

Managing expectations of doing a PhD in the ICT4D Collective

Recent feedback from some of my postgraduate students as well as my reflections on various matters relating to supervision over the last year, have made me think that there would be value in clarifying certain aspects of my understanding of the supervisory process. College has clear guidance on what research students and supervisors are each expected to do, as indicated in its Code of Practice (http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Registry/academic_regulations/PGR_Code_of_Practice.html). However, this does not go into quite the amount of detail that I now think is necessary. I am therefore summarising some of my own thoughts about the supervisory process (over and above the general comments contained in my overview of what doing a PhD in the Collective is about – available at <http://www.gg.rhul.ac.uk/ict4d/ict4dpgr.pdf>), in the hope that this will clarify my expectations. I am often asked to quantify expectations, and so this document does indeed provide broad quantitative guidelines on some aspects of PhD work. However, it must be stressed that everyone is different, and that these are only general guidelines! However, they indicate my expectations, and outline what I believe to be essential for the satisfactory completion of a PhD within three years.

1. **Time Commitment.** My expectation of the normal amount of time that a PhD student should work on their research is 40-50 hours a week. For a 50% part-time student, this would therefore work out at 20-25 hours a week. If a student is registered full-time and cannot devote this level of work, then they should seriously consider shifting to part-time status. Royal Holloway, University of London, has adopted a 4-year maximum (full-time equivalent) registration period for a PhD, and it is therefore absolutely essential for students to use this time effectively. Any prolonged illness or absence (such as for maternity leave) must be recorded on the official forms as a period of interruption.
2. **Leave/Holidays.** Working for a PhD is an all-the-year round activity, and unlike undergraduate students who have vacations, PhD students are expected to work permanently on their research. However, it is also essential to have periods away on leave, or for holidays, to recharge the batteries and gain other experiences. A normal expectation for the amount of holiday time would be four weeks plus official bank holidays.
3. **Speed and amount of writing.** A PhD is usually around 80,000 words in length. I expect PhD students to be able to write at least 1000 good words a day when they are crafting material for their theses, and therefore a first draft should require about 80 days spread across the duration of a PhD. Most chapters will require three or four drafts, and I have had PhD students who have needed to complete seven drafts of some of their work before it has been satisfactory for submission.

4. **Time spent in reading.** A PhD requires a huge amount of reading. Indeed, this is probably the period of your life when you will actually have the time to read the most! I am conscious, though, that many PhD students do not read enough relevant literature. I expect that any PhD student should be able to read, understand and take notes on a 30 page article in a field with which they are familiar in about one hour. This means that you should be able to read 8-10 papers, or one 300 page book a day. If you are not able to do this, and I know that many students who are not native English speakers find this difficult, then it is essential that you seek guidance at note taking and language support.
5. **Finding relevant material to read.** I am sometimes told by research students (or read in their written work) that they cannot find any material written on a particular subject. This should be a really exciting occasion, since it should suggest that this is something really new! However, all too often a two-minute search on Google Scholar or (a much longer time spent) on Meta-Lib, reveals a wealth of literature that could easily have been consulted. I am very happy to suggest particular literature to be read, but I do expect that some ground work has been done in advance. Indeed, with the vast amount of literature now being produced on most subjects, you should all already be far ahead of me in knowledge about what has been written in your respective research areas.
6. **Deadlines and feedback.** I am becoming increasingly dismayed at the failure of PhD students to meet deadlines for submission of written work. If research students expect their theses to be completed on schedule then it is absolutely essential that they get used to completing written work to time – and scheduling their lives so as to achieve this. The work may not be perfect – but no work ever is! Just get the work to as good a standard as you can in the time available. Remember that you are going to have to complete several drafts of it over the three years of your thesis! Perhaps I have been too willing to permit flexible deadlines in the past, but especially with the strict four-year limit on theses that now exists, I can no longer afford to be lenient over this. I am also dismayed that some people think they can hand material in late, and still expect me to go through it in time for a scheduled supervision! I nearly always provide feedback on written work within a week, but I do have to schedule this in to my diary, and if you submit work late I do not think that you can reasonably expect it to be responded to so swiftly. By the way, when I send out notes requesting responses on things (such as feedback on my supervision, or completion of forms, or even RSVPs to parties!), I do also expect these to be answered – at the very least it is courteous to do so! If you expect me to respond to your written work, I too expect you to reply to the things that I send you!
7. **Supervisions.** The College expectation is that supervisors and research students should see each other normally on a monthly basis, with formal records being kept of these meetings on the appropriate College forms. For part-time students, the expectation is on a pro-rata basis, so that the normal expectation would be six meetings a year for a 50% student. With distance-based students, I seek to hold more frequent meetings by Skype, usually twice as many (thus 12

meetings for part-time distance-based students each year). These meetings are absolutely essential to the progress of your research, and should not be cancelled. Please ensure that at the end of every meeting, we arrange the next one. Given how full my diary is, it is usually extremely difficult to reschedule cancelled supervisions. With distance-based students, we should also try to meet face-to-face once or twice a year.

8. **Peer Supervisory Meetings.** I introduced these peer supervision meetings for three main reasons:

- So that I can see you all more frequently than just once every month (usually there is a peer supervisory meeting once a month in term time, so that you will therefore be able to meet with me more or less fortnightly);
- So that you can learn from each other and share experiences – you are an incredible group of people, with much to give and learn from each other;
- So that I do not have to say the same general things about research to each of you in turn – thus making our main individual supervisions much more focused on your specific topic and issues.

Some of you appear not to think it necessary to attend these meeting. This means that I have to go over things again with you individually, and this wastes time. Failure to attend these meetings also means that you miss out on feedback and support from your colleagues – all of whom can provide useful advice and support on issues that you are facing in the completion of your research.

9. **Means of communication.** Quill and parchment is soon to become my favourite form of correspondence!! At present, though, I am very happy to use e-mails as the main form of written communication with my PhD students, with attachments of your written work also being acceptable. If I respond digitally, it will also be much easier for you to read what I write! I will usually try to respond to e-mails within 48 hours, which I think is a reasonable time span especially since I receive well over 100 e-mails a day. My PhD students come very high on my list of priorities in terms of my intended urgency of response, but I cannot always respond instantaneously to your queries, especially since I am only working part-time at the university. For distance-based students, the most sensible way to communicate is by Skype (although given the large number of interruptions I am now getting when on Skype, you will note that I am reducing my visibility on this medium). In exceptional circumstances, I am happy for you to send me SMS text messages or 'phone me, but having spoken with other staff in the Department, I do not think it reasonable for this to be your main way of contacting me. Apart from anything else, to receive texts and 'phone calls on my mobile when I am abroad is a very real financial cost to me, let alone being intrusive. Supervisors should not be at the immediate beck and call of their PhD students; at weekends and in the evenings, I do need to have a little but of privacy! Please also note with immediate effect that when I am away for extended periods, especially when on leave, I will be putting an out of office reply for all my e-mails that will specify that I will not be responding to them. In such circumstances, I really mean that I will not be responding, and you should not expect to get a reply from me. Do write to me once I have returned!

10. **Attendance at seminars.** It is a Departmental requirement that research students attend research group seminars, Departmental seminars and lectures by visiting speakers in the Department. All such events provide opportunities for you to learn about research, ways of presenting your arguments, and developing a wider understanding of the academic world. Do remember that in your viva you will be expected to know about academic issues wider than the immediate focus of your PhD topic. I am dismayed how few of my PhD students regularly attend these events, and it is indeed quite embarrassing when I have to defend such absences to my other colleagues. Interestingly, those of you who are making best progress are also those who do regularly attend such events. I am sure that there is a lesson here.
11. **ICT4D Days.** I try to convene an ICT4D day three times a year, primarily as a team-building event, but also to serve as an opportunity to discuss aspects of our mutual work, and other matters of general interest. Those who attend usually find these to be particularly valuable events, with some of our distance-based students even coming from abroad to visit on these occasions. While not everyone can join in all of these days, I would like to emphasise that I do see them as being of very great importance, alongside individual supervisions and our peer supervisory meetings. It would be great to have suggestions for other activities that we could do on these occasions!
12. **Annual review and upgrade from MPhil to PhD.** The annual review process is currently being changed, but it forms an essential part of the monitoring process for research students and usually takes place in the summer months. It is by no means guaranteed that everyone will have a successful review, although I very much hope that all of my research students will regularly have excellent reviews – hence, why I am placing such importance on this overall list of my expectations! You should expect to submit hard copies of the following for your review:
- An overview of work done during the year of approximately 5 pages (c. 1500 words), including *inter alia*,
 - i. An account of the research undertaken during the previous year
 - ii. Details of any field work undertaken
 - iii. Plans for the next year, including a Gantt Chart or equivalent indicating proposed activities, anticipated deadlines and outputs
 - iv. Conferences/workshops attended, and in what capacity
 - v. Details of any papers submitted to journals
 - vi. Contribution to wider life of the Department and College (members of relevant Committees, Societies, or sporting achievements)
 - vii. Any other issues you wish to bring to the attention of the review team
 - One example of written work completed during the year, such as a chapter or paper
 - Completed training log (including attendance at all College and Departmental training courses, and if any compulsory elements have been missed an explanation of why these were not attended)

- Copies of all supervisory records.

The upgrade process to PhD status is usually undertaken in a second meeting, and you should not expect this to take place until you have undertaken some analysis of your data. I usually expect the theoretical framework, the methodology and one analytical chapter to have been completed satisfactorily before the upgrading meeting takes place. This would therefore usually be near the start of the third year of a thesis.

13. **The Departmental web-site and participation in our Moodle environment.** I guess that digital sharing environments are not everyone's favourite item! However, in this day and age, having a digital presence is vital to your success – especially since the field in which most of us are working is ICT4D. How will people know about your research if you do not publicise it? It is a Departmental requirement that all PhD students have their profile on our web-site, and that this is regularly updated. Do, therefore, please ensure that this happens. Some of us have also put a great deal of time into creating our digital shared learning environment on Moodle – this should be an area where people can share ideas and collaborate – but this is clearly not working! I am now seriously wondering how much value there is in continuing with it. Very, very few of you have even logged on to the new site since we shifted this away from the College's general learning environment to <http://moodle-ict4d.rhul.ac.uk>. Interestingly, as I write, there are also now 97 people on the Collective-initiated ICT4D Group on Facebook, and yet only 5 of our research students. You may well have other better things to do, but there are some interesting contacts and conversations going on there!

This, as with so many of my documents, remains a work in progress, but it does highlight what I expect from 'my' research students, as well as my commitments to you. Above all, it is intended to make clear what it is necessary for you to be successful and complete your PhDs within three years full-time equivalent. As noted at the beginning, it reflects my responses to the feedback from those of you who have so kindly taken the time to respond to the circular I recently sent you, and it also builds upon conversations that I have had with many of you over recent months.

Tim Unwin
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