

Chris
A PhD student struggling to finish because “life gets in the way”

Bren’s final reflections

As the supervisor involved in this situation, I think a number of lessons can be learned from this case.

Supervisors

To take the case from the beginning, supervisors should be careful to read the student’s file and background before they agree to take over a student from someone else. I’m not sure if Chris’s file did actually state that she had suffered from stress in a previous research job and left. But I would have realised she was a student from a different disciplinary background and would require a lot of additional support. I should also have been more cautious about taking over from a supervisor who had probably not given the necessary grounding in the various literatures that the student needed to make a good start.

Supervisors need to be careful about their relationships with students. While friendship with students is often seen as desirable rather than a more ‘distant’ relationship, becoming too close to students can lead to a number of issues. From the perspective of the supervisor this includes being seen as ‘soft’, which can lead to the student ignoring deadlines. It may also lead to the student trying to manipulate the supervisor via the friendship by using emotional pressure to move deadlines and alter work content. The supervisor may also lose perspective on what course of action is ‘fair’, as well as becoming emotionally upset at the student’s behaviour. If a student has a complex personal life which they discuss during meetings, and progress issues, this may cause considerable stress for the supervisor in trying to manage the relationship. However, that is not to say that PhD supervisors should not form ‘friendships’ with their students – how this works out in practice is very dependant on the student and their circumstances. ‘Friendships’ with students need to be monitored by the supervisor and if the friendship becomes detrimental for whatever reason, then more distance and formality should be introduced into the relationship.

If supervisors feel a friendship with a student may colour their decisions, they should take third party advice on what course of action to take, in order for impartiality to be maintained. I felt it necessary to do this in Chris’s case.

It is also clear that the failure of PhD students to complete their theses can become highly politicised, and that there will likely be blame from other members of staff or even from the student themselves. Supervisors have to be clear in their own minds that they have acted in the best interests of the student, and evaluate whether any of this blame is actually fair – to learn for any future students.

PhD candidates

PhD candidates must be honest with supervisors about problems they are having which cause progress problems. However, they should not expect their supervisors to act like a trained counsellor or have all the answers. If they don't feel comfortable about discussing their personal circumstances or health problems with supervisors, or need a referral, then they should ask supervisors what support is available and what accommodation can be made for such problems. PhD students can then be passed on to student support services or have statements placed early on their files so that various strategies can be used to support them.

PhD students also need to reflect carefully on what the impact the actions outside the PhD may have on the PhD. In this case, the expensive flat which needed to be serviced by many hours a week temping was a detrimental turning point in the PhD. Chris had the possibility of moving back in with parents who were fairly local at low cost, but rejected the option for reasons which did not seem rational if finishing the PhD was a priority. If PhD students are determined to finish their PhDs, then their decisions need to be modified to achieve this outcome.

It is often tempting to prevaricate in the PhD, and put off the hardest aspects until last. This can often put too much pressure on in the final stages of the PhD and cause motivational problems. Students need to do some of the tough aspects as they go along, even if it is uncomfortable. There is the need to set small objectives day by day and week by week, and stick to them.

In addition, doctoral students need to take charge of their own PhD timetable. Trying to bend deadlines and ignoring time slippage may be the easiest thing to do at the time, but the repercussions will be felt further on, when a supervisor may have to stop progression to the next year or some other draconian measures. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the student to care most about the PhD and get it done. A PhD supervisor cannot take ultimate responsibility for getting the thesis done.

PhD students should listen carefully to their supervisors about their own experiences. Chris was briefed very early on about the consequences of slipping beyond the funded three years – the supervisor had seen many of her own peers needing to take on part-time work and never finishing. Yet this advice, along with other suggestions, was ignored.

Institutions

Institutions need to make clear what support there is for supervisors. In this case there were a number of problems at the institutional level – what to do about other joint supervisors who were inactive and how to get other supervisors who were more relevant to the PhD.

Heads of department and chairs of supervisory boards also need to recognise when lack of progress is due to the student's motivation or problems, rather than some kind of supervisory failure, and suggest sources of support for the supervisor in terms of strategies to increase progress.

There also needs to be more support for supervisors who are feeling under considerable stress during PhD supervision, such as being unable to get the student to progress and what to do when students have personal issues. Sometimes the PhD supervisor may feel that the supervisory relationship is not working out to the point where they can't continue with the student. Yet while PhD students can ask to change supervisors, it is not clear if PhD supervisors can ask to end a supervisory relationship.

Institutions should also run mental health support sessions for PhD supervisors regularly. It was clear from the stories emerging at the session I attended that mental health issues were a common problem amongst PhD students, but PhD supervisors did not know where to turn due to concerns over issues of data protection and anonymity.

PhD students also need to have their support options mapped out more clearly by institutions at the beginning by institutions, so they know what is on offer. They should be briefed more clearly in the 'non-academic' side of coping with the PhD, such as the implications of time slippage, good and bad practice and the experiences of other PhD students.