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IT SHOULDN'T HAPPEN TO A PHD STUDENT

HOW TO THRIVE, NOT JUST SURVIVE, DURING YOUR PHD



THE GIRLYMICROBIOLOGIST

It Shouldn't Happen to a PhD Student – Chapter 8 Exercise

Choosing to undertake a PhD is a really exciting moment in your life, but at times it can feel overwhelming. To help with this, and to support in some of the processes and decision making, I have published a book entitled:

It shouldn't Happen to a PhD Student: How to thrive, not just survive, during your PhD
The book takes you through a PhD from applying, year by year study, and finishes with how to maximise your future success.

Some of the chapters benefit from having additional material and so these exercises run alongside the book, although they can probably be undertaken independently by anyone who would find them useful.

Exercises link directly into the following chapters:

CHAPTER THREE: CHOOSING THE RIGHT PHD FOR YOU

CHAPTER FOUR: DEVELOPING YOUR ELEVATOR PITCH

CHAPTER EIGHT: DEVELOPING YOUR LEARNING AGREEMENT

CHAPTER TEN: DEVELOPING YOUR GOAL SETTING SKILLS

CHAPTER TWELVE: MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: MAINTAINING YOUR WORK LIFE BALANCE

This exercise is linked to Chapter 8, please head over either to Kindle or to your print version of the book to support you working through this exercise.

Developing your learning agreement

Learning agreements take a number of different forms, and many academic institutions will have their own templates and starting points. The common theme amongst them all is that a learning agreement is based on conversations between the learner and their supervisor where they both actively set out the expectations and boundaries of their relationship.

They can include all kinds of things:

- What topics are in or out of the learning objectives
- How deadlines will be set and a broad plan of work
- Expectation setting around students identifying additional learning objectives
- Ideas for how the learner will benchmark their progress and/or learning
 - How the educator will assess progress/learning

In short, they are about making the implicit, explicit. Although the above questions are often part of most frameworks, the most valuable parts of a learning agreement, for me, are less structural and I always work to include these. It's your time to reflect and discuss:

- What kind of learner are you?
- What kind of support do you prefer
- What are your main objectives that may or may not be topic based?
 - What are you hoping this will lead to?
- How do you prefer to communicate, face to face, email etc?
- Why this course? Why this training? What attracted you? What would you like to get out of this opportunity, outside of a PhD?

There are also a number of other factors linked to starting out that you will want to consider?

- Where should you have the meeting? Consider being outside of the department where you can not be disturbed
- What framework will you use? Does your university have one that you can utilise?
- Is this something your supervisor has done before?
- Talk through the questions you will utilise with people who know you well beforehand to aid reflection

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In case you don't have access to a template, below are a number of questions to help you in developing your own in order to support having good conversations with your supervisor when you are starting out.

Other points to consider are:

Supervisory and working arrangements:

What hours will you work?

What are your core hours (hours that you will work daily)?

How much will you be expected to work on site?

How should you flag when not on site?

What should happen if you cannot attend, due to illness etc?

How often will you meet with your supervisor?

What will be your primary route of communication outside of these times?

Is there a good day, or time, for informal drop ins?

How should you escalate any issues or queries?

Who should be your first point of contact for technical queries (is there a post doc)?

Who is your first point of contact for administration queries (funding or ordering etc)?

Who is your post graduate tutor, and what are the expectations for meeting with them?

How often will you meet any wider supervisory panel members?

Notes:

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Project planning and milestone setting:

What are your key deadlines for the first 12 months?

What are your key milestones throughout your PhD?

Are there student logs, or other things you need to complete/submit?

How should work be submitted?

How long before a deadline should you submit drafts of work to your supervisor?

What is your supervisor's turnaround time?

How many drafts will your supervisor be prepared to see?

Does your supervisor want you to liaise with someone to pre-book diary time?

Will your supervisor provide feedback face to face or electronically?

Notes:

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Training and personal development:

What are your long-term career goals?

What additional learning requirements are in place for the programme, CPD etc?

What journal clubs, regular meetings are in place for additional learning?

What access to additional skills training is available, stats, communication skills etc?

Are there any funding resources to support conference attendance etc?

Is there any funding support for joining professional bodies or to support networking?

What regular departmental, or funder meetings, are you expected to attend?

What are your non-project specific development goals?

Notes:

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Progression and benchmarking:

How will you be expected to demonstrate achieving benchmarks?

What is the process for flagging that there are concerns?

What additional support can be put in place if challenges occur?

Notes:

Personal support requirements:

What is your learning style?

What is your communication style?

What adjustments or additional support might you require?

Notes:

The table over leaf can be modified to serve your needs as a learner, but before you meet your supervisor think about how to prepare in order to get the best outcomes and have a pre-conversation.

Before you meet you should decide with your supervisor:

- Clear objectives, what are you both trying to achieve
- What's included or not i.e. inclusion of pastoral support
- Timeframe for prior access to the learning framework
- Dedicated time in an uninterrupted space
- Clear timelines, as more than one meeting may be required
- Ground rules, such as approaching all points with openness and curiosity, to support open sharing

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Student name	
Primary supervisor name	
Supervisory panel contacts	
Working hours	
Core hours to be on-site	
Primary route of communication	
Primary contacts for leave requests/sickness etc	
Regularity of supervisor meetings	
Day and time of supervisor meetings	
Day and time of key departmental meetings	
Name and contact for administrative queries	
Name and contact of post graduate tutor	
Requirements for panel meetings (frequency, expected submissions)	
Initial deadlines	

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Key milestones and estimated dates	
Initial training requirements identified	
Additional support arrangements identified	
Other notes	
Initial date	
Review date	

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