

Where to graduate studies: of bulls and bears

5

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Learning outcomes

- Why graduate students are cash cows
- Institutional impediments (or support) in getting a degree
- Why students should manage their own research
- Why academics are expected to do the impossible
- The consequences of massification
- Holding the university to account

The most important question for a graduate student is to identify an appropriate supervisor and an appropriate university, as suggested in Chapter 4. Consider this comment from South Africa's premier research methodologist: "We found in a recent study that the result of indiscriminate admissions policy at the postgraduate level is having disastrous effects" (Mouton, 2013).

A few South African universities that have been accepting any doctoral students (no selection/no screening) have a dropout rate of 90 per cent.

Just think of the complete waste of faculty time in trying to supervise this cohort where only 10% eventually graduate. Not surprisingly, top universities are actually going the other route and putting in more stringent selection criteria at this level.

This telling observation was offered by Johann Mouton, whose Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology at Stellenbosch University undertakes surveys of the tertiary education sector.¹

¹ Readers are referred to ASSAf's (2010) *The PhD study*, which discusses factors in success and in failure (by both students and institutions). It argues for better monitoring systems and quality assurance (i.e. more bureaucracy – sometimes this is necessary), proper support and supervisor training. This report, in fact, should be required reading for every PhD student to enable them to get a better understanding of the national context and where and how they fit into it, and how they can work with their host institutions in improving conditions for PhD study.

Where I develop a satirical argument to critique the perils of “academia”, Rajendra Chetty (Chapter 4) writes from within the walls of his own research environment. Our styles are different but our message is the same. Universities must rank among the most complex administrative, bewildering and labyrinthine environments to inhabit the planet. Committees, decision making and procedures work at a snail’s pace, often inefficiently. Often, one has to learn by osmosis how universities manage themselves. Some PhD students complain that their theses took over a year to be marked, and then another six to eight months for examiner reports to be processed by higher degree committees and/or graduate offices and/or school administrations. Only then are students able to start their corrections. In some institutions, something that seems like a simple routine process (such as ethics forms) might require four to five signatures, from that many divisions, taking many months to process. Sometimes the student has long graduated before ethical clearance is secured. Institutional inaction – if not downright obstruction – is the impression perceived by students. During such delays the student’s career is on hold. This kind of situation is known as the Fitzhugh Phenomenon, where everyone is partly responsible for everything, but nobody is totally responsible for anything. Administrators and academics shuffle paper, emails and documents between themselves, which imposes more red tape requiring more administrators, and everyone has to check with everyone else before anything can get done (cited in Martin, 1973: 42). In the email age, correspondence often just goes round and round in perpetual motion as all addressees think it is another’s responsibility to respond.

Students should take responsibility for their admittance and in managing their research in relation to university offices, structures, rules and procedures. While, as the Fitzhugh Phenomenon reveals, these can be Byzantine, they do need to be understood, manoeuvred through, and mastered.

Many of the intricate rules that delay decision making, and require endless numbers of signatures and supporting documents for simple tasks like examiner appointments, often irritating both students and supervisors, arose precisely to deal with corruption, subversion and amateurism by both staff and students. For example, some supervisors try to get soft, incompetent or inexperienced examiners appointed. They do not trust their own supervision. Examiners sometimes do not even read the theses they have been contracted to grade, and some automatically approve without corrections everything that comes across their desks, without actively engaging with the work. They then send off their invoices. All students should read the documents sent to examiners by their graduate offices to get a sense of how the institution has tried to address these recurring problems. As a result, to protect the integrity of the examination process, the level of administration has in some cases reached absurd proportions where the examiner spends more time filling in forms than doing the examining itself.² Examiners are underpaid and overworked, and often need constant reminders to prioritise the task. Many South Afri-

can universities are overmanaged, underresourced, understaffed and overwhelmed with complicated systems which they are unable to implement properly, as they try to meet their state auditing requirements. In general, however, the internal rules are made for the 10 per cent who refuse to play the game.

The senior administrators who set unrealistic “targets” (for admission) are not themselves responsible for ensuring academic throughput. That onerous task is allocated to the hapless, underresourced academic sector, which is lumped with doing the impossible. This sector is increasingly treated as the repository of an increasing number of tasks and administrative duties that were previously done by university-wide support divisions, which now, however, largely operate as reporting divisions, constantly mining academics for data they themselves once gathered.

Why do educated policymakers and university management make such grievous and obvious errors? As Chetty infers (see Chapter 4), these start with the way that universities are funded, their need to the pay their bills, and the new instrumentalist notion that educational institutions are simply production lines that enrol “clients” who are processed via the promise of learning, and pushed out at the other end of the factory’s conveyor belt a few years later, whether or not they are educated, literate or even employable.³

While academics know what the problem is (no screening; massification; corporatisation and managerialism; lack of institutional student support; chaotic, unfriendly and incomprehensible institutional organisation, etc.), management ironically blames them for high postgraduate dropout rates.

Students are rarely exposed to this behind-the-scenes administrative Neverland and managerial speak, and thus do not understand – or appreciate – why their supervisors are always on the edge of a nervous breakdown (see chapters 9 and 10; Module 6). Sometimes, however, students are directly responsible for their own demise. Among these are opportunistic students who deliberately court soft and inexperienced supervisors and expect them to write their theses for them (some do), who threaten legal action when faced with constructive criticism from supervisors, recommendations for revision from examiners, or when they fail. Such individuals are less interested in learning anything than obtaining a piece of paper that certifies their half-digested ideas, thereby bringing the whole institution into disrepute.

2 See Tomaselli, *The UKZN Griot: Of literacy and illiterates*. [http://ccms-ukzn.ac.za/images/griot/may2012-07illiteracy and illiterates.pdf](http://ccms-ukzn.ac.za/images/griot/may2012-07illiteracy%20and%20illiterates.pdf) (Accessed on 3 November 2017).

3 Students who assume that they are clients deserving of high grades irrespective of their performance and who blame their lecturers for their failure are a drain on national economies. In fact, if anything, overteaching is anti-Freireian and counterproductive, and creates dependency, passivity and learned helplessness. The attitude that universities are just supermarkets where ideas can be bought off the shelf ready-made is junked once and for all by Mboti in this volume (Chapter 10), who argues that the most successful students succeed *despite* their lecturers.

Development researcher Imraan Valodia observes:

Let's be clear. Academics are a difficult bunch – the academic enterprise tends to attract a somewhat odd, opinionated, single-minded group of people. It is what makes the system so challenging and difficult to manage. But, it is also the very essence of what makes the system work – it is what generates the innovation and single-minded focus on excellence that we would like to believe we all strive for. You simply cannot have the one without the other.

Academics are also enterprising. Note how research output suddenly increases with a bit of a research incentive. There is a lesson in that. More hierarchies and bureaucratic procedures are unlikely to generate anything but more hierarchies and bureaucratic procedures – and a lot more resistance and unhappiness. Flatter hierarchies, more self-governance and associated accountability, encouragement of “quirkiness”, and a few little incentives are likely to achieve a lot more.

It is for the above reasons that Chetty appeals to students to find ways of successfully navigating the often impenetrable bureaucracies that universities have become. Even academics have largely lost sight of how universities work, but many just do not care. Students then become the victims of such dis- or non-engagement. This should not happen, but by the same token, nor should their supervisors be turned into victims (Change-List circular UKZN, 2009).

Use the manual

A good car mechanic would not do a service without reference to a manufacturer's manual, yet the last book that a new PhD student will consult is one like this one. There are many excellent texts that should be at any student's call. One is *The emerging researcher. Nurturing passion, developing skills, producing output* (De Gruchy & Holness, 2007). This is a serious book dealing with serious matters. It is presented as a handbook, a manual, a route map, and will save you time, money and frustration. It makes for a reverent tactical companion to this irreverent anthology.

Just as Mboti argues in Chapter 10, the smartphone is *not* a manual – it cannot solve problems from first principles, and the thinking must be done for it by its user. Diagnostic skill is the key. Being a critical digital native is a learned experience. Intelligence does not come automatically with micro-processing chips/DNA. Tactical searches are the basis of research. Technologies and software such as NVivo and ATLAS.ti can be just as stupid or just as intelligent as their users (chapters 23 and 24).

Some final suggestions for the student

- Study your university's graduate policy. Hold it to account.
- Become an active member of your disciplinary associations. Ensure that they engage critically rather than play the corporatist game.
- Communicate your research far and wide.
- Engage in the politics of research to shape better institutional practices. Use your student power.
- Demand your due in terms of time, support and supervision. Even the self-proclaimed research universities undervalue graduate students, as their bread and butter comes from undergraduate massification.
- If possible, choose your supervisor with care. Looking for someone you “like” is a waste of time because the structured relationship that should exist between student and supervisor will be compromised.
- Dialogue across disciplines and engage those who eschew critique.
- Work within communities of scholars, be intellectually disruptive, pedagogically unruly, and do not become a neoliberal subject looking to buy rather than earn your degree.
- Always consider yourself an empowered critical citizen.
- Become a public intellectual – publish constructive analyses anywhere you can (newspapers, magazines, blogs, etc.).
- Adopt an attitude of self-sufficiency.