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Expectations of research supervision

Overview

This document outlines some views I have about research supervision which I thought might be helpful as a basis for developing mutual expectations of the supervisory relationship. It's intended for current and potential candidates so that they know what they are getting into (or choosing to avoid).

General Issues

Choice of Topic

I believe we need to work together to identify a topic that's interesting to you and interesting to me. If you are interested you'll be more likely to last the distance and if I'm interested it's more likely that I will be better able to support you.

Writing

Every bit of research I read, and my experience, indicates that writing early and often is critical. There's something about having wonderful ideas in one's head which somehow evaporate as they leave the brain expecting to be placed on paper or the keyboard. So, the earlier that writing begins the sooner condensation of ideas, i.e. words on paper, occurs!

While I expect drafts of written work throughout candidature I also expect that each draft you submit is the best that you can do at the time. So not perfect, but the best you can manage at that stage of candidature. (See Reading drafts below for more detail).

Supervision

Panel

A supervisory panel (Chair, Primary, and Associate) is a requirement of the ANU. It is also definitely my preference to work with a panel as soon as possible. My experience suggests that having more than one person to discuss issues with is enormously helpful for all concerned. I would expect to negotiate the membership of the panel with you in the first three months, ensuring that all panel members are on board for the Thesis Proposal Review (see below).

Meetings

During your first six to nine months, if I am the primary supervisor, you can expect to meet with me every two weeks (part-time) or weekly (full-time). I expect that you would meet with co-supervisors and advisers as required but that we would meet as a full panel (face-to-face or by teleconference/Skype) every six to eight weeks or so for part-time candidates and every month for full-timers.

As your work progresses it is likely that we will reduce the frequency of our meetings to perhaps once a month (or fortnight for full-timers) and the panel as required. Beyond the first year, how often we meet depends on the stage your work is at, and the amount of input you need to continue making progress; although I'd still expect to meet once a month to keep up with how the work is progressing. Of course, if you feel you need more supervision, just ask; often we'll have additional meetings for specific purposes.

Given that this is your project I feel that it is your responsibility to make sure our meetings happen, that is you organise them. I used to invite candidates to send me, and the Associate supervisor, a short summary, by email soon after each meeting. However, I have found that some candidates just don't get round to it, which is a shame. If this is the case with you, then after a meeting, I will write to panel members who were not present at the meeting so they know what was discussed and agreed. The notes will cover key items we discussed, conclusions we agreed to, and the actions required with expected dates. It's also a good idea if

you can take the initiative to propose agendas for our meetings before they take place, just a few points by email.

Group meetings

I have also found it wonderfully helpful for all concerned to have monthly group meetings of the candidates researching with me. At these meetings we work together to help one another with research and progress. Attendance at these meetings (face-to-face or by Skype) is an expectation I hold of all candidates working with me. (And after the meeting we usually head over to University House for Pie Night and a chat.)

Reading drafts

It takes me about an hour to read and comment in detail on 8-10 pages of scholarly writing, and slower than that for writing that needs additional attention. It would help if you could keep this in mind when you give me things to read: I need to be able to schedule enough time to read things before we meet, otherwise the benefit of our meeting time is limited. Usually a good rule of thumb would be:

- One page, 24 hours in advance
- Two pages 48 hours in advance
- Three to eight pages four to five days in advance
- More than that, at least a week in advance.

When you have submitted work please, please resist the temptation to ‘fiddle’ with it. Personally I find there is nothing more irritating than spending an hour or more commenting on work only to find by the time we meet that changes have been made to what I was given (just talk with a couple of my doctoral graduates to find how irritated I can be)!

Another issue to keep in mind is that after reading something three times I, and most of other readers it seems, lose their critical ‘edge’. So please consider carefully which drafts you give me for comment, keeping in mind the read of the penultimate draft. Others who can read drafts are co-supervisors, peers, writing groups, colleagues, family and friends.

PhD specifics

The expected duration of a PhD is three years (full-time) and six years (part-time) with a maximum of four and eight years respectively. For full-timers it is quite hard to complete a PhD in three years: some people manage, but most go over by at least six months. Nonetheless, you should plan to finish in three years; then you can fall back on the additional time if you need to. For part-timers I suggest you aim for five years, extending out to five and a half, or six if necessary. I know the maths doesn’t work out here – but although the University (and Government) calculate part-time as ‘double’ full-time, most part timers (and their supervisors) find the concept of eight years on one topic an unrealistic (even daunting) idea. If you are doing your PhD part-time I would expect to talk with you about strategies you could adopt to give yourself some decent chunks of time, through perhaps taking leave.

Formal coursework

In the College of Arts and Social Sciences all commencing candidates are expected to enrol in four compulsory award courses. The timing of these will be something I would expect to discuss with you very early in candidature.

Timing

There’s no one model that fits all cases, but the following structure is a good default.

Months 1-9 (P/T) 1-6 (F/T): The Literature Review

The main goals of this stage are as follows:

- Enrol in at least one of the compulsory courses
- Read widely

- Become aware of the key players in your research area and reading the principal works
- Identify the key issues in your research area; and
- Write your literature review.

You should also use this time to take short-term courses to fill in gaps in your knowledge, whether they be in writing, data base searching, using Word and Endnote, or getting to grips with the general field. The ANU has a rich array of workshops and support and my expectation is that you would access these as you determine or as one of you panel members suggests.

Months 10-16 (P/T) or 7-12 (F/T): The Thesis Proposal

The main goals of this stage are:

- Enrol in the other compulsory courses
- Identify your research questions/ hypotheses you will explore;
- Work out in broad terms how you will approach addressing these questions;
- Write this up as a plan for your research.

Meanwhile, you may still be taking short-term courses to fill in gaps in your knowledge.

It is during this stage that you will be doing your Thesis Proposal Review (TPR). This is a formal requirement of the ANU where you present approximately 30-40 pages of written work from the past months and a seminar to staff and fellow candidates.

Months 17-40 (P/T) or 13-24 (F/T): The Research

The main purpose of this phase is to explore the research questions/hypotheses/problems introduced in the research proposal, and to develop answers.

Your Mid-Term Review (MTR) involves presenting the draft chapters you have written to date (I would expect Introduction, Literature, Methodology and Research Design, and Initial Analysis) and a seminar to staff and candidates.

Months 41-66 (P/T) or 25-36 (F/T): The final stage

The thesis will typically have about seven chapters: an introduction, the review of the literature (often two chapters), Methodology, research design, and proposed analysis chapter (including reference to the literature on our approach, design and analysis) and three chapters that contain the substantial contributions that make up your work (findings and interpretation/discussion), and a conclusion.

As you write the thesis itself it is likely that you will identify all kinds of problems that you need to address, so that you end up filling in holes in the research while you are writing.

Approximately six months prior to your intended submission date the ANU requires that you present your research in a Pre-Submission seminar, this is the time where you confirm your work with a broad audience and prepare for the final submission for examination. From experience, most candidates take six months from the time they submit their first full draft for review until final submission.

Publication

Writing in a scholarly style

Unless you have had previous experience writing in the academic genre is unlikely to come naturally. To acquire this skill, you need to write a lot and read a lot. The first few times you give me a document to read, it's likely to be covered in comments. Don't despair: I wouldn't put in the effort if I didn't care about your work.

Writing your first publishable paper is important, and I'll help you with this. Generally what happens is that we discuss the work and develop a framework, you revise a basic paper several times in response to comments, and when things are starting to take shape, I spend time with

you revising the text to make it appropriate for academic publication. Your papers might be co-authored with one or other of your supervisors, or both, but that will be negotiated early on.

Publication targets

I expect that each candidate working with me will present to at least one national and (hopefully) one international conference, and submit at least two manuscripts to ranked journals. In the field of Education it is normal to present work at a conference, seek feedback, and then rework for publication.

I will help you identify suitable conferences but I also expect that you will keep your eyes and ears open for opportunities. It is important to keep in mind that many conferences have a minimum of nine months between the closing date for Call for Papers and the actual conference so you need to plan well ahead.

Expectations

It's important that we have a clear understanding of what we can expect from each other and I hope to negotiate these expectations early in candidature. As a starting point:

What I expect of you if you choose to work with me

- You will take responsibility for your research, making the final decisions while taking into account advice received. It is your project and I expect that by the time you complete it you will become an expert in the area of your research.
- You will undertake to arrange meetings with individuals on the panel and with the whole panel, including the Annual Review meeting, the Thesis Proposal Review seminar, the Mid Term Review seminar, and the Pre-submission seminar where the whole panel is involved.
- You will get to know the community you are becoming part of and contribute to the research culture of the research group by attending seminars, workshops and where possible occasional social events.
- You will comply with the ANU policies and procedures for research students and for responsible and ethical research practice.
- You will seek out, and engage in, workshops and programs that support and develop knowledge and skills related to the project as well as development more generally; as well as seeking advice and assistance related to the project from panel members, peers, colleagues and others as appropriate.

What you can expect of me

- I will take your research seriously, providing comment on your work in an effort to support you in taking it to the high standard for which you are aiming.
- I will take all reasonable steps to meet agreed deadlines; follow through on actions I take on as a result of our meetings. I will also undertake to let you know of absences which may impact on your progress.
- I will attempt to provide helpful pointers to relevant research and people, and generally help you as much as I can to carry out a world-class piece of research, ever mindful that it is **your** research project for which **you** have responsibility.
- I hope to recognise that where there is a need for a change in the way supervision is occurring and/or the membership of the panel, this will be done in a professional manner recognising that it is your well-being that is the critical factor to be considered and that supervision will be in line with ANU policies and procedures.
- I will actively encourage you, and where necessary help finding funding, to enable to you attend relevant workshops, seminars and conferences, and to assist you in developing professional, personal and career goals as part of your doctoral study.

Note: Thanks to Professor Robert Dale, Macquarie University (See <http://web.science.mq.edu.au/~rdale/>) for allowing me to access his supervisor expectations statement and to use it as a model.