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No more poor supervision

PhD students need suffer no longer - their supervisors are being trained

By Grace McCann

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Unfinished PhD syndrome is a nasty affliction. You have to grit your teeth and find a new direction in life, while trying to be happy for your friends who have gained the title of "Dr".

According to a report from the Higher Education Funding Council, the problem has reached epidemic proportions. Nearly a third of full-time and two-thirds of part-time doctoral students in the UK fail to complete their degrees within seven years.

The blame for unfinished PhDs is often laid at the door of the supervisor. Horror stories of woefully inadequate supervision abound. "I know of someone whose thesis involved a complicated physics problem," says Dr Stephen Marshall, co-author of the self-help book *Your PhD Companion*. "His supervisor didn't make enough time to help him and thought he wasn't up to the work. But when the supervisor later tackled the problem himself he found it couldn't be done."

Susan Johns (not her real name) was demoted to MPhil status by her supervisor at Oxford University shortly after having a baby, when he felt she wouldn't be able to cope with the rigours of a PhD. Another student had to deal with the suicide of one of her supervisors, and sexual harassment from the other.

Of course, other factors can be responsible for failed PhDs, but there is growing recognition in academia of inadequate supervisory practices. Training courses for lecturers on undergraduate and taught masters courses are well established, and equivalent schemes for supervisors are taking shape.

The most advanced of these is the training and accreditation programme for postgraduate supervisors, which is in the process of being accredited by the standards body the Higher Education Academy. It started life at the Institute for Animal Health in Surrey, a research institute with 100 PhD students. The Institute was asked by external reviewers what it did to support supervisors. "We had to say 'not very much'," admits Professor Peter Mertens. "They said: 'Wrong answer'." He decided to explore the issue before the reviewers returned.

It became clear that supervisors were thrown in at the deep end, he says. Mertens and his colleagues decided that those new to the role should start out as junior supervisors, to be trained and mentored by a more experienced colleague. There has been a move towards such supervisory teams in recent years, but this makes it official.

Mertens's team also put together lists of competencies - such as in selecting students, designing theses and time management - and underlying values - interest in students' progression, concern for students' welfare, and so on. Training in these competencies could then be brought in from outside sources or developed in-house.

Mertens came to the conclusion that the best way to package the programme would be to make it a qualification, assessed by a portfolio of evidence and a viva. Mertens worked closely with the educationalist Professor Pat Cryer to make this happen.

Cryer and Mertens soon realised that the programme might be of use to supervisors outside science. Some networking led to a workshop at Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen. Dr Charles Juwah, who is responsible for academic staff development at Robert Gordon, was enthusiastic. "He could see it being

moved into fine art, law, finance", says Mertens. "Because they are an entire university they now represent a bigger focus for it than we do."

As at the Institute for Animal Health, the scheme at Robert Gordon is delivered via workshops, seminars and "support network" events. The legal aspects of supervision - and growing student power - are reflected in the qualification. "When the student hands over their money a contract is established," says Juwah. "Nowadays, if we don't fulfil our obligations in terms of contact time and mentoring we could get a compensation order slapped on us." Other legal issues such as disability discrimination laws, rules on maternity leave and intellectual property rights are covered.

Juwah says the guidance on cultural issues can be a real eye-opener for prospective supervisors. A young single woman from the Islamic world will feel very uncomfortable sitting in a room with a male supervisor, he says. It may be against her beliefs to even shake his hand. "We say: 'Play it by ear. During the first meeting, leave the door ajar, or even hold it in the common room. Then she will gather confidence.'" It also pays to be cautious if a foreign student is still mastering written English, says Juwah. "If you correct every aspect of their grammar on some work straight away the whole thing may be a sea of red, and they will lose heart. It would be a good idea to highlight only major errors at first."

Students get a chance to mark their supervisors, too. "The portfolio includes a warts-and-all assessment from the student," says Juwah. Students tend to be a bit shy about this at first, he says. "They may say - 'I can't do that - I won't get my degree!' But we say as long as you don't go for personalities it's fine."

One supervisor at Robert Gordon has completed the course so far, and 15 are following. Putting together the portfolio is not arduous, but it takes a while because the completion time depends on the student. Five or six supervisors have gained the qualification at the Institute and many more are on track to do so.

Juwah admits that there has been some resistance to the scheme. "Some have said: 'I'm not a teacher; I'm a researcher,'" he says. Most of the trouble has come from people who have been supervising for years. Mertens had the same problem. "Some of the disagreements were fairly aggressive. But younger supervisors were saying it would be great to have some training."

It might be argued that having a junior apprenticeship as a supervisor would suffice, and that the rest of the course is so much form-filling. Dr Richard Butterworth, a supervisor at Middlesex University, is sceptical about schemes that are inspired by concerns about student satisfaction. "We have quality assurance meetings about completion rates. But when a student does not complete it may indicate the stringency of the qualification rather than a lack of decent supervision."

Mertens rejects the idea that an apprenticeship will provide sufficient training. "What happens if you have a dodgy supervisor in a senior role?" he asks. "They would pass on bad practice."

It looks like the harrumphing from experienced supervisors may be assuaged by a simplified version of the accredited qualification. They would be able to earn this based on a statement of successful supervisory practice. This matter will be settled by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in due course.

The accreditation of the full training programme by the HEA, meanwhile, will give those who complete it a recognised, transferable qualification as well as automatic membership of the HEA. "The news of the accreditation is likely to prompt a flurry of interest from academics at Robert Gordon, and enquiries from other universities," says Dr Juwah. "September will be an interesting time."

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