – and with – one another. This book aligns with what I have learned over my years researching doctoral education, that the process is tricky, yet one can navigate with the right guidance and tips.

Throughout the book I noted a strong emphasis on investigation and “doing one’s homework,” or as my brother-in-

law would say from his army background “time spent on reconnaissance is seldom wasted.” And what better message could one pass on to candidates who are undertaking a program aimed at educating them to think like researchers? From my own experience of being a mature-age doctoral candidate there was one potential supervisor I really wanted on my team because he was an expert on the context in which I was researching. But he was a very, very busy man and, understandably, kept saying he couldn’t take me on as a candidate. However, I knew his expertise would be invaluable so eventually we agreed, given that I had a very supportive team of other supervisors, that he would join the supervisory group on the condition that we would only meet once a semester. These meetings were wonderful. I would prepare very carefully to ensure that every moment counted and as I walked out after my hour of learning I had enough knowledge and enthusiasm to go on with for the next six months. Mind you, this would not have been possible without my other wonderfully supportive and differently skilled supervisory panel members, but it highlights the importance of knowing what you want out of your doctoral education and having the confidence to get it.

Other entries in the book have a clear focus on the concept that becoming a researcher doesn’t just happen in isolation but is located within a globalized environment (for example Chapter 7). In fact, the international nature of the doctorate was a strong theme in many of the chapters, such as Chapters 5 and 6 on networking as well as being reflected in the location of the authors who came from Australasia, North America, Europe, the UK, and Asia. Networking doesn’t come naturally to some, but it is fascinating just how much we rely on “who we know” rather than “what we know” when setting up research projects. One thing I enjoy at conferences is being able to introduce candidates to experts in

the field, often researchers they have been citing, and more importantly, letting the researcher know that there is an early career researcher joining their area of interest.

Another aspect of this book which I really appreciated was the number of times that the positives and negatives of various situations were raised, but, in most cases, such as in Chapter 4, creative suggestions are then made on how to address any negative issues. The concept of thriving, not simply surviving, came through in most of the chapters – a concept dear to my heart. In one way it is easy to make the doctoral experience sound like “a struggle,” something one must “survive” and “conquer” rather than thinking of it as an opportunity to “transform,” “develop,” and “achieve.” I am constantly amazed by the number of times that a candidate will be really frustrated by one of their supervisors, and then a year or two after graduation hear them say something along the lines of “I couldn’t have done it without my supervisor, Tom.” I, in fact, had a similar experience in a masters coursework program where one lecturer drove me nuts during the semester but at the end of the course I was just amazed at what he had challenged me to learn. Gosh, learning is just so “tricky.”

Of particular interest to me as a researcher was the effective use of the research literature in many chapters. Such use reflects, in my mind, the growing body of knowledge we now have related to doctoral education and insights into the huge variation in candidates and supervisors, an issue clearly addressed in clarifying expectations in Chapters 2 and in Chapter 9. No longer is doctoral supervision a cottage industry, but rather a professional and exciting aspect of an academic’s life.

The notion of academia is another theme that was evident in the chapters. While certainly not suggesting that all doctoral graduates will move into academia, there were some very

creative and interesting strategies and ideas put forward for those interested in that future, as well as a future in many of the other professional areas where a doctoral graduate can thrive.

Lastly, a theme in the book that attracted my attention was that of the “others” who support, or sometimes hinder, candidature progress. Certainly, over the past ten years the research on the role and value of peers has grown substantially, as outlined in Chapter 3. In addition, in the book we learn of the importance of the support provided by such services as writing advice, the library, IT, and research skill development. The chapters in this well-crafted book strongly support the idea that it takes a university to graduate a doctoral candidate, not just a supervisor. Having said that, family and friends are absolutely critical. It brought me (and him) to tears when a male colleague undertaking his PhD part-time told me how when he went home the evening that he had submitted his PhD his young son said something like “This is terrific Dad, do you think now you might have time to put up the basketball ring we bought nearly three years ago?” Maintaining family, friends, and physical and mental health are just so important, we are more than just researchers, we are people.

I commend the editor and contributing authors on a very useful “how to” book aimed at assisting potential and current candidates in ensuring that their candidature is successful, fulfilling and rewarding. This is particularly important at a time where there are increasing numbers of candidates enrolling, as well as increasing numbers of graduates who will be employed in roles outside the academy, if they are not already employed in professional positions. I wish them all the best of luck.

Dr Margaret Kiley
The Australian National University

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