

Book Review

The Unwritten Rules of PhD Research

Gordon Rugg and Marian Petrie. Published in 2004 by Open University Press. ISBN 0-335-21344-8

By Ingrid Lunt

The title of the book tempts one to read further, even to buy the book. There are, indeed, many unwritten rules of PhD research, in part because the process of gaining a PhD still remains a somewhat mysterious business. Twenty years ago, the process of PhD study was largely dependent on a relationship between a student and a supervisor; what happened in and through the relationship was largely a matter of mystery, and to an extent still is today.

Although the QAA in its latest Code of Practice, in particular the Section on Postgraduate Research degrees, (QAA 2004) seeks to make the process both transparent and accountable, the process of supervision, and hence of PhD teaching and learning is still unobserved and unrecorded. The QAA Code, which is explicitly student-centred, requires universities to provide students with information, *inter alia*, on the requirements and expectations of the PhD, on the assessment of the PhD, and on the criteria for pass or fail. These are welcome and timely requirements. The secrecy of the viva has been well-documented, and there are frequently problems in an assessment process which is so lacking in transparency and hence equity and accountability.

However, this book does not really seek to address these major issues. It is written in a more light-hearted vein and provides, in a very readable and at times amusing manner, a range of suggestions and sections of advice for PhD students, from the point of view of the student. This is almost in the form of a book which a recent PhD graduate might give to their best friend who is embarking on the same path, ie, "can you give me some advice which will enable me to settle in, get going and make good progress to my PhD"?

The book contains 16 chapters which cover the following: so you want to do a PhD? (a very useful introductory chapter with useful 'tips'); procedures and milestones (a straightforward chapter with information about annual reviews and upgrade or transfer, and an explanation as to the purposes of these milestones); the system (a chapter which aims to help students to find their way round the university 'system', its people and its customs); supervision (another useful chapter about managing the supervisor which builds on other works such as those by Phillips and Pugh (2000) *How to get a PhD – A handbook for students and their supervisors* and Delamont, *et al.* (2004) *Supervising the Doctorate*. The chapter also provides some very practical advice on how to get the best out of the supervisory relationship); networks (an important reminder that research students should be networking right from the start of their PhD period), reading, paper types, writing, writing structure, writing style, the process of writing (6 chapters on the centrally important issues of reading and writing), presentations (a chapter with a number of useful 'tips'), research design, the viva, conferences, and 'What next?'

While there are an increasing number of books which are aimed at supporting research students in various aspects of their research study (eg, Rowena Murray (2003) *How to survive your viva*; Penny Tinkler and Carolyn Jackson (2004) *The Doctoral Examination process*; Patrick Dunleavy (2003) *Authoring a PhD*), the authors of this book appear to have succeeded in bringing together a wide range of very relevant suggestions and advice for

students from the students' perspective. The book is different in its message from the volumes mentioned above, and serves a different purpose.

Although there are parts of the book where the readership is clearly probably a different kind of research student from those frequently studying at the Institute of Education (ie, a younger, less experienced student studying for the PhD full-time), the approach taken is mostly appropriate for the wide range of research students undertaking doctorates across the different subjects. With pressures to complete 'on time' (3-4 years full-time or 6-7 years part-time), a new research student is advised to 'hit the ground running', ie, to use any resources available to help in understanding 'the system'. The authors of this book devote a chapter to 'understanding the system', and this is probably a very useful section. Of course the system may be the 'system of the PhD', ie, the rules, regulations, expectations, customs, of the university, the informal ways of getting things done in a particular university, or the very specific nature of the relationships formed with key individuals essential to progress with the doctorate.

I recommend this volume to all research students at whatever stage of their doctorate. It is reassuring, and provides very sensible advice to counterbalance the amount of paperwork which universities are increasingly producing. For students at the start of their research degree the book provides some of the resources which will enable them to gain an understanding of the system they are joining, while for more experienced students, the book may both reinforce experiences gained and help to formulate questions which need to be raised. This book is an easy but very informative read, and forms a welcome addition to the volumes already on the market to support research students.

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