# Research Journeys
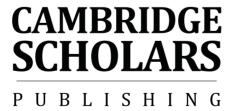
Research Journeys:
A Collection of Narratives
of the Doctoral Experience

Edited by

Elsa Lee, Chloe Blackmore and Emma Seal

**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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A Collection of Narratives of the Doctoral Experience

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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West Doctoral Training Centre conference at University of Bristol. She has presented her research at the Space, Place and Social Justice conference at Manchester Metropolitan University and the European Conference for Educational Research (ECER) in Cadiz and Istanbul. (chloe.blackmore@gmail.com)

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# CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH JOURNEY

## EMMA SEAL, ELSA LEE
## AND CHLOE BLACKMORE WITH JILL PORTER

## Introduction

This book is a collection of narratives of students' experiences of doctoral research. It is aimed at an audience of current and prospective doctoral students and their supervisors. For some of these readers the process of doing a doctorate will be familiar. They will know that it can at times be an exciting and exhilarating experience, and at other times, arduous and burdensome. In compiling this volume we hope to have shared some of these experiences. For others, the doctoral journey will be somewhat inscrutable and for these readers we hope to have illuminated parts of the process; a process in which details of the challenges, complexities and uncertainties are often concealed.

## Why Research Journeys?

This book is the outcome of a student-led conference held at the University of Bath in June 2012. The title of the conference was 'Research Journeys' and it was followed up by a symposium event with the same title in November 2012. The title referred to the conference theme, which aimed to provide postgraduate research (PGR) students with an opportunity to talk about their experience of the process of doing research. The theme emerged from conversations between PGR students and academics about the lack of opportunities for discussions about the process of research at master's and doctoral level. These conversations took place both formally during sessions entitled Tricky Issues set up by the Director of Studies for the doctoral programme at the University of Bath (Dr Jill Porter), and informally between peer researchers in the Department of Education.

There are many opportunities for research students to talk about the outcomes of their research but there is less opportunity to talk about how they arrived at their findings; to discuss the tricky issues that research students and novice researchers have to deal with in the process of researching and generating a thesis or dissertation.

Hence, for this conference presenters were encouraged to reflect on their research journey, focusing on a specific turning point or on-going theoretical and/or methodological dilemma. Taylor (2011, p.6) highlights the value of giving doctoral students a focal point to guide their reflections. She draws upon Miles and Huberman's (1994, p.115 in Taylor 2011, p.6) notion of 'critical incidents' which are events "seen as critical, influential, or decisive ". The idea of turning points or on-going challenges that we have employed in this work is consistent with this idea.

The intention was to 'lift the lid' on student researchers' experiences and to stimulate debate and discussion around the process of doing research. Presentations were invited from research students at all stages of their research project and across all disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

The extent to which the theme resonated with presenters, discussants and audience participants was striking and evident in the animated discussions that followed the presentations. It was clear that doctoral students, prospective doctoral students and academics with supervisory responsibility would all benefit from engagement with this theme.

The metaphor of a research journey to represent the process of doing a doctorate is discussed in the literature (see e.g. Batchelor and Di Napoli 2006 and Taylor 2011). The process approach to the doctoral experience is further explored by Delamont *et al.* (2000), Pearson and Brew (2002), Nickel *et al.* (2010). These authors identify that elucidating the learning process can reveal some of the complexities, challenges and uncertainties encountered during doctoral research. Students are not often encouraged to discuss these challenges openly, despite the benefits that accrue from doing so. As Chiang (2003) points out, this leaves many PhD students feeling isolated and dissatisfied. This point is also picked up by Delamont *et al.* (2000) who discuss the uncertainties many students experience when trying to make a contribution to knowledge at doctoral level. These uncertainties may be exacerbated by the contrast to undergraduate study where knowledge structures are presented as relatively safe and secure.

We acknowledge that the process of doing a doctorate involves a period of 'necessary isolation'. Nonetheless, our experience is that sharing and openly engaging with the challenges that arise from the process of research, helps students to become comfortable with inevitable periods of

discomfort. This contributes positively to the successful conclusion of the process and the strength of the findings of the research. Traditionally, doing a PhD is about completing a thesis. A focus on the research journey challenges this assumption by legitimising different types of knowledge generated in the process of completing the thesis (Nikel *et al.* 2010).

Building on the conference theme, this book consists of a series of narrative accounts in which conference participants discuss and reflect upon the experiences of doing research. The idea of producing narrative accounts or research biographies detailing how research was done, what problems were faced and how they were resolved is not new. Authors have written about the research process, particularly in conjunction with ethnographic and participant observation studies (e.g. Hammersley 2004). However, these biographical accounts are usually written up at the end of a research project. This is assumed to be the optimum time to reflect back over the process. Such accounts may be written for different purposes. They may provide a form of validity check, a way of dealing with problems in research, or a way for novice researchers to learn from the experiences of their seniors (Hammersley 2004).

We recognise the value in each of these functions. However, our purpose in planning the conference (and subsequently, putting together the book) was to give research students the opportunity to share their experiences while they are still in the process of completing their doctorate. This approach enables revelations about learning on the journey that may potentially be lost by the time that traditional research biographies are written.

Traditional biographies are written in hindsight by biographers whose subsequent experience will have shaped and modified their memories of the experience of doctoral research. Hence, what they write may not holistically reflect their experience during their journey; rather it will be an edited version, shaped by what they have since found to be important. Such biographies remain informative in many ways; for example, they help research students to take a more dispassionate approach to what they experience. However, issues such as the influence of the researcher's personal life at the time of the research or the emotional turmoil experienced by the anticipation of the *viva voce* examination may seem less significant to these biographers and may be glossed over. For research students, these issues are of paramount importance; often determining the direction that the research might take. Thus, we feel that there is a gap to be filled by biographies written by researchers in the throes of the challenges of the research process. The novice researcher status of these biographers is what qualifies them to write about their learning journey in

a way that is likely to resonate with prospective and current postgraduate researchers.

Another reason why research accounts written by research students are not so common may be the perceived need to conceal the difficulties and challenges they face. This may be an outcome of institutional pressures resulting in apprehensions about the impact that openly discussing difficulties might have on the researcher's potential for successfully achieving their doctorate at the end of the process. The concealment created by these apprehensions may have a negative impact on individual research students' well-being and may influence their chances of success. It may also obscure valuable knowledge about how individuals handle challenges that arise in such processes and the learning that results from these encounters.

In compiling this book, we hope to have illuminated different learning trajectories and challenged the 'taboo' of talking about the tricky issues that arise on the path to the thesis. One such tricky issue identified by Dr Jill Porter as the 'Golden Thread', is how to write a thesis that flows, a thesis that has a logical argument running through it. The insert in the box that concludes this chapter is written by Dr Jill Porter.

The chapter following this introduction is written by an established and celebrated academic, Dr Sara Delamont, and comprises invaluable advice for prospective and current PhD students and their supervisors.

The remainder of the book consists of ten short accounts written by doctoral students who presented at the Research Journeys conference in 2012. The students are all at different stages of their doctoral work. Some are just setting out on their journeys, while others are nearing completion. Each chapter begins with a brief biographical account including an explanation of where the student is in their research journey.

Each author then introduces a turning point or an on-going challenge encountered in the process. They provide detailed accounts of this issue followed by reflections and insights about the learning process this involves. Through the reflections of the contributors, each chapter provides unique insights into the personal learning arising from the contributor's research journeys.

We conclude the book with our own reflections as conference organisers and editors of this book using the metaphor of shifting horizons to frame our remarks. The experience of each author is unique, yet we were able to identify common strands running through the accounts. Drawing on Batchelor and Di Napoli (2006), we show how students negotiate the complexities and challenges in their research, highlighting the kinds of learning that emerge from the process of doing doctoral

research. Dr Harriet Marshall (an established academic with experience of supervision and research in her own right) adds her own comments on theme from her perspective as a supervisor and lecturer.

## Description of Chapters

**Chapter 2: Dr Sara Delamont** is a Reader in Sociology at Cardiff University. She was the first woman to be President of BERA. Her books include The Doctoral Experience and Supervising the Doctorate. She was the keynote speaker at the Research Journeys Conference. In this chapter, she gives practical advice for PhD students that enables them to get the most out of their research journey but also empowers them to finish it.

**Chapter 3: Chloe Blackmore** is a third year Education PhD student with a background in international development. Her doctoral research is an ethnographic study in one UK secondary school, seeking to examine the meanings of global citizenship education (GCE) as it is understood and implemented in practice. In her chapter she discusses the process of formulating her research question within the field of GCE. She identifies a number of challenges in this process; in particular, clarifying the role of theory within her work. She reflects upon these challenges and how she overcame them to frame her question.

**Chapter 4: Catherine De Levay** is a practising teacher who, at the time of writing is completing the final phase of her EdD (professional doctorate in education) as a distance learner. She writes about her experience of finding a substantive research topic from the starting point of a commitment to a particular theoretical perspective. She outlines the challenges she faced in doing so and reflects on the relative success of this quest.

**Chapter 5: Benjamin Bowman** is a full time researcher in Politics, Language and International Studies investigating young people's engagement with politics. At the time of writing, he is completing the first year of his PhD. In this chapter he describes his pilot study and reflects on his attempts to find a suitable research method that enables participation for anti-political or apolitical young people without losing focus on political issues.

**Chapter 6: Shona McIntosh** is an experienced teacher and part-time PhD student researching the influence of placement school contexts on trainee teachers' development during their PGCE year. She considers the role of reflection and its changing significance at different stages of her research. She draws on her research to demonstrate how drawing a learning trajectory can focus reflection. She discusses how reflecting on

individual learning processes can simultaneously develop skills required for data analysis and a sense of agency over the emotional experience of one's learning journey.

**Chapter 7: Pierre De Levay** is a practising teacher who at the time of writing is completing the final phase of his EdD (professional doctorate in Education) as a distance learner. He writes about his enquiry project where he investigated the role of websites as marketing tools for the international schools. He elaborates on the challenges he faced in finding an appropriate method for analysing websites.

**Chapter 8: Ana Douglas** is a full time PhD student at the University of Exeter who at the time of writing is completing her second year. She writes about the challenges of negotiating her identity as a practitioner and emerging researcher and how this modifies her understanding of herself and her role in different institutions.

**Chapter 9: Naasirah Abdullah** is a final year Education PhD student at the University of Bath. She completed her fieldwork in Brunei Darussalam. She describes how she has grappled with the problem of finding a suitable analytical method. She elaborates on the constant effort of 'binocular' focussing between her theoretical framework lens and the 'value-free' grounded theory-like lens she uses to view her empirical data.

**Chapter 10: Ciaran O'Sullivan** is an experienced FE educator completing the final year of his PhD at the University of Plymouth. He describes the difficulties of balancing a critical approach to education in schools with seeking verification from and sharing findings with participants in ethnographic studies. He reflects on the ethics of doing research that engenders change without alienating the participants he aims to support.

**Chapter 11: Stuart Gallagher** is a lecturer who recently submitted his PhD thesis at the University of Bath. He failed his *viva voce* examination and has been asked to resubmit his thesis for consideration for an MPhil degree. His doctoral research journey started after many years of professional work in child welfare settings. He describes the controversial nature of his empirical research, which investigates published reports of significant maltreatment of very young children and the professional learning they entail. He elaborates on the challenges arising from balancing this work with becoming a father and uses his experience to reflect on the non-linear nature of the journey from research question to submitted thesis. He remarks on the effects that failure can have on a student's motivation and direction.

**Chapter 12: Elsa Lee** is a full time student who has recently submitted her thesis in Environmental Education and is awaiting her *viva*

*voce* examination. Prior to studying for a doctorate she taught in secondary schools both in the UK and abroad. She will start a Research Associate position in October 2013. She describes how writing the thesis was instrumental in clarifying both her analysis and methodology and reflects on the highs and lows of the research journey drawing on Dr Jill Porter's analogy with *Pilgrim's Progress* and the need for finding a golden thread to draw the thesis together.

**Chapter 13: Concluding Remarks from the editors**—the editors draw out some overarching themes from the conference and the chapters and reflect on their potential contribution to knowledge and understanding about the doctoral research process. Dr Harriet Marshall, an academic in the department of Education at the University of Bath adds a note from a supervisor's perspective on the conference itself and the significance of the doctoral research journey.

## Conclusion

We offer this book as a way for readers to live vicariously; to experience some of the challenges that arise on the research journey through the narratives of others. Although we draw out themes from the chapters to emphasise the commonalities that emerge, as students and novice researchers ourselves, it is not our intention to produce a self-help manual. Rather we hope that in reading these narratives other students and their supervisors will get a feeling for the kinds of issues they may be faced with that might prepare them for their own journeys. What each reader gleans from reading the narratives will be influenced by their personal experiences; they will take from the chapters what is useful for them at the time of reading.

However, the chapter by Dr Sara Delamont and the inserts by Dr Harriet Marshall and Dr Jill Porter go some way towards providing more explicit, practical guidance for those who want it. Thus we leave the final word of this chapter to Dr Jill Porter, an experienced academic with a long track record of working with doctoral students and the Director of Studies of the PhD programme in Education at the University of Bath. Dr Porter opened the Research Journeys, 2012 conference and her opening remarks inform the vignette that concludes this introduction.

## A Golden Thread and the *Pilgrim's Progress*
## Dr Jill Porter

People undertake a doctorate for many different reasons. Maybe they have a burning interest, something they want to investigate, or a problem to solve. Maybe having completed a Master's, they want to continue their studies. Or maybe they feel that a doctorate might enhance their career prospects. In consequence, people often start with different perspectives on what a doctorate is about. The journey is therefore in large part one of discovery. Until the journey is well underway, they might not have a clear view of what that process of discovery entails. It is all too easy to focus on the empirical elements, the scale of the research, the number of studies or participants required, the rigour needed in carrying out the research, or to focus on more pragmatic elements such as the time it takes, the need to write 90 000 words, to produce so many chapters. And of course the overriding recognition that it should result in something original.

I write this in the knowledge that, as a student, I (mistakenly) thought once I had transferred from MPhil to PhD that I was almost finished, that all the big decision-making had been undertaken. As one travels along the path however the true nature of the endeavour is revealed, with growing understanding of the meaning of the activity.

As Director of Studies of the PhD programme in the Department of Education, at the University of Bath, I was invited to open the conference that has led to the production of this book. In my presentation I used the analogy of the journey undertaken in Pilgrims Progress, where the protagonist is weighed down by a great burden. On his journey he meets many diversions - it is by no means a straight path with tricky challenges encountered along the way. This seemed to me to represent well the highs and lows of the doctoral journey and the emotional challenges that it brings. I invited students to recognize the "Hill Difficulty", the presence of "Doubting Castle", the home of "Giant Despair". I suggested that each student might find themselves navigating their way through the "Slough Despond", being wary of the "Valley of Humiliation", the pull of "Vanity Fair" and the hope that keeps one going of reaching the "Celestial City". Although the journey is not the same for all students, with different obstacles encountered along the way, it most surely is a path of learning.

Different types and approaches to research lead to different tricky encounters at different points in time as students move through a series of complex decisions. The result of one decision impacts on the next but also calls one to reconsider those made previously. There is therefore a ripple effect to the decision-making rather than a straight forward linear

procedure. Of course, the decision itself may be less the issue that the strength of the rationale that underpins it. I adopted the term golden thread to refer to having a plot that builds through the thesis, as the significance of the research is brought to fruition through the relationship between the decisions that are made. There is therefore a complexity in weaving the thesis together in a way that communicates well with its audience.

To give some example of the decisions that can burden the doctoral traveller, perhaps the trickiest for education students can be identifying a theoretical or conceptual framework, one that will enable them to transcend the descriptive and provide an explanatory account that goes beyond the simple reporting of their findings. Framing the literature that they will draw on can also pose the challenge of being either too specific, with little written in their particular area or too broad with an over whelming number of possible studies for inclusion. Establishing the boundaries can require time spent reading material that ultimately proves to be tangential to the thesis. Simple description of the literature is not enough, it has to be evaluated and applied. There is an important task of structuring the review, pulling together disparate literatures, and ensuring that the messages for the thesis are clear and developed. Drafting and redrafting can feel an endless task.

One of the elements that holds the thesis together is the research question(s), finding an answerable question, one that does justice to the scale of the endeavour is a significant strand of the golden thread. Test the question by imaging the answer to it— is it central to the plot? Be wary of having too many questions or indeed no question, only aims and objectives - a particular bone of contention for examiners. Then of course, there are the tricky issues of ethics, of gatekeepers and access, and informed consent. Having eventually collected the data, and even though a plan was made, one can feel overwhelmed by uncertainty of how best to analyse and portray them. What was originally conceived as one stage now has many parts to it. These are just some of the challenges that the doctoral student faces— there are more, as the chapters in this book will reveal.

I'm writing this on graduation day having watched students who have struggled their way to a happy ending - sometimes over a very long time. It's a great feeling when the burden has been put down, when you reap the reward of having tussled with the complexities and communicated them to the satisfaction of your examiners. It is after all the challenges that make this journey so very special.

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# CHAPTER TWO

# ESCAPING THE PERILOUS REALM: STRATEGIES TO SUCCEED AS A DOCTORAL STUDENT

## DR SARA DELAMONT

## Biography

*Dr Sara Delamont is a Reader in Sociology at Cardiff University. She was the first woman to be President of BERA. Her books include The Doctoral Experience and Supervising the Doctorate. She was the keynote speaker at the Research Journeys Conference. In this chapter, she gives practical advice for PhD students that enables them to get the most out of their research journey but also empowers them to finish it.*

## Preface

An earlier version of this paper was given at the Research Journeys conference held at the University of Bath in June 2012. The students who spoke at that event were much more positively reflexive than those who talked at the two workshops I describe in the first part of the chapter, where comments could not have been published for the benefit of other doctoral candidates.

In October 2012 the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) held an event about the training and development of higher degree supervisors and the impact of postgraduate research. It opened with brief *testimonios* (personal testimonies) from seven current doctoral students, mostly in education. The *testimonio* is one form of narrative data, particularly associated with central and South America, made famous by Rigoberta Menchu (see Smith 2003; Tierney 2000; Treuba 2000). It is a personal story, which represents the experiences of a group. That is, the listeners are expected to understand that the speaker is narrating things that

are not necessarily events which happened to him or her, but are 'typical' of the lives of the category of person (peasants in El Salvador, elderly Holocaust survivors, merchant seafarers) that the speaker 'represents'. In other words, the *testimonio* is meant to have resonance beyond the individual recounting it. As I listened to the seven speakers I felt myself carried back thirty two years to a period in 1980 when BERA (The British Education Research Association) conducted an exploratory project on MPhil and PhD students in education, using an anonymous postal schedule of open ended questions. (Eggleston and Delamont 1983). The seven current research students could have been respondents to the open-ended questions we sent out for BERA in 1980.

Some of the things said at the UKGCE event about being a graduate research student in 2012 would suggest that core aspects of the experience have not changed at all, and each candidate has to live through them as part of their individual status passage (Glaser and Strauss 1965) from student to fully-fledged scholar. However some of the things those seven graduate students reported as problems, difficulties or barriers to thesis completion should not have been happening in 2012 because many policies have been put in place to prevent them. For example, all graduate research students are supposed to be in universities which have signed up to the UK wide Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Students; which became mandatory in 2004. The revised version was published in 2012 (QAA 2012). It prescribes at least two supervisors, both either experienced, or if a novice, formally trained, for every research student. There is also a requirement that every university provides for every research student an annual progress review by a relevant scholar not part of the supervisory team who is not eligible to be the internal examiner. Yet from what the seven speakers said at the conference it appeared that they did not have two functioning supervisors, and not one of the seven mentioned progress review, as an event, or a source of help and guidance from an academic.

Later in the day, I asked all the students present if their supervisors had been given any initial training, or had had any CPD (Continuing Professional Development) to improve their supervision. The student response was typified by the comment, 'Sorry, we are not privy to that information'. Apparently none of the supervisors had mentioned being trained, or updated, and none of the students had thought to ask about the issue. On my train home, I thought how like the 1980 BERA respondents they were.

The following week I did a day school called 'preparing for the oral examination' run by the Society for Research in Higher Education

(SRIHE), and there were another 25 research students, mostly in their third or fourth year of registration, from a wide range of disciplines including Dentistry, Zoology, Fine Art, and Accountancy. These students were predominantly from very high status institutions with large numbers of PhD candidates but some came from very new universities with very few graduate students. Again, I discovered that most of the students had not heard of the Code of Practice, or rather they said they had not. Similarly, when I asked, most said their universities were not providing the two supervisors, the progress review and other things mandated in it. They had chosen to attend the SRIHE event because their university did not provide any class(es) on what happens during the viva, or individual mock vivas, or a public mock viva. Again, I felt as if it was 1980, and I was reading the BERA questionnaires in which lonely, intellectually isolated people, dependent on one supervisor, demonstrated a lack of any support structures and revealed that they were ignorant of the rules and procedures that would decide their success or failure.

Given that the readers of this book may be as isolated and ignorant as those thirty plus graduate students were, and be registered in universities that are not implementing the Code, the rest of the chapter is designed to provide some firm advice.

## Introduction

In this chapter, I sketch in a few precepts about postgraduate success, drawing on the research I have been doing since 1980, and the policy changes of the last 30 years. I then make some practical proposals for current students about how to escape from the worst of their tribulations. I have fancifully characterised the period of doctoral registration as an 'other world' calling it the 'perilous realm'. The practical proposals should help students 'escape' from the perilous realm of the PhD and get on to the next stage of life. The focus is on social sciences and humanities, especially educational studies, rather than science and engineering (STEM). The disciplinary culture in those STEM subjects is different in several ways (see Delamont, Atkinson and Parry 2000, Delamont 2003). STEM students are generally embedded in a research group, with less dependence on one supervisor, and a clearer sense of progression.

## Picking Winners?

For all doctoral students it is helpful to remind yourself that the supervisory team, the department and the university want you to complete.

For STEM students the progress of the research group is built up by successive completions. While that is not true in non-STEM departments, for arts, humanities and social science students it is very important to remember that the staff of the department selected and admitted them, because they were thought to meet certain criteria and were expected to succeed. Given that staff have far more experience of choosing successful doctoral candidates than students can imagine, it is sensible to assume they knew what they were doing.

Liam Hudson (1977) used the phrase 'Picking Winners' in a paper that tried to explain why some bright undergraduates were subsequently PhD completers and others were not. The paper included inaccurate accounts of the private and intellectual lives of me, and several of my closest friends, who were fellow students of Hudson's in Edinburgh between 1968-1973. We had not given consent to be discussed, and were scarcely disguised at all. The paper is today entirely forgotten. It is not cited in the literature reviews on postgraduates. One noticeable feature of it as a contribution to the body of material on postgraduate success is still worthy of comment, however. The title and the paper itself relegated the students to a passive role in their own PhDs: the emphasis was on the selector. At no point does it refer to the nature or processes of the supervision, and how different structures and patterns of supervision might contribute to the eventual completion of a doctoral thesis. Nor did it suggest any strategies a student might employ to get help and support from staff, or discover more about the university requirements, or learn how to be a successful doctoral candidate. In contrast I want to stress the research evidence available in 2012 that allows me to offer some advice about actions students can take that are associated with success. These are set out critically as a list of things the successful student is *not*.

## Being a Winner

The successful student has learnt how to act so she or he is:

1) *Not* cue deaf
2) *Not* ignorant about what a thesis, in *their* discipline, at *their* University looks like
3) *Not* a victim
4) *Not* ignorant about how to get their supervisor(s) to answer their questions
5) *Not* intellectually isolated
6) *Not* emotionally lonely

7) *Not* hopelessly unfit
8) *Not* suffering 'writers' block'
9) *Not* ignorant of how their examination will be organised

In the next section, I explain each of these in turn.

# 1) Not Cue-Deaf

'Cue-deaf' is a term coined by Miller and Parlett (1976) in a study of law undergraduates' attitudes to assessment. They found that a small minority of students were cue-seekers, actively questioning staff (in subtle ways) about their upcoming finals, analysing the structure and content of past papers, and reading the publications of the external examiners so they could quote them. The majority of the students were 'cue-conscious': alert for hints and advice *e.g.* 'The case of Regina v McLie is a really important one that you all need to know thoroughly'; 'Professor Warren the Land Law external, has recently published an important paper on this in *Scottish Law Review*: read it' but they made no active investigations. The cue-deaf were a minority, but a depressing one to read about. They had no idea about any of the exams they were facing, could not name the externals, and even when advice was given, such as the public comments made in lectures, they did not 'hear' them. The researchers attended lectures where such things were said, asked the cue-deaf if any advice had been offered and were told 'no – no one ever tells us anything'.

In the BERA research on postgraduates, Jim Eggleston and I were amazed to discover that there were cue-deaf doctoral students. It seemed likely that cue-deaf students would not get 'good enough' degrees to go on to doctoral study, and would not enjoy university enough to want to stay there. However, we found responses from people who complained that they knew nothing about, for example, how they would be assessed. In the large project a decade later Odette Parry interviewed a cue-deaf doctoral student we called Colin Ives whose constant refrain was 'no one ever told me' (see Delamont, Atkinson and Parry 2000, p. 39).

"A lot of mistakes I've made are the result of me not asking questions and people not putting me right. They presume I must know. I didn't know the PhD was meant to be an argument. As Dr Durham said 'its meant to say something'. I thought it was meant to be one of those old fashioned monographs."

Colin Ives discovered how long a Kingford PhD was meant to be, *not* by skim reading several in the library but by accident.

> "I just happened to be reading a book, the prospectus, one day, and saw 100,000 words and thought "That's really long" and nobody bothered to tell me, and nobody has told me."

Most lecturers would *assume* that a PhD student had read the prospectus, the regulations for their degree and looked at some successful theses. The Petre and Rugg (2010) book is particularly designed for people like Colin Ives. If you felt that 'someone' should be telling you 'something', but you are not sure what, you may be cue-deaf. If you think you might be cue-deaf, or that some other student is, it is vital to take steps not to be. There are six steps to be less cue-deaf.

i) read Petre and Rugg (2010) *The Unwritten Rules of PhD Research*
ii) get the departmental postgraduate handbook and the University rules and force yourself to read them, asking what each point *means* in practice.
iii) make a list of the key things, like word length and deadlines, and put it in *all* the places (on your phone, on the fridge, in your gym bag) *where* they are highly visible to you.
iv) do a really boring, careful, check with the supervisor who is most likely to be crystal clear about all the rules, every three months about what is coming up.
v) make friends with the relevant secretary in the department – if you have already annoyed them apologise and promise to turn over a new leaf. Confess that you find the bureaucratic procedures and documents baffling and ask them to explain things more clearly (for idiots) and chase you up regularly if you miss deadlines.
vi) ask other students regularly what they are doing *and why*: if you are not doing what they are doing, ask yourself what they have understood that you have not.

## 2) Not Ignorant about the Task

It is vital to skim several successful theses in your subject at your university. Ask about people who graduated in the past five years, and go and look at their theses. The aim is **not** to read them in detail, but to look at structure, chapter length, type face, data presentation, length of bibliography and so on. Colin Ives, the cue-deaf student, thought a PhD thesis was a 10,000 word journal article even when he became a PhD

student. Contact the successful graduates and question them. Ask who the external and internal examiner were, and if possible, ask the candidate why they wrote the thesis the way they did. They have passed, so they will probably be pleased to tell you.

## 3) Not a Victim

It is very easy to feel like a victim when a graduate student, and victims are paralysed. The best way to stop being a victim is to find out things and act on them. For example if you are dyslexic, legislation exists that means your HEI is required by law to give you extra support. However, you will have to ask, and provide clear evidence about what you are entitled to. Check out the university's policies and then politely, but firmly (and not whinging) point out you are entitled to help in writing.

Much more generally, many people feel victimised about the lack of effective supervision. If your supervisor(s) are not giving you the help you expected, work out from one of the self-help books what might work for you, make up an action list, put it in writing, point out what you hoped to get from the supervision, and ask to try a different pattern for three months or so. If things do not improve, go to the relevant authority in your school and ask for help or a change. Getting the sort of supervision you want probably means researching your supervisors, so you can interact with them more effectively (*e.g.* what sort of questions produce the sort of answers you want?). One way to research your supervisors is to ask other people they supervise how they get those staff to do whatever it is you are not getting (*e.g.* written feedback on your draft).

## 4) Not Baffled about Focusing the Supervisor(s)

All the research in the UK in all disciplines has found that supervisors are appalled at any suggestion that they are 'spoonfeeding' their graduate students. If they do too much of the work, the originality and ownership of the thesis are (fatally) compromised. That makes supervisors reluctant to answer student questions which they hear as requests for spoonfeeding, needing too much of their input. Students frequently report that supervisors avoid answering their questions.

The best strategy for the student is to research, rehearse and vary the ways they request answers until they find what 'works'. To give a concrete example of a question that rings alarm bells in the supervisors' heads, and one that does not, consider the following. Asking 'what should I read next?' is a needy question and sounds like a request to be spoon fed. 'I've

read the Williams paper in *AERJ*: next would it be better to follow up Williams's earlier works or the studies by Boniface that Williams criticises?' sounds like an informed question posed by a competent researcher, *and* it sounds 'smaller', so safer for the supervisors to answer. Send an agenda of such questions by email in advance of supervision, and work through them in a systematic way.

If you are puzzled by instructions to 'be more critical' of the literature, or 'more analytic' or 'more theoretical', which *are* vague, look at your supervisors' own publications and see how they do things. If they urge you to be 'more critical', look at the criteria they use to evaluate the literature they discuss. Alternatively find a publication you think is explicitly critical, pull out the criteria used, and check if those criteria are relevant for your work.

Treat the supervisors as a research project, and try different questioning strategies until you find what triggers the answer(s) you wanted.

## 5) Not Intellectually Isolated

Because a PhD has to be original not very far into the candidature, the student will have become the expert. Being 'original' and 'the expert' can be very isolating. Some people find it exhilarating but many are frightened by the isolation. The wise student sets up intellectual networks, focused on the methods, the theory, the topic, the region or country (which could mean four different networks), both physically close so she or he can meet them, for coffee, at the gym, at classes and seminars, and in cyberspace. Joining the relevant learned society(ies) which have cheap rates for students such as BERA, SERA, SIHE or CAE (Council for Anthropology and Education) and being physically present at events in your own university are both useful for preventing intellectual isolation and for self presentation as a new member of the scholarly community. If you show genuine interest in the research of others, you will find they will reciprocate.

## 6) Not Emotionally Lonely

Many doctoral students find they are physically distant from family and friends, have far less money than their peers, and that their families do not 'understand' the long haul of doctoral research. It is sensible to find way(s) to explain the long haul for different audiences, a little at a time, and keep them focused on your goal. People living in a new city or

country need to find a hobby or pastime where they can make some friends away from the PhD.

## 7) Not Hopelessly Unfit

It is very easy to neglect one's health and fitness. Doctoral students do not necessarily eat sensibly, avoid repetitive strain injury, or take exercise. A plan to eat sensibly and take some exercise while being thrifty will pay off in a general sense of well-being. Taking up something like a dance (salsa, tango) or a martial art (savate or Muay Thai) can provide new friends and a general sense of health and welfare. If necessary do something like dog walking to earn money and get fit at the same time.

## 8) Not Suffering 'Writer's Block'

Write early and write often. Get into the habit of writing something every day, so writing becomes like breathing, eating, cleaning your teeth, feeding the baby, topping up the mobile phone. People who write every day protect themselves from writer's block. There is a good chapter on writing in all the self-help books like Petre and Rugg (2010)—use their advice. The best book is Becker (1986) which is helpful and funny. If you are a qualitative researcher Richardson (1990) is helpful for showing the differences between the genre of the thesis and of publications. Many people find Zerubavel (1999) useful.

## 9) Not Ignorant about the Examination

Read the regulations and possible outcomes in your university. Read Tinkler and Jackson (2004). Ask people who have had their viva, once they have calmed down, to tell you what was asked. Ask your supervisors what they ask in vivas when they are examiners. Look at the chapter on preparing for the viva in Delamont, Atkinson and Parry (2004), where we suggested many ways in which students can prepare for the oral.

## Conclusion

If the PhD or PD (Professional Doctorate) were easy to obtain it would not be worth having. It should be hard to get. But, if you have arrived at the starting line you were picked for being a winner. You have the ability to make it through to the end; you just need to apply your intellectual capacities to identifying and complying with the rules and procedures and

the politics of getting through. Action drives out fear, and prevents you being a victim.

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