PhD completion: an evidence-based guide for students, supervisors and universities

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Timothy Colin Bednall Senior Lecturer in Management, Fellow of the APS College of Organisational Psychologists, Swinburne University of Technology

Many students enrol in a Master or PhD postgraduate research degree, but few complete them. From 2010-2016, 437,030 domestic and international students enrolled in postgraduate research programs in Australian public universities. Only 65,101 completed within the same six year period.

This discrepancy does not necessarily mean postgraduate research students “failed” their degree. Common reasons not completing a degree include changes of career goals, work-family conflicts, poor health or financial strain. Alternatively, some students remain enrolled in their degree for long periods without making significant progress.

Even so, the discrepancy is large enough for universities to be concerned. Nobody wants a student to suffer through years of hard work and frustration without achieving their goal.

What does research say about completion rates?

Research has identified several factors that make students more likely to persist with their degrees. These factors are related to the students themselves, their supervisor, and the university environment.

Psychological studies of postgraduate students find the more successful ones tend to perceive themselves as competent and be intrinsically motivated. These are students who enjoy their topic area, perceive their postgraduate studies as a valuable learning experience, and who strongly identify with being a career researcher. Students who are motivated by external factors (such as pursuing a prestigious academic role) are more likely to say they want to quit.

Scholarship holders are more likely to complete their degrees. This is likely because they are academically stronger than non-scholarship holders and are less vulnerable to financial strain. Students can support themselves financially through teaching, research assistant roles or other work, but this must be balanced carefully. Part-time students are less likely to complete their degrees.

Students’ field of study also affects completion rates. A higher proportion of students in sciences tend to complete their degrees than those in arts and humanities. This is likely because students working in the sciences are more often involved in laboratory-based work in teams, where there is greater social support and knowledge exchange. People studying humanities more often work on their research alone.
A positive student-supervisor working relationship is critical. A good supervisor should be an expert in the student’s subject of choice and a supportive mentor. They should help the student navigate through the frustrations and uncertainties of writing a thesis, and help students adjust to the world of academia.

Students are also more likely to finish their research degrees if they have strong connections with their peers. Such connections help students develop their professional identity as researchers, as well as providing opportunities for social support and informal learning.

The quality of associated coursework is also important. Ideally, postgraduate programs should provide students with a sound foundation of research skills and content knowledge, and facilitate ongoing communication with their faculty.

Involvement in formal and informal professional activities is also important. Students who complete tend to participate in departmental events, such as research seminars and professional development workshops. They also tend to participate in academic conferences. These events allow students to learn and expand their networks.

What students and their supervisors should do

First, given the importance of the student-supervisor relationship, universities can provide advice to students about locating and approaching a suitable supervisor. Specifically, students should consider the research area they wish to work in and locate a supervisor with relevant expertise. They should approach supervisors with an openness to negotiating a research topic.

Read more: Ten types of PhD supervisor relationships – which is yours?

Both students and supervisors should be upfront about their expectations about how the supervision will work. An excellent starting point for discussion is the Expectations in Supervision questionnaire. Students and supervisors sometimes have mismatched expectations about how often they should meet, the amount of feedback the supervisor should provide on drafts, and how much counselling and emotional support the supervisor should provide.

Supervisors have an important role in providing a realistic preview of academic life. One useful exercise is to review an academic competency model, such as the Vitae Researcher Development Framework, to discuss which skills academics need. In addition to knowledge of their topic area and research methods, academics increasingly need to be good at managing complex projects, working in multidisciplinary teams, and engaging with industry and media.

This discussion should enable supervisors and students to plan how students will develop their capabilities. Alternatively, it could prompt some students to opt out of a research degree if they think an academic role is not compatible with their goals.
What universities should do

As well as providing research training, universities can also increase the capabilities of students by helping them understand self-handicapping patterns. These include busyness, procrastination and disorganisation.

Students can be guided to replace these with more helpful actions such as scheduling dedicated writing time, reframing difficult tasks as learning opportunities, and developing a work routine. This could be done as part of a workshop or supervisory relationship.

Universities should also encourage greater connectedness between research students to build social support. This could be accomplished through team-based activities or face-to-face events.

For instance, some universities offer Three Minute Thesis, a research communication competition where students present their work in under 180 seconds.

Some universities organise Shut Up and Write sessions, which turns writing into a social experience and limits distractions. These activities can be complemented by encouraging students to become involved in supportive online communities and blogging.

Read more: The rise of writing events gives PhD students the support often lacking in universities

Finally, universities should be dedicated to helping academics develop as supervisors through ongoing training and coaching. Departments could consider tracking the progression of students and ensuring supervisors have the time and skills to take on new students.

Completing a dissertation can be richly rewarding, but it’s the endpoint of a process that’s often long, frustrating and uncertain. Helping students achieve their research aspirations makes academic life a better experience for all involved.