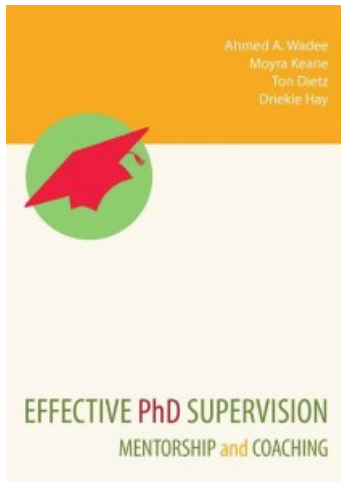


Effective PhD Supervision - Chapter Three - Guidelines for Mentors



3.1 Introduction

The supervision of postgraduate students generally follows institutional guidelines such that policies or procedures (sometimes confusing and contradictory) are in place to produce PhD graduates. From the students' perspective, on the other hand, the path leading to the doctorate is unclear and filled with all kinds of hurdles and uncertainties. Most importantly, and especially at the early stages of the degree, support at all levels is a necessity.

The concept of mentoring is a universal phenomenon and certainly not a new one! In almost all cases the challenges faced by post-graduate students appear to be dealt with more effectively, or rather with a greater sense of personal satisfaction, when such individuals have someone to rely on. During the course of their postgraduate studies, and particularly in the early stages, students are required to make an intellectual and, more importantly, an emotional leap from being Bachelor's and Master's students to becoming PhD candidates. In some instances, as with individuals with professional qualifications, the primary degree is earned without much exposure to formal instruction in research, ethics and knowledge of the requirements for proceeding towards a doctoral qualification. Primary degree supervision typically consists of structured courses, with the student enjoying direct instruction and regular contact with the team of lecturers concerned. PhD candidates are, however, expected to be more independent, self-sustaining, with

little access to their supervisor and less structured than in their prior degree. For the PhD student, contact and feedback with supervisors depend very much on the rate of progress of the individual student concerned and on the commitment of the supervisor to the process.

The mental leap required by students who find themselves in a PhD programme is enormous, and for some the gap between prior qualifications and the doctorate may appear insurmountable. While in earlier endeavours in a student's academic career, advice and guidance (even at the proposal level) was relatively easy to obtain, this is not necessarily the case for PhD candidates. The expectations are that the student will now have greater insight into areas of research design, techniques and methodology. A familiar but unsettling comment from a supervisor, subtly or not so subtly suggesting that the new student should be in a position to find out for him/herself, is not always easy to accept. Often, however, students' expectations about asking the supervisor for 'advice' is hidden within an agenda of finding a quick solution to the proposal, project or ideas originally generated in the planning phases of the project. The student's perception is one where the supervisor seems to expect a switch will be turned on in the student's head such that the information required will be instantly at hand. Some students find this bewildering, confusing and frustrating, whilst others rise to the challenge. Often students look towards others to share their experiences and to seek emotional and intellectual support. In some cases, students arrive on campus without confirmation of residence, or any knowledge of the new environment or without even having a clear PhD topic in mind. The entire experience of undertaking doctoral training can therefore be very unsettling. So, to whom should the student turn to? Affirmation is a high priority! In this sense the student may have expectations of 'someone' being available to assist. That 'someone' is often targeted as the supervisor or course coordinator, and disillusionment based on expectations may set in very early.

The challenges for new doctoral students are not only to engage in academic work but to become familiar with the environment and to build new relationships. The engagement in the required academic commitments is an expectation of supervisors and faculty staff who often ignore or are unaware of the student not having resolved the initial appropriate social (non-academic) requirements. Thus, instead of focussing on the academic expectations of the PhD programme, the student is floundering and focussed on the former practical needs of facing a new

environment. One possible negative aspect of this is the initial discordance between the two foci, which could be the seed for mistrust and unhappiness. This then becomes the focus of the student. The Faculty, with its academic and non-academic staff and more experienced students, should set its sights on assisting the new recruit in adapting to and managing life over the next few years in what may be perceived as an inhospitable environment.

In an ideal situation the supervisor is thought to be an outstanding and patient teacher, a superb researcher in his or her own right, and one who could, depending on the needs of the student, be a facilitator, mentor, and coach, including being the initial nucleus of knowledge around which postgraduate students would want to be. This could allow the student possibilities of growth limited only by the student's own ability and interests.

Not all individuals, be they staff members or senior students, have the makings of a mentor. Individuals who enjoy supporting others and sharing knowledge and time are far more suited to being mentors. The success of the programme rests crucially on the supportive nature and academic capacity of the prospective mentor.

Mentors, be they volunteers or faculty appointed to support new students, need some basic knowledge of the requirements for effective mentorship. To this end, workshops on mentoring at the faculty level are recommended to assist in identifying the requisites for mentoring. The remainder of this chapter, therefore, will focus on identifying some of these issues and will build on the previous publication based on experiences shared by many supervisors, students and staff members at various institutions within the Netherlands and South Africa. The contributions made by all are gratefully acknowledged (see acknowledgements).

3.2 Central Aspects of Mentoring

3.2.1 The functions of mentorship

The challenges faced by mentors, supervisors and host institutions include providing direction and motivation to achieve common objectives (ultimately, the PhD degree); assisting with research conception, design and methods; providing a perspective on the project and research environment; and, finally, starting the process of providing guidance, support and structure to the new doctoral student.

Central to the idea of mentoring is the development of a relationship such that the helping nature of the interaction is focussed on longer-term and broadly defined academic and social achievement. In this context both the mentor and student should gain intellectual, emotional and personal achievement from the experience. The starting point nevertheless is that the mentor initially comes from a background of having had previous exposure to various aspects of the programme and can share this experience with the new recruit. From this starting point, the interaction has huge potential to become a lifelong relationship. Indeed a common saying emanating from workshops has been 'once a mentor, always a mentor' and the implication, rather than being literal, is actually about the lifelong relationships built over the time the student spends with the mentor. This then develops into a closer relationship entering realms other than supervising a PhD! Whilst mentors may be the supervisors, there can be others who are interested individuals who share commonality of purpose with the student or colleague.

Some of the core functions of being a mentor include:

- A primary personal relationship between the mentor and student
- Provision of emotional, psychological and moral support
- Direct assistance and guidance with the student's career and professional development
- Role modelling to the point of 'showing the way'
- Development of trust, confidence and mutual respect between the student and mentor
- Reciprocity within the relationship in terms of derived benefits.

3.2.2 Who needs a mentor?

Everybody needs a mentor! This may not be applicable all of the time, but throughout life, and particularly in academic life, a mentor of some sort is necessary. Most, if not all, individuals have had role models but not all have had the privilege of a personal mentor who guided them through some maze, difficulty or challenge at some time. Indeed, almost everyone has had a mentor in some form or another during their lives. Their lives could be varied from little

interaction to major involvement or to advice/support on anything minor or major.

Students thrive with the right mentor at their side. It does not stop there, though; mentors are sorely needed for individuals at all levels in the academic arena and in teaching. Even Deans and Vice-chancellors require a coach or mentor at some point in their careers. This is also true in the business world where leaders lend support to their juniors and gain insight from those who have undertaken similar tasks, shouldered the emotional burdens and have lessons to share with new entrants to the corporate enterprise.

The need for a mentor varies from individual to individual and from circumstance to circumstance, but decision making and looking towards the future is often clearer with support from those who have walked that road before. Most often it is not the advice but the sheer knowledge of affirmation and back up (if required) that tips the balance to a favourable outcome for the individual seeking support.

3.2.3 The benefits of the mentoring process

There are a variety of benefits for both the mentor and the student. While mentors benefit from the experience on a more personal level, the student's benefits are more far-reaching.

Potential benefit to the student:

- Increased knowledge of the research programme, discipline, department and faculty/university culture
- Acquisition of skills and 'street-wise' knowledge that will be useful at a postgraduate level and in future careers
- Easier adjustment to the programme, department and environment
- Increased self-confidence and greater independence
- A channel for airing problems
- Desire to pursue an academic career and possibly mentoring future careers
- The difference between success and failure, if mentored early enough in the career.

Potential benefits to the mentor include and are not limited to:

- Tolerance and empathy with students, colleagues and associates
- An ability to identify problems that students/colleagues may not voice or even be aware of
- Life and leadership skills, interactive skills and limited coping mechanisms within the mentor's own sphere of events
- A sense of increased personal self-esteem based on the student's successes: 'parental/protégé pride'.

3.2.4 Requirements of mentorship

The more obvious requirements or expectations of the mentor in academia are to:

- Be aware of all the academic requirements for the programme
- Ensure the new student is made aware of all requirements, and possibilities for funding support and other opportunities
- Provide personal one-on-one support to the PG student
- Be aware of the needs of the student
- Have the capacity to refer the student to appropriate personnel for specialised academic or psycho-social support.

Other procedures common to both individuals and to the institution/department should be put into place to make the mentoring process a functional and a rewarding experience. The institution can play an important role in the process by providing an enabling environment for mentor-student meetings and by supporting the mentor. Often, the mentor may not have the knowledge or be unable to provide adequate support. It is important that the mentor has access to a Faculty-appointed mentor coordinator or supervisor to turn to for such support.

It is generally thought that mentorship should be voluntary and only those individuals wishing to take on the responsibility make the process successful. Reluctant mentors or those with expectations of perverse incentives such as payment or career advancement rarely make good mentors. Relationships

between such mentors and students almost always break down, leaving all concerned disillusioned, and this may at times contribute to academic failure.

The stakeholders in this process are the institutions, departments, supervisor, mentor and the student. Some believe that a formal contract should exist to define each stakeholder's role and that it should be duly signed, etc. This however adds to the bureaucratic environment and is not necessarily conducive to the spirit of mentorship, viz., camaraderie, a helping hand and a socially interactive process.

3.2.5 Training of mentors

Training, providing funding resources and clarifying the role of the mentor are vital to the success of the mentoring process.

Training should include partnership responsibilities, knowledge of important campus sites such as offices of residence, financial aid, student administration, banks, restaurants, entertainment areas, safety and security measures, officers and offices, campus health offices, resources for guidance and counselling, sources for books (new and used), libraries and study areas. Experience with such training has demonstrated that, sadly, few students who had already been in the system for some time were aware of the range of available facilities.

An important component is the provision of skill training for mentors in order to be able to identify the warning signs of depression, anxiety and the need for psycho-social support. At no time should mentors take on the role of psychological counsellors but rather should refer the student to professionals appropriately trained for such support.

3.2.6 Stress: seeing the signs

Mentors, coordinators and supervisors must be able to identify signs of stress in a student. Stressed individuals in the course of their tenure may exhibit variable patterns of behaviour. The cause of the stress may be academic, personal or social, and it is important to recognise stress regardless of the cause.

Stress may become apparent as behavioural, cognitive or physiological symptoms. Behavioural stress is seen as performance inefficiency, irritability, reduction in social sensitivity, pacing or hyperactive behaviour; cognitive disturbances are

evidenced by anticipatory anxiety and fearful or worrisome thinking; while physiological symptoms may be seen in the form of mood swings, muscle tension, frequent headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances and cardiovascular symptoms (increased heart rate, blood pressure and respiration).

Obviously these are not all of the warning signs. That said, it is important to be on the lookout for any telltale signs. Once the situation has been identified, the student should be referred for appropriate treatment or counselling.

3.2.7 Reverse mentoring

In this situation, as is seen more and more with the advance of the electronic era, the student has greater exposure to and knowledge of a particular area. This has great potential as the roles can be reversed and the mentor may now find him/herself in the opposite position. The role reversal can be advantageous to both. Not only is the experience an educational one for the mentor, but one where the mentor's reversed role opens an avenue for observing him/herself as reflected by the student who, in the reversed role, is now the mentor. Negative aspects such as impatience and irritability or the positive sides of mentoring such as understanding and an ability to transfer knowledge come to the fore acutely. Consequently, both parties are brought centre stage in playing out each other's roles and can only benefit from the experience.

3.3 Organisational Mentorship Structures

Whereas the following sections provide suggestions on setting up formalised mentoring structures, experience has shown that the most successful mentoring relationships have been those where the informal situation came into effect due to various situations, be they social or academic interactions.

Faculties should be encouraged to consider specific strategies to create opportunities to provide quality mentoring for doctoral students. The professionalization of mentoring could include sponsorship for research programmes into mentoring, continual mentoring-education seminars and workshops, and the provision of specific training in the professional and ethical conduct of mentoring. Since most supervisors in the current era have not necessarily been exposed to formal mentoring programmes, it is important to highlight the need for strategic practice, ethical guidelines and operational procedures to formalise the structure and management of the mentoring

programme. This could be beneficial and ensure the integrity of the process for both parties. The upshot of this would be to avoid exploitation (at all levels) of or by either individual. Factors that could be avoided are emotional interdependence and emotional/academic exploitation.

A strategy that could be harnessed by faculties is one whereby a culture of mentoring is created, nurtured and supported financially as well as being recognised as part of the academic process. In this facilitated mentor environment, staff mentoring students would be valued and rewarded. Some of the strategies that could be used to entrench mentoring in the university culture might be:

- Orientation of staff towards mentoring: *Mentoring workshops, supervision of mentors (hierarchy), defined mentor functions*
- Rewards for mentoring: *Include mentoring in peer evaluations, awards and the assessments that contribute towards promotions*
- Tailoring mentoring programmes to suit the needs of the students and staff/mentor
- Preparing the student to accept the role of mentee or protégé
- Continuously assessing the mentoring programme and adjusting with changing student/mentor needs.

Depending on the structures within departments and available human resources, mentors may be the supervisors themselves, heads of research units, divisions or departments, and senior students (who have been in the post-graduate programme for at least one year and who are familiar with the environment and post-graduate programme). The basic scenario is one where the supervisor also becomes the mentor because of the lack of personnel. A further step may be afforded when a senior student, who is also under the supervision of the project leader (in the same area of research as the student), is asked to mentor the new incumbent. In those cases where no such senior student is available and/or the supervisor is unable to mentor, a senior student in a similar or parallel project may be asked to mentor. Even though this approach may not necessarily be ideally conducive to the academic support of the student, it could potentially provide many of the benefits of mentoring.

In large units with many staff members, an individual (normally a senior member of staff) is asked to become a mentor coordinator. This individual could act as the head of the programme to which mentors in the department may refer. The coordinator's role is to ensure that mentors are trained and have the necessary knowledge and support to fulfil the duties of a mentor. The coordinator may also be the initiator of the programme and generally obtain donor or departmental funding for the mentor programme. Where such hierarchies do not exist, the supervisor/head of department usually takes on the responsibility of funding and providing the back-up for mentor consultation.

3.4 Setting up Mentoring Systems

Successful mentoring depends on:

a) Selecting appropriate mentors

Selection of mentors should depend on the demonstration of sound academic performance in the past, an appropriate personality profile and temperament, leadership potential and a willingness to mentor. Empathy, patience and commitment to the programme should be uppermost.

b) Appointing a mentor coordinator

The institution should provide an individual who would be the contact person to whom mentors may refer and be a source of information for student and mentor needs. The coordinator also should provide an avenue for successful reporting and feedback processes. The role of the coordinator is also to ensure support being made available from outside sources such as counsellors and academic programmes, and to engage in fund raising for the programme.

c) Training mentors

Once mentors have been selected, it is the institution's responsibility to provide training in stress management, listening skills, time management, resource availability, leadership skills and the art of social mentoring, as well as to orientate both mentors and students towards how to achieve rewarding partnerships. A certificate or some form of formal award at the end of the programme is desirable and will provide both staff and student mentors with a sense of accomplishment.

3.5 Requirements for Effective Mentoring

3.5.1 Linking students to mentors

This is not an easy task. Merely linking a senior student to a newly enrolled individual may be problematical. Likewise, because the two are in the same field of study or live in the same residence should not be the only reason for the partnership. Senior students should be asked to mentor. It is advisable, however, to allow new students a short independent settling-in time in which some (though superficial) liaisons may be made. The role of the mentor coordinator or supervisor in this instance is to be able to identify likely suitable mentors. Thereafter, the prospective mentor should be solicited or asked for his/her interest in mentoring, followed by suggesting the possibility of mentoring the new student. If affirmative, the individual should then be offered the opportunity to mentor and be introduced to the student. At that point, the social mentoring process should be allowed to take its course.

In essence, mentoring is a two-way commitment between individuals based on honesty, realistic expectations, and an understanding and appreciation of each other.

3.5.2 Mentors fulfilling students' needs

From the perspective of the student, the mentor should:

- be committed to the mentoring process
- provide guidance and academic support
- promote effective time management (This implies knowledge of the student's academic schedule so as to be mindful of important lectures, seminars and journal clubs, etc.)
- encourage the student to be well prepared for relevant courses
- encourage self-study and preparation for research meetings
- assist in the setting up of study groups and self-support units with the student's peers
- furnish referrals to academic staff for specific academic problems and to

relevant personnel for psycho-social support

- render limited personal counselling and have a positive attitude towards the process
- encourage participation in academic and non-academic matters
- be available to regularly review the student's progress in both academic and non-academic areas
- identify needs and provide avenues from which support may be obtained. These include offices of administration, financial aid, accommodation, libraries, study rooms, campus health, counsellors, banks and automatic teller machines, recreation and student societies
- encourage familiarisation with the department, the faculty and the university environment
- assist the student in adjusting and coping with the stresses of the environment
- facilitate an enabling environment
- actively address tutoring or supplemental instruction as required for the student's success (appropriate referral).

3.5.3 The student's commitment to the process

For the mentoring process to be successful, the student should be willing to:

- commit to the mentoring process
- commit time and energy
- establish clear research goals and work with the mentor to develop a pathway for achieving these goals
- accept constructive criticism
- meet regularly with the supervisor and/or mentor to discuss progress and review assignments, projects and progress
- respect and be mindful of the mentor's time, commitment to his/her own studies

and responsibilities

- seek advice when required but not become overly dependent on the mentor
- review research progress regularly both independently and with the mentor
- raise issues of concern (academic and non-academic) in a timely fashion
- be unafraid to ask for assistance.

3.5.4 Academic milestones

With regard to the academic component, mentors should be able to support the students by ensuring that the student is prepared or able to meet the deadlines for submission of:

- Applications (at all levels)
- Timely submission of applications such as ethics proposals, data collection (time management)
- Timely submission of protocols, data and write-ups - from drafts to the final stage - to the supervisor
- Registration
- Approval of research protocols
- Submission of research for examination.

Achievement of all of the above is very dependent on practical hurdles such as social interactions, accommodation, adequate funding, etc.

3.6 Problems and Dangers Associated with Mentoring

Having set out the expectations of both parties in the mentoring process, it is important to identify boundaries and to be aware of pitfalls. Mentoring is personal and intimate, and the process could come unstuck due to a number of factors. These include, in the first instance, a lack of motivation and commitment to mentoring. The mentor and/or the student may not be prepared to invest the time and energy required to facilitate the success of the undertaking. The lack of commitment could result in hurried and superficial interactions and very little (if

any) constructive interactions. Worse still, it could evolve into resentment and acrimonious interactions.

A situation may exist where the mentor may feel coerced into mentoring the student due to not being able to say no to the coordinator, needing to save face or for fear of a negative impact on his/her own career prospects. This would obviously lead to a reluctant mentor simply going through the motions, thereby depriving the student of the required commitment.

The student's failure to communicate his/her needs due to awkwardness or embarrassment or even lack of appropriate knowledge could lead to misunderstandings or even major hurdles. It is important that both the student and the mentor clearly state the goals and objectives of the partnership. Added to this is the failure on both sides to discuss problems or potential problems at the outset. The breakdown in communication or understanding may become obvious at the initial meeting or only during later interactions where personal and academic pressures are not being conveyed. It is possible that meetings would then lose their focus and become secondary to the current crises. This could lead to both parties becoming defensive and lead to acrimonious meetings.

Another area of concern is the student's inability to interpret the mentor's intentions correctly. In these instances, the student may become overly dependent on the mentor both emotionally and academically.

A large risk to be guarded against is harassment, be it sexual, religious, academic or social (class distinctions). Harassment could begin with emotional over-dependence, and incorrect or inappropriate interpretation of the mentor's intentions or vice versa. The consequences of such could lead to the academic failure of the student and mentor as these become the focus rather than the challenge of the academic pursuit.

There is also the risk of conspiracy theories, superstition and general mistrust of the system or academic institution. In these situations the thought process deals mainly with these overriding perceptions. Consequently, the students find themselves being suspicious of the advice given and spending time evaluating the 'hidden messages'.

Important factors to be considered are those of language and past experiences. Failure of the mentoring process could be due to a lack of understanding or the

misinterpretation of what is being communicated. In the majority of these situations, it is desirable for either or both parties to communicate honestly in order to highlight the situation. Resolution may be a direct one-on-one discussion or referrals to appropriate individuals such that where possible corrective action may be put into place or the problems overcome by a simple understanding of the needs of both the mentor and student. The coordinator or mechanisms set up to address difficulties may play important roles in resolving the distrustful, misjudged or undesirable situation. The latter should be a role played by the coordinator and institution.

It is desirable that there be regular interactions between the student, mentor and coordinator (or supervisor) to monitor the mentoring process. Institutions may take a more formal approach and request monthly independent reports from both the student and mentor that would go to the coordinator, supervisor or department head. Sensitive and diplomatic handling of any negative events is essential.

3.7 Conclusion

Obviously not every scenario or event in the mentoring process is mentioned here. The intention of this chapter is to provide insight into the major difficulties and possibilities during study towards a postgraduate degree based on individual experiences shared and gleaned from workshops. The principles remain a useful guide towards a successful mentoring programme.

Situations differ from institution to institution and this would dictate the format of the programmes suited to their needs: it is important to note the adage of 'different strokes for different folks'. Adaptation of a mentoring system is highly dependent on the environment and on the mentor-student relationship as well as the hierarchy and expectations of the department. This having been said, by applying the recommendations outlined here, all institutions initiating a mentor programme should be able to ensure a pleasant and rewarding experience for their students, who would then be able to achieve their goals.

Mentors should be aware of and recognise that graduate students new to the system are generally anxious, insecure and initially very dependent. Mentors that stand out are typically experienced, generally confident and competent professionals in their own right. Their interest in the mentoring process is the

personal and professional development of their students/protégés. They should generally be aware of the mentoring process and offer career/professional and psychosocial support. Most often these individuals create opportunities for their students, allow them some leeway in their work and generally set higher performance standards for them. In the end, they become very accepting of their students, are unafraid of promoting their students to share positions of authority or even senior authorship in publications, and generally open up to their students. This is the essence of the long-standing, lifelong relationship referred to at the beginning of this chapter.

Next Chapter – Chapter Four – <http://rozenbergquarterly.com/?p=1888>