

Review: How to get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and their Supervisors

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Since it first appeared in 1987 *How to get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and their Supervisors* by Estelle Phillips and Derek Pugh has been an important source of support for PhD researchers. The Third Edition was published in 2000 and is the book currently available and reviewed below. The publication of a Fourth Edition has been scheduled for 2005 and will undoubtedly have been significantly updated. For example the www.openup.co.uk website states that the new edition 'takes in the impact of the new Code of Practice of the Quality Assurance Agency' and includes a new 'section on increasingly popular professional doctorates such as EdD, DBA, D.Eng.' Readers thinking of purchasing a copy might prefer to wait for the publication of the Fourth Edition, and a review of the updates will appear in a later Issue of the journal.

Subject, aim, and scope

Aimed at PhD researchers and supervisors this book provides a realistic and comprehensive account of undertaking and supervising doctoral research. The chapters are arranged in a chronological style which reflects the PhD journey. Chapter one describes the process of becoming a postgraduate student and sets out the aims of the book. Chapter two builds upon chapter one, offering advice on how to navigate entry into the system; choosing the institution, field of study and supervisor; considering the pros and cons of distance supervision; debunking the myths of postgraduate study and describing the realities.

The meaning and structure of the PhD is set out in chapter three. Additionally this chapter examines the aims of the interrelated actors in postgraduate studies and institutions.

In chapter four, arguably the most pessimistic in the book, Philips and Pugh present the 'seven ways of failing'. These are issues which in the authors' experiences, have contributed to a student failing to attain their PhD. This chapter, though somewhat disheartening, is nonetheless vital in presenting an overview of factors to avoid. Philips and Pugh balance the provision of candid guidance on what not to do, with measured and informed recommendations on how to proceed. In this, the third edition, a greater focus is placed on emphasising the positive aspects of the PhD process, thereby overcoming criticisms of previous editions.

In chapter five the authors examine the characteristics of research. Three basic types of research; exploratory, testing-out and problem-solving are described in a cursory manner. These classifications are, in this reader's opinion, not as segmented as the authors' suggest, as multifaceted research can incorporate all three types. An additional criticism lies in the lack of consideration on the part of the authors for those students, in art or design disciplines, who are writing up practice-based research.

Chapter six discusses the form of the PhD thesis. In this chapter particular emphasis is placed on clarifying the requirements of a

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student in contributing to knowledge and demonstrating originality. The ability to demonstrate novelty is one of the major concerns of most postgraduate students. By providing a comprehensive list of how research can be deemed as novel, Philips and Pugh contribute significantly to reducing these fears. Additionally in this chapter the authors offer advice on how to write the thesis.

Chapter seven discusses practical considerations and emotional concerns associated with postgraduate study. The authors' candid description of the psychological aspects of studying is representative of many students' experiences. The section entitled 'others getting in first' is particularly accurate in depicting the paranoid fear some student's experience, which can result in lack of interaction with others. The practical aspects are equally useful, despite the inevitable replication of sections within other books aimed at postgraduate study.

Chapter eight outlines what is expected of the student and what the student can expect of their supervisor(s). Philips and Pugh intersperse practical guidance with testimonials of student's real life experiences which offer a broad remit of situations and difficulties for further discussion.

In Chapter nine the authors discuss the impact of race, gender, nationality, social, cultural and political concerns within postgraduate institutions and offer targeted advice for those individuals to whom these issues are applicable.

Chapter ten, the final chapter aimed predominately at students, sets out, in general terms, the formal PhD procedures; submission of the thesis, preparation for and completion of the viva oral examination, dealing with results and appeals procedures.

The last two chapters, geared principally towards supervisors, present advice on how to supervise and examine postgraduate students and the institutional responsibilities respectively.

Although aimed primarily at PhD students and supervisors, this book is also appropriate in assisting partners or parents of PhD students to gain an empathic understanding of the ups and downs of undertaking long-term research and the pressures exerted on relationships.

Insights gained through the authors' extensive research into PhD education and their experiences of supervising and examining postgraduate students are supplemented with real-life case studies and interviews, which combine to construct an authoritative and reliable account of the PhD process. The interviewees collectively represent a cross section of disciplines, ages and backgrounds, their experiences therefore, are relevant to an equally broad range of readers.

Strengths and weaknesses

Having received a copy of this book almost six months into my PhD, I found that some of the preliminary chapters were not applicable, as I had previously selected the institution and field of study and was familiar with my supervisor's research record and expertise in the field. Despite this, I found the advice to be a sensible and prudent course of action for potential students yet to select a place of study and supervisor, or unacquainted with their allocated supervisor.

The section entitled 'becoming a research student', in chapter two, was somewhat brief and could have been relocated to preface the previous chapter 'becoming a postgraduate'. Additionally, it would have been helpful to have a section describing complementary practical, academic and interpersonal skills which may be useful for prospective PhD students, yet perhaps not traditionally taught within specific disciplinary undergraduate courses. A creative person, for instance, may find it difficult to think in a linear, mathematical way, and may consequently find statistical analysis of data problematic. Therefore, reviewing these subjects prior to commencement of the course of study may help to refresh these skills.

Philips and Pugh provide practical advice on relationships inside academia, whilst

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emphasising the social and personal difficulties of maintaining external relationships and contending with demanding domestic or professional commitments. The frank discussion concerning the pressures, anxiety, exhaustion, monotony, and dissatisfaction associated with the PhD process, in chapter seven, accurately depicts most if not all postgraduate students concerns. These psychological aspects are portrayed as chronological; depicting the transitional journey one takes. Illustrating this journey in a visual format therefore, would perhaps aid the readers' understanding.

It is surprisingly reassuring to confront these 'realities' and in doing so realise that you are not the only person to feel that way and that these feelings will inevitably subside.

As a general observation the book might benefit from the inclusion of large scale 'pull-outs' of significant diagrams such as the PhD process on page 88. This would be useful as readers could extract the diagrams and place them on their wall for constant reference.

In chapter nine the authors attempt to broach the impact of race, gender, nationality, social, cultural and political concerns within postgraduate institutions. Despite varied applicability in terms of readership, these complex issues are of considerable importance and as such deserve greater coverage, debate and advice than Philips and Pugh are able to dedicate in this brief section. Those readers searching for information regarding racial, sexual or heterosexist harassment or disability discrimination should seek books which specifically explore these issues in greater depth. Philips and Pugh could perhaps facilitate this search by referencing key texts at the end of each chapter, rather than locating a general list of references at the end of the book.

The reader benefits from the authors direct, concise and accessible use of language, informal writing style and the useful addition of an 'action summary' at the end of each

chapter which reiterates the key points. As the title suggests this is a handbook and is not, this reader would suggest, intended to be read from cover to cover but referred to intermittently to access relevant information when guidance is required. The book is organised in succinct chapters allowing the reader to access applicable sections without having to read the entire text. Not all sections will be relevant to all readers. To improve this function it may be beneficial within future editions to 'bookmark' pertinent sections with protruding 'tabs' for easy reference.