

Finding a tutor (supervisor) for a doctoral thesis

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1. Finding a tutor (supervisor) for a doctoral thesis

Every doctoral student needs a supervisor or tutor, as we call this person. This page gives you tips for the process.

2. Basics

2.1 Get the best expert available

The basic principle is simple. In an ideal case, the tutor is the best expert who is reasonably speaking available, and has a lot of experience in tutoring doctoral work, preferably in the form of having successfully tutored several students through the process, and having examined several others.

If there is no such person available, the next best choice is to go for experience.

A late colleague of mine from the University of Helsinki once noted to one of his students that he does not understand anything about the topic, but he understands what a Ph.D. thesis is, and knows one when he sees one. This

works, as long as the tutor has some degree of knowledge of the topic. Few historians can supervise work in chemistry.

2.2 Qualifications

Universities follow a simple rule: if you supervise something, you must have done that degree. At MA level, there are exceptions, but at Ph.D. level, this rule is strictly obeyed. Thus, the tutor HAS to have a Ph.D. or similar degree.

Not only that, we increasingly require that tutors must be at least adjunct professors (docents) at some university. This means that they have continued doing research after their Ph.D, and have published at least one book comparable to a Ph.D. after their doctoral work. Above all, this is an important quality check. Keep in mind, a Ph.D. is tutored by someone; we do not know whether someone with a Ph.D is capable for many academic tasks until the person goes through the process of being an adjunct professor.

2.3 Own professor or an outsider?

In Finnish universities, the default has been that professors from own department supervise their own students. We have not had such policy, but

follow the best expert theory. You are free to search for a tutor from other universities or industry, as long as they are qualified for the job.

2.4 Availability

Take someone available for tutoring. There is nothing wrong with Australians living in Perth, but they are far away. Seek Finns first, preferably from Southern Finland; it eases your life significantly and makes it cheaper too. Traveling to Stockholm is not that exotic, but easily gets too expensive for a doctoral student.

3. Process

The process is explained in Research Institute's Web site. Check formal details from there.

At the School of Design, the principle is simple. It is the School's job to propose tutors, not the student's. Of course, the student has a say in the process, but you should talk to professors first and let them take care of the process, contact the tutor, and so forth.

The process takes anything from 4 weeks to 3-4 months.

4. When to get a tutor?

There is no right answer to this question, but the sooner the better. It does not make sense to recruit someone after three years of work. Try getting one during the first year of your studies; at this stage, advice has more value than at any other stage.

However, it does not make sense to rush with this decision. Once your plan is accepted and you have started your studies, you should start to read and then rework your plan. When reworking the plan, tutoring is important.

Typically, the first months of doctoral studies go to reading and studies, so as a rule of thumb, start to think about the tutor roughly after 6 months of your studies.

5. How many tutors?

Traditionally, we have had only one tutor for each student. This system has the benefit of fixing responsibility. Only if the topic requires two tutors - like in some artistic pieces - we have gone for a two tutor system.

It may be that in the future, we increasingly switch to two tutors, but the reason is organizational. Best coaching for first-time tutors is to work with a more experienced one.

5. Compensation for tutoring

Nobody tutors a doctoral thesis for money. It simply does not pay off, and someone can probably earn better flipping burgers than advising doctoral students.

Still, the SoD gives a small compensation for tutors. It goes like this.

Traditionally, we pay for 10 hours of work for a doctoral degree. Thus, if you have two tutors, they are paid for 5 hours each. This is a ridiculous sum, and only covers their copy expenses and a few books, but that's better than nothing.

Currently, we are considering raising the sum significantly. If this takes place, we will also cut down the number of doctoral students, or risk running out of money completely. More information follows 2009.

The only exception to this compensation policy are the SoD professors, who are not paid anything.

6. Conflicts with the tutor - or anyone else

Doing a doctoral thesis involves working with several people. The key dyad-triad is the student-tutor(s) one. If there is a conflict between the student and the tutor, then the best policy is to talk to professors at the SoD before any sudden moves. Their job is to talk to various parties, and to seek a solution for the problem.

There are difficult times in most processes. My own experience is that there is at least one important conflict in every process. Early stages of the process are usually smooth sailing, but there comes a time of doubt, lack of trust in one's work, exhaustion, etc. Conflicts belong to the process, but in most cases, this is temporary.

If nothing else helps, the ultimate solution is changing the tutor. Tutors can be changed, and this happens once in a while.

However, a good policy is one of non-confrontation.

Naturally, this policy applies to other parties too, including the custos, the valvoja (SoD nominated academic supervisor), etc.