

## LETTER TO A STARTING PhD CANDIDATE

This letter is based on input from: L. Aper, S. Buzink, J. de Feijter, M. Leliveld, M. van Lohuizen, S. Ramaekers, M. Westerman, as well as many PhD candidates and supervisors who attended the PhD Candidates Day 2009 of the Medical-Educational PhD Candidates Network. Edited by: H. Sonneveld.

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Dear fellow PhD candidate,

You are considering pursuing a PhD somewhere, or perhaps you have just started. I hope I reach you before you accept a PhD position. Below are many practical suggestions for PhD candidates who have started their PhD research.

In my view, however, it is important (and possibly essential) that this letter reach you before you take on a research position. In the final stage of the program I asked several professors in the Netherlands and abroad what I should consider in the run-up to a PhD program. They all told me that what matters most is to talk with PhD candidates previously supervised by the thesis advisor you have in mind. That will give you an impression of what type of supervision you are likely to receive. Be sure to make a well-informed decision. You want to inquire not only about the scope of the project you will be starting but also what your PhD supervisor is like as a person. Having lunch or a drink together would be ideal, but there should be several moments besides the official interview. Your research depends on good substantive supervision and on the interaction between the two individuals. Meeting three or four times with the other PhD candidates helped me a lot. I asked them why they were delighted with the supervision, or what the shortcomings were.

If you want to know what to take into consideration about thesis advisors, please let me know first whether you're still applying for a position or have just started one. If you're applying, ask first whether your thesis advisor will be your general supervisor. If not, the person who will be is actually far more important..... It also depends on what you're looking for.

Look before you apply and leap.

If you like a structured approach, try to find somebody who already has an elaborate research plan, is affiliated with a research school, and is very active there. The drawback in my view is that you will have little say and will have difficulty steering the research in a different direction, if you think a change of course would raise more interesting questions. Besides, in such cases the research school is often more of a burden than a convenience.

I would certainly check whether the thesis advisor is not responsible for too many candidates to provide proper guidance.

Financing for the project you'll be working on and the balance between instruction and research (and any other activities) have not yet been explicitly stated as aspects to be considered.

Research funding

Regarding the financing: has it already been arranged for the full project duration? If so, who is covered by the project, what is funded, and what is not, and are there special conditions or interests to take into account? If (part of) the budget is covered by an institution or industrial partner outside the university, may they in due time influence the subject or course of the project, and will this also mean having to satisfy an additional supervisor? Sometimes a project may be initiated by a university research group willing to provide funding for the first two years, on the assumption that financing for the last 2 years will come from external financing that has yet to be arranged. If, for example, a grant request needs to be written for those last two years: who will write it, and what will happen, if the financing is not forthcoming in time? It may mean that as a PhD candidate you will need to devote a considerable amount of time the first year to writing a grant proposal, time you will not be able to spend conducting research. You should therefore ensure from the initial stage of your PhD program that the financing arrangements are clear or guaranteed. Sometimes you depend on other sources of financing, and much time is wasted learning to write or writing research proposals

Whoever your supervisor will be, see whether you get along: do you identify with one another as people and as researchers? Writing a PhD thesis means that you and your PhD supervisor will be working together for a few years. Getting along reasonably well with that person definitely helps and will facilitate the discussions. You need to feel at ease.... Invest in getting to know yourself and each other: what is motivating, what is appealing? This will stand you in good stead, and you will have a better idea of what you need and/or how to address your supervisor. You do this by "doing things together," such as having lunch. Depending on your employer's culture, you could of course have a beer or go out for dinner as well. (This seems to be more common south of the rivers than north of them.) And perhaps my most important piece of advice: make mutual expectations explicit.

Do you get along....?

What do you need to consider? Your supervisor should be knowledgeable in the field, and you should have a specialist as your thesis advisor, as well as a supervisor or second reader who knows about instruction in medicine... Your supervision team should know enough about educational research and ensure that the study involves more than simply advice... Your supervisor should also ensure that your work relates sufficiently to the present state of research and elaborates on it. The research subject should undergo critical review, relating it not only to the department but to the world as well. Your thesis advisor will also try to help you perceive the research in a broader context.

Supervision: competent in substance?

- Tip. If your thesis advisor is unable to provide concrete/specific/constructive criticism, find others who are able to offer this.

This person will be good at conducting scholarly research. Somebody with experience writing publications, abstracts... and able to provide support here. He or she has established a reputation in a field that at least relates closely to your research area.

As a PhD candidate, you should have a supervision team that is a network of other researchers to spar with now and then and to exchange views ... Your thesis advisor will also try to get other experts to

Your network

help you resolve problems that may arise...

When you are starting out, navigating through the wealth of publications may be confusing. A thesis advisor should be pointing you in the right direction toward publication opportunities.

Publishing

Consider future options after you complete your PhD. Your thesis advisor should help you with these as well.

The future

He or she helps with planning, elaborating, and redirecting your research. You are largely responsible for the planning and monitoring elements!

Planning

- Budget your time, if you have other responsibilities in addition to your PhD project, such as teaching duties. These can easily become very time-consuming (you want to do your best here as well), while your research requires a lot of attention, focus, and dedication
- Draft your own proposal, in addition to any plan compiled by others, and generate a progress report, after a year or so. This will provide you with an overview
- Plan your periodic evaluation moments. They may not seem fun, but they are much needed: for your own benefit as well as to keep mutual expectations clear. Not evaluating is not a sign of expertise or extensive independence!

Finding out whether your thesis advisor has experience supervising PhD candidates is wise. If not, you'll need to do and ask a lot more than if your thesis advisor has already supervised 10 PhD candidates.

Inexperienced supervisors

What do you as a PhD candidate value about the supervision? As a PhD candidate, you want to be heard at any time, if not in person, than by email.

Meetings

Try to find out as well whether somebody accepts walk-ins or will see you by appointment only. By appointment only is inconvenient, as most thesis advisors are always busy.

It is essential that the thesis advisor to make enough time to speak with you regularly and to keep abreast of your research.

One of the things that matters most about the supervision you receive from your thesis advisor is to stay in touch with one another. Access should be easy in the event of questions, especially during the first year. If your thesis advisor is extremely busy and has no time for consultations, you'll need to make specific arrangements: perhaps a regular appointment once every two weeks to review matters. This is especially important, if the individual is your general supervisor. You do not necessarily need to see your thesis advisor frequently, but keep the appointments regular. Make them six months in advance, if necessary (this may be important for thesis advisors with busy schedules). It is wise to compile an agenda for all meetings to help you steer the conversations and derive full benefit from them. Circulate it in advance, so that everybody knows what to expect. With important conversations (e.g. the ones at which all thesis advisors are there with you), you might want to draft a report of the conversation and submit it to everybody for approval. That establishes a record of what was discussed and is clear for

everyone (especially if after a while you don't remember exactly who said what anymore).

During the conversation you need to be in control. Otherwise, it may take an entirely different course, and at the end you still may not know what to do.

Keep your supervisors informed, such as by e-mail or remarks over lunch, to which your supervisor may respond "keep up the good work." For example: "data collection for Study A started yesterday. Everything is on track." This keeps them involved in the process, even though you are doing all the work.

Receiving guidance from multiple persons can be quite complicated. If you have more than one supervisor, agree on how to distribute the responsibilities from the outset, and try to take maximum advantage of the differences in their expertise. The more diverse your team, the more your research will benefit. Of course you want to avoid being caught between conflicting views. If your supervisors disagree, gather them together to resolve their differences, while you oversee the process. Remember that the supervision committee is there for you, not the other way round! You may not be able to make this clear immediately and might want to grow into this role.

Multiple supervisors

Distinguish the methodological from the subject-related expertise of your supervisors.

As you proceed, take note of any instructions from your supervisor. Should your supervisor make a remark along the lines of "if you want a response by a certain date, indicate this in the subject and body of your e-mail," do exactly that! Once again, supervisors are busy people. You'll need to get yourself on their list of priorities. A lot also depends on who becomes your supervisor.

(Concealed) hints

Some supervisors will want you to try things on your own first, while others may consider such experiments a waste of time. Both approaches may be very enlightening, but in different ways. Start by trying all kinds of ideas, and you'll figure out what works. Supervisors here generally prefer when you come to them with specific ideas to give them a target for their feedback. Asking "should I try this or that" is not appreciated. I have heard from another one that she has to consult every step of the way.

Style of supervision

Pressure is an integral aspect of pursuing a PhD. Try to agree on what does, and what does not belong in your research (substance), which additional duties you are willing and able (or not) to perform, and how much time you will devote to such duties. Try to balance budgeting your time with learning as much as possible... As a PhD candidate employed by a university, you will often be assigned teaching duties as well. In some cases your contract will stipulate a maximum number of hours, but you should check with future fellow PhD candidates in the same research group whether practice corresponds with what appears in writing. Also inquire what type of instruction you are expected to provide, and how it will be distributed over the course of the year. Spending the entire academic year supervising a one-hour weekly lab session will have a completely different impact on how you schedule your research than coordinating a two-month course full-time and reviewing piles of student reports. Sometimes you may be able to use the teaching to benefit your research by having students in a certain

Pressure, instruction

course or as a traineeship or graduation project conduct preliminary or other research in a subject you designate. Bear in mind, however, that standards of work done by students vary enormously, and you will be responsible for the accuracy of the results.

A supervisor who meets all the needs and requirements I have described above is indeed a “miracle thesis advisor.” While some undoubtedly exist, over the course of four years issues may arise that frustrate your working relationship. I’ll wrap this up with three situations that often arise between PhD candidates and thesis advisors. In each case, I describe the best course of action. Be aware that we all have problems. They can be a “normal” part of growth within a subject and performing complex research and correspond with the different stages in a PhD candidate’s development.

Problems

Case 1. Gradually, you realize that you are starting to know more about your subject than your supervisors do. You sense that good, substantive feedback is no longer forthcoming. How serious is this? What can you do?

Expertise

*Prevention is obviously always preferable to solving problems as they arise. If you have the space or are in a position to choose, select mutually complementary supervisors. For example: balance subject-related with methodological expertise, as well as expertise within the team of thesis advisors and second readers in areas such as writing or revising texts, access to relevant (international) networks, and the like.*

*If, however, subject-related expertise is inadequate throughout the team of supervisors, consider the following possibilities.*

- *Try to expand your network, and discuss this with your thesis advisors and second readers*
- *Your supervisors may be able to put you in touch with other experts or relevant institutions*
- *Ongoing communication would therefore seem essential. If they are willing and able to make time available, continue to inform them about progress in your subject, prior relevant publications, and substantiation of your own new insights*
- *Try using – informally – a second reader (general supervisor) to “mediate” with your thesis advisor*
- *If you encounter problems, involve others, possibly an impartial outsider, for help or support...*
- *If the situation becomes truly unbearable, terminating this working relationship may ultimately be a satisfactory solution (for all parties). This will require care and integrity.*

Case 2. In our hectic academic environment, this problem may be more common than the one in Case 1. You have an impossible time getting your three supervisors together in a room and notice that they hardly discuss your work with each other. All this leads repeatedly to conflicting advice. Worse, you sense that your supervisors have not read your work when you meet. How do you deal with this situation?

Team of supervisors

- *Do not let yourself get caught in the middle.*

- *Get the problem out in the open, and explain why it bothers you.*
- *Ask your second reader/general supervisor to intervene.*
- *If the problem arises later on in the program: take the final decisions yourself, and e-mail them, together with your grounds, to your supervisors. Conclude (politely!) with a sentence indicating that if one of your supervisors wants things to change, they will all need to arrange this together with you.*
- *Stop if no other option is available.*
- *To avoid this problem:*
  - *Agree from the outset who does what, and who decides (distribute the roles)*
  - *At the start of your program indicate clearly (but nicely) that whoever wants a say will need to join the meetings*
  - *From the very beginning, plan appointments well in advance... if your advisors are still impossible to get together, then there is more going on than busy schedules!*
  - *Put these agreements in writing, in an e-mail or contract. Make sure they are written down somewhere, and that you have a record of consent from all parties (i.e. not oral)*
- *If you manage to get everybody together, pay attention to the following:*
  - *Get them to listen to your problem first*
  - *Explain why the subject is so important*
  - *State your boundaries and enforce them*
  - *Remain in charge of the discussion: your supervisors will need to resolve any differences, but you will need to monitor whether it is feasible... a compromise that gets you nowhere is as useless as conflicting advice.*

*If you sense that they have not read your work properly yet, consider the following:*

- *If your supervisor(s) have not read your work yet or are unprepared for the meeting, explain that you can't continue, and make a new appointment*
- *Group pressure often makes supervisor(s) feel compelled to read your work or prepared for a meeting. Indicate that you expect that from everybody!*

Case 3. Your supervisors keep focusing their supervision and comments on parts of the dissertation, while the chapters are usually published as articles first. None of the supervisors is considering the dissertation as a whole. You are becoming worried, because you realize that the PhD committee will be judging your final output from an "overall perspective." What is best in this situation?

- *Consider in advance how your articles relate to one another. After all, these are the chapters from your PhD thesis*
- *If you can start with a literature review, issue a list that includes the articles or chapters*
- *Thesis advisors are not solely responsible for maintaining an overall perspective; PhD candidates need to do so as well*

The general picture

- *Could your thesis advisors be overly ambitious? Adjust the objectives!*
- *Research questions should be the prevailing common thread in all cases. Take care to consider them.*
- *A general debate about your subject is binding. Conveying this will force you to maintain an overall view*

The last piece of advice is: keep those questions coming! Most supervisors have the best of intentions but are not mind readers. Be specific about what you need. You are very likely to get it... You will also need the courage to turn down some requests or to keep probing, if things are unclear.

(Remember to be polite :).

If you hope to make (and keep!) your thesis advisor happy, go the extra mile: do just a bit more than agreed at the previous meeting.

Warm regards and all the best!

Your future colleague