

Jack's PhD: not a wise decision?

1

In the year 2000 I had just obtained my MA in European Politics at Barchester University and was keen to follow on with a doctorate there. But, for internal reasons, the University could not manage the supervision. So, I decided to stick with a 'bronze-medal' university. I chose Middlemarch Metropolitan. Not a wise decision.

Q1 Discuss the factors someone thinking of applying to study for a doctorate should take into account

Q2 How should they go about choosing an institution?

2

My original research aim was to revisit the 1930s period of appeasement. This was rejected by one of the interviewing panel; he claimed that more than enough had been written and researched on this. I re-thought the topic and chose 'Constitution making in the post-war period of initiating European integration: its role in the UK national interest'.

From the start, I allowed the supervisor to assume the initiative since he claimed to have the depth of knowledge. He suggested the question, and the research plan. My enthusiasm meant that I started off in a hurry. I realize now that the full significance and meaning of the question eluded me. (... and still does!) .

Q1 How should the topic of a doctorate be chosen?

Q2 What part should the potential supervisor have in this decision?

3

I kept going for 3 years. The defining moment was at a review meeting of all the current Ph.D. students in May 2003. My supervisor left early before my turn to present. He had rung me the previous night – I thought to go through the programme. Instead he told me not to ask another student any questions. It might put her off. Instead it put me off.

I took this as an insult. I had worked closely with the student in question. We had given each other moral support and helpful advice. In my view, I could have asked him, my supervisor, for help. Instead, I fell back to type and gave him the answers he wanted to hear, rather than spell out my anxieties. I had failed to indicate my anxieties about the way things were developing. There was no clear research question to investigate – such as – “why did the UK adopt a policy with the permission of the USA instead of a UK policy endorsed by the people of the UK?”

Q1 What are the main features of a good upgrade/transfer procedure?

Q2 What part should the main supervisor have in this process?

4

I had accumulated masses of data from the PRO - Public Record Office - (now the "National Archives") but had got hopelessly bogged down. I found the research documents boring: reading closely through Treasury, Board of Trade and Foreign Office documents was frustrating, sections have been weeded, so the key evidence could have been destroyed. So how credible is what is left? A point about the methodology that I should have pursued. Generally, historians take the available data as a "given". What was I looking for?

During the three years, I had not really grasped the full meaning of the academic vocabulary. I had written an interesting polemic about the role of the UK in post-war European integration: the wrong approach. There was no meeting of minds with my supervisor - in spite of appearing to relate to each other quite well at the personal level. Time for meetings was limited and he often seemed to have something more important to do. We met once every 2 to 3 months or so per year.

Q1 Discuss the issues that have arisen by this stage

Q2 List the main features of a good supervisory relationship

5

In addition there was a programme of training meetings at the University. Clearly these were aimed both to up the standard of work produced and to overcome the high rate of drop out. Before I had formally enrolled, open meetings had been held on Saturdays - all day. The morning was a training session for up to about 15 of us. Sandwich lunch. The afternoon, two or three students would present a progress report on their PhD. About 8 of us who remained would ask questions and make helpful suggestions. This arrangement suited all parties. That was the cogent reason why I joined.

Q1 What are the main features of a good training programme?

Q2 Should participation and success in such programmes be a compulsory feature of doctorates?

6

Meanwhile, my supervisor had won some sort of political game – a power struggle in the department. The original lecturer in charge of training was 'out'; the whole format was changed. He hated North of the Thames and moved back to Leatherhead. I had signed up to a totally new regime. This meant a training and review programme of a totally new structure. He now organized for training sessions to be held twice a year at the University during the week. Others often did the work. When there he expounded his ideas to a larger audience; feedback was intimidating, the atmosphere competitive.

He announced that I should do 2 years' research before writing anything. This was a classic recipe for disaster, and against what the outside training sessions had taught me. I failed to argue with him, but continued to write a succession of narratives anyway. With no one else working on a similar project, I felt a bit isolated and frankly lonely. The V.I.P. interviews, however, were very interesting and certainly kept up my interest.

Q1 Comment on Jack's supervisor's advice

Q2 What should Jack do now?

7

The one-to-one meetings with him were variously in a London restaurant of his choice - at bill time he asked for half; otherwise at various cafés, somewhere around Middlemarch town centre or central London. All hopeless for getting down to business. Mostly meetings were at his office at MMU. If I sent him an attachment e-mail, he would print it off while I was there. I would take a back up copy.

His advice I followed uncritically. He seemed not to read most of what I had written. In fairness he did read some of my efforts – but when he did his marking was illegible, and, as I recall, unhelpful.

At each meeting, the task would get changed, the question re-focused; the period extended from my concentrated 1940s period to arbitrary dates in the process of European integration. That meant three times as much research. The original hypothesis and methodology faded slowly into the background.

Q1 List the main features of a good supervisory meeting

Q2 What should Jack do now?

I found the whole research student experience a bit shameful in that I gave up the struggle. However, it was otherwise helpful to me and the way I conduct myself with supervising post-graduate students at my present university in their Masters or PhD dissertations. I make it clear to them that they are in the driving seat, but I am there to help with their problems in navigation: meaning scheduling the inter-play between research and getting the structure and writing done. For a Masters degree I advise on a clear target and a realistic scale. I advise against a widely generalistic area, rather for the research to be confined (as in one case) to one London district and one bus route that served it. The student was much clearer as to her aim, and enjoyed going deeper into the topic. Convergence is always a good idea. In six months only so much can be achieved.

Even at the meeting in May 2003 I might have stayed with it, had the supervisor stayed on for my presentation and grasped my problem. (In fact my second supervisor did stay on, saw the problem and attempted to rescue me. I wish I had had him as my first supervisor. It was too late: he was due to retire). Meanwhile, I had a job to do, plus a son and a wife who both needed their Masters/PhD for job advancement. My hobby had lost both its charm and its purpose.

Q1 Discuss what Jack has learned from his experience of supervision

My expectations were all wrong. My supervisor had interests elsewhere: his home life, ambition at the university, a name in journalism. He, on the other hand, expected better of me and acted as though I were at his level. Older is not always wiser! I had allowed myself to ignore danger signals in terms of his role, and to carry on digging instead of climbing out for fresh air. Try to choose the right supervisor and do make use of the second supervisor – or an equivalent specialist for a different perspective.

My advice to those about to do a doctorate: do not start a PhD (and perhaps a Masters) until you are absolutely clear what you want to research and why; what does the question mean and how to go about researching it. Keep the initiative. Find out who is at the university qualified in the subject matter and competent to supervise. Interview them! What is their motive or career advantage in your field of exploration – and why? Talk to their previous “victims” for testimony etc.

In the interview part of the programme for primary source material, I met some really interesting, good and great men who had served in the government on the political or the administrative side of the ‘European Game’ in the early post-war period. My recording of the interview and their books are all that remain. I gave away boxes of PRO copy to a student at Wessex University. I do hope he did something positive with the material.

Both from your course and from my own experience, the following key points emerge:

- Do not be or feel pressured; put time on your side
- Be clear what you want to do; better spend the time before the fee paying starts to get all the basics right
- Do not feel committed to others – stay in control. Question, question, question.
- Explore the field – even the Open University – again, before paying a fee
- Check out the supervisor – the motives: why do they want you and your item.

Endnote:

It surprised me after my withdrawal from the PhD ‘course’ that there was no enquiry nor attempt to recover the situation. After a review with my second supervisor, I finished up being offered an MA course to help with research.

Team task:

What are the lessons here for

1. potential PhD applicants
 2. supervisors, and
 3. institutions?
-