

Rebecca's PhD

I Introduction

My experience of university life was typical. Middlemarch University was a run of the mill establishment. I had gone to Middlemarch because I had not achieved the necessary grades to be accepted by Barchester; despite me having more A level points.

I am one of two children. My elder brother was at University too and I wanted to follow in his footsteps. My mother was Head Teacher of a Secondary School and my father worked in the property industry. Mum had been to University and Dad has always regretted not going.

In the third and final year of my first degree I had two obvious career choices; becoming a solicitor or doing a PhD. I had always taken my degree with the intention of becoming a solicitor, but, during the course of the final year I realised how much I had enjoyed the opportunity to do a dissertation relating to the work I had been doing for a firm of developers during the summer vacation. Law seemed to require a wider knowledge of issues that I would not be interested in.

Despite my applications to do a Law conversion course I also made one application to study for a PhD at Barchester University and one application to do a taught Masters at Middlemarch (who offered me a one-year University scholarship).

My PhD application was to a good department - the one that I had wanted to go to as an undergraduate. I suppose I wanted to prove my worth, after all I had achieved the right number of points at 'A' level, but not the grades, despite a grade A in the chosen subject. Just after Easter I was invited to interview with two potential PhD supervisors. They talked through my ideas and suggested that I write an ESRC proposal. These two men were to become my supervisors.

It was all a bit daunting really. They spoke to me and quizzed me about my ideas, they then offered some suggestions about the potential of the research and finally left me in the room whilst they went out into the corridor to talk about me. One of the potential supervisors returned suggesting that 'we could do something'.

I returned home excited about the prospect of going to such a prestigious university. I followed the supervisor's advice and made a formal application to ESRC and to the University. I also applied to the Graduate College. I waited for my degree results.

On my graduation day my Head of Department presented me with the ESRC results form - confirming that my 2.1 had been in the upper bracket. Surely this gave me more chance of getting ESRC money.

In August I found out that my ESRC application was successful and over a stressful few days I decided to reject the offer to do an MA, I also rejected my place at Law School and I decided that I would do the PhD.

Q1 Comment on the selection process at Barchester University.

Q2 What should Rebecca do now?

2 Arrival

During the summer vacation I travelled to Barchester with my Mum. I met my supervisor again. He gave me a book, suggesting that I read it and make notes before the start of term. I also went to see my new home - back in Halls of Residence! Never mind, at least I would make friends.

I arrived on the first day of term, unpacked and found myself in an empty building with no hot water. The Graduate College was new and not quite finished. All postgraduates on taught courses did not start for another week.

I went to the Research Postgraduates Welcome Meeting - everyone seemed much older than me and more focused. Those who were more of my generation had done their undergraduate degrees at Barchester and knew most of the detail. I came away feeling slightly happier, but still well out of my depth.

Later that week, at the first meeting with my supervisor, he suggested a weekly meeting in the first instance and that I took part in all the training course. I should also attend one of the third year options. I was glad of the social contact.

The department had arranged computer training for us and the Masters students. We were shown our office; a big empty room with 6 desks - one was to be mine. The 5 others users were all mature male foreign students. I felt uncomfortable in this room. I tried to make it feel like home with posters etc. but I had no storage space - my small room in College was so much more welcoming; I would work at home instead.

Q1 Discuss Rebecca's first week at Barchester.

Q2 What should be included in the induction of new research students?

3 The First Term

As the first term progressed I attended as many training courses as possible and made a few acquaintances in other faculties. In college I had one good friend - the others were either Greek (and, although very friendly, had a suitable mass to enable them to speak Greek and have Greek parties) or 'girlies' who had never been self-catering before and enjoyed cooking Sunday lunch, baking cakes, going to church and watching Songs of Praise - not my scene! Unfortunately my friend's Dad was dying from cancer - she wasn't around much. I would escape to my boyfriend's house at weekends. I had moved away with the intention of leaving him - now he was my lifeline.

Supervisory meetings continued once a week on a Thursday at 2pm and lasted precisely one hour. I would write a review of some aspect of the literature and hand it in on a Tuesday and get it back on the Thursday. It all seemed very organised. Indeed my supervisor gave me more attention than any other first year student was getting. He seemed unsure about my ability (why did I have to do a third year undergraduate option?). He seemed to want me to do a lot of writing - was I really up to this? Did he want to see more of me because I was no good?

At Christmas I was invited for a meal at his house. A gesture I could not refuse (although I did try to find an excuse). What should I wear? Should I take a bottle of wine? (but it's Christmas and the end of term and I had no money). What will we talk about? In reality it wasn't so bad. I listened to his wife's ethnic music. He drank lots and got tipsy. I made polite conversation and left as soon as it was appropriate to do so.

I was glad to get back to my parents' over Christmas - but with lots of work to do it was not much of a break. More literature reviews and a suitcase full of books!

Q1 Comment on Rebecca's first term.

Q2 Does a Supervisor have a role as a personal tutor?

4 The Conference

After Christmas there was a three-day Annual Conference. My supervisor had suggested I should go. He had said “it will be full of old men looking for the bar in the dark, but really useful”.

I arrived at the conference with optimism, but was soon feeling lost and insecure. I knew no one - none of the lecturers from Middlemarch ever went to anything like this.

I saw my supervisor once - he said hello and then excused himself to go off to drink with his mates. I went to lots of session and took reams of notes. In the evening I sat in my room with no food. He hadn't warned me that there would be no catering if you don't pre-book meals. On the last day I escaped and walked to the nearest town. I felt so guilty. I should be at the conference - what if my supervisor saw me now? He would be furious.

Q1 Should postgraduate students be encouraged to attend conferences?

Q2 Discuss how a student could make the best use of conference attendance.

5 Second Term

Back at university I was more unhappy. I hadn't made many friends and there seemed to be no social life. I was working all the time and nothing ever seemed good enough for my supervisor- was I really up to this? In my heart I wanted to leave, but my Mum was unwell and contemplating retirement due to ill health - I couldn't hit my parents with this decision. Anyway I liked the subject matter.

The term continued, I got more and more involved with my work. The more efficient I was, the more work I seemed to be given. Still weekly meetings for an hour, 2pm on Thursday. I began to avoid seeing my supervisor. I never sat next to him at coffee - I didn't want him to nag me about where I was up to. I was working hard but never hard enough.

Q1 Comment on Rebecca's experience this term.

Q2 What should Rebecca's response be to her supervisor's current strategy?

6 Opportunity Knocks

Out of the blue in March my supervisor telephoned me - how would I like a full time teaching job in the Department? It was just up my street and an interview was arranged for me for the following week. He told me that I should get the job. After a nail-biting afternoon I decided to go for it. The PhD could wait. Before the interview another member of academic staff congratulated me on getting the job. All I had to do was give a paper for 20 minutes - All! I had to do - what a nightmare - what did I have to say?

I had a panel interview, amongst the six were the Head of Department and the Dean. Luckily the questions related to my research and history so I could answer most of them. I think I was rather confident and certainly not nervous.

The presentation was a different matter. All the staff from the department were there, some had wished me luck before hand - it all seemed so competitive. I felt out of my depth - surely my fellow interviewees had already achieved their PhD and certainly had some experience of presentations. Whilst I was talking I was thinking about the kind of questions which the audience may ask in response.

I never got the job - what had I done wrong? Had there been a better candidate or was it something to do with internal politics? I'll never know.

Later in the term I was invited to be a temporary research assistant for my supervisor on a project based in London. This was a great opportunity to see the master at work - he even let me attend his interviews. For the two weeks we were away together I learnt so much about research. I also began to realise just how strange this man really was. He was obsessed by time management - both his and mine. I did however try to tell him how miserable I was. I think he began to understand how hard I had been working and how run down I felt. I then had two weeks in London doing research on my own - this was brilliant, this was what it was all about!

Q1 Discuss Rebecca's current situation.

Q2 Should postgraduate research students take on additional research or teaching?

7 The Upgrade

At the end of the first year I had to do the upgrade to PhD - consisting of a formal presentation and a written paper (which would be published as a department working paper). The formal presentation was great fun. I shared my lunch time seminar slot with Marco - an outgoing MA student. We practised for hours. I really enjoyed this opportunity to talk about my research to date.

The written paper was different. My supervisor had read the drafts many times. Surely it would be OK now. At a panel of 5/6 I was questioned about the theory and method and told that, despite a couple of typing errors, this would be upgraded - at last positive feedback.

(It was 12 months before my paper was bound and published. Indeed it was during the following round of upgrades - why was mine so late? Was it not good enough? Had it been rejected? Even now I think it only got published because I kept asking where it was).

The summer loomed. It was suggested that I spend this time doing preliminary primary research. A methodology was agreed and I was sent off researching, whilst my supervisor was on holiday. For much of the next 6 months I was sending letters and conducting interviews. I remember sending a batch of letters on Christmas Day, so that the interviews could start in the New Year and no time would be wasted.

Over the summer vacation I travelled to London to present my first conference paper. My supervisor did not attend this conference. I got lots of positive feedback from the audience and was beginning to see the importance of the work I was doing.

By October and the start of my second year I had done a year of research with no holiday. My boyfriend was now moving to be with me. We rented a house 8 miles from the University. At least I had some company now.

Q1 What are the features of a good monitoring and upgrading system?

Q2 What plans should Rebecca make for her second year?

8 The Second Year

Year Two was far better. I was living away from the University. My boyfriend's job necessitated me taking him to work each morning. Hence I worked 9 to 5 in my new office. There were just 3 of us in this office which, although being small was cosy. One chap never came in and the other was a third year family man who was busy writing. We even had a computer, which, although not networked, enabled some data analysis.

This year I did some part time teaching and helped with a couple of field courses. For one of the field courses I was able to organise a whole day of activities. At last I felt confident about something - teaching, not research. This I thought would be my future and I really enjoyed it.

I had become involved with a postgraduate research group and was organising a conference for postgraduates in my field. Again I had a new confidence, this time about my organisational skills. But I was still unsure about my research I could never give a paper at my conference. My research had no substance, no academic argument.

The weekly meetings became a farce. My supervisor had never read the work before I got there. He was often interrupted by undergraduates and phone calls. A few joint meetings with my second supervisor were arranged. But he was always late, never prepared and on a couple of occasions failed to show up. My supervisor was obviously embarrassed. So we sat in silence for most of the designated hour and I went home.

By this stage he had acquired another ESRC funded student. James had done his degree at Barchester and got a first. He is still a great friend to me, but I began to see how my supervisor was treating us differently. James didn't have weekly meetings. James chose his own research project and James seemed to be better than me. I was always being compared. May be I wasn't cut out for this.

Q1 Comment on Rebecca's supervisory and feedback strategy.

Q2 What are the main features of a good supervisory session?

9 A new wave of confidence

I was beginning to know more people in the department now - in this way I felt more satisfied socially. They were beginning to ask how I coped with my supervisor. Slowly realised that I was not the only one with communication difficulties. Most people felt the same way - I think? I became friends with a younger member of academic staff - he explained about PhDs and how this supervisor relationship was important - he assured me that my work was of a good standard and told me to persevere without my supervisor.

I continued to go to the weekly meetings (2pm on Thursdays for an hour) - but I also tried to slow down a bit. I was working seven days a week and still no holiday.

In the summer term I went to a one-day conference with James and my supervisor. At the bar afterwards, James and I were called over and introduced to one of our supervisor's friends as "here are my two ESRC students" and then ignored. Were we just his prize, something to show off about?

As the end of another year loomed I knew I had to continue to gain my PhD - for my own purpose. As the result of the paper I had presented in London I was invited to speak at a conference in New Zealand. My airfare was paid and ESRC would cover most of the rest of the cost. What an honour. What a great experience, but my supervisor suggested that I shouldn't go. What about the time away, with jet lag the five days away would turn into a week. I would be a week off schedule. But I hadn't had a holiday for two years, wasn't this just a great opportunity which I couldn't afford to miss?

My boyfriend was similarly jealous. He also said I shouldn't go. Things hadn't been good between us for a while. I left him, moved out and lived with friends in Barchester. My life improved again.

I now had regained my confidence and independence. For once I would do what I wanted. I went to New Zealand for four weeks - I had a fabulous holiday and a worthwhile conference. This was the best experience ever and I realised that I could stand on my own two feet and do a PhD!

Q1 How important is the peer group for research students?

Q2 How can a supervisor and department encourage the development of peer group support?

10 Third Year Writing

Year three and writing. We came to an agreement, or he came to an agreement. He was writing a book and had set himself a target of a month per chapter. I would do the same. We would both finish on target.

So I wrote a chapter (still seeing him at 2pm on a Thursday for about an hour). James was off doing fieldwork so I felt lonely again. I handed my chapter in a month later, then started Chapter two. The following week I went for feedback. The chapter hadn't been read. So I sat there whilst my supervisor corrected punctuation and typing errors (also answering phone calls and dealing with distractions). He said that I should do the corrections and submit both copies the following week (I was still writing the first draft of the next chapter). This I did and he sat at our meeting and checked that I had altered all the typing errors he had suggested (one copy against the other). No critical comment though. Was it wonderful - or should I be looking for that? I daren't ask!

The first chapter was difficult to write the second was made worse by having to correct the previous one. This process continued and I got more and more exhausted. A month was not long enough for the results chapters. I had 12 months to complete - why was writing so hard? I would often be in my office at 11pm. Writing away - surely this could not be quality work. I was feeling run down. I needed to get out of this place, find a job.

After Christmas of the third year I started job applications. My supervisor was unhelpful. He said he would be a referee but suggested I wait until I had finished and passed "you never know there may be something in Barchester". I needed to get away.

Another member of staff introduced me to some heads of department and advised me on my CV and applications. The interview invites started to come in and I was offered a job at Middlemarch Metropolitan University. No congratulations from my supervisor. Just - you can't go there - it has no reputation! All the more reason for me to accept.

The writing was difficult. I had one long chapter (22,000 words first draft). This was hard to write in a month. The day before handing I asked for an extension for one day. It was refused. Didn't I remember I had a deadline? But all I wanted was one day! That evening I was at a reading group meeting, which I chaired. He sat next to me. When a friend invited me to a party I declined the invite explaining how I had the chapter to finish. My supervisor replied "too bloody right, you don't do any work". The tears welled in my eyes, but I was not going to let him see it. I had been up writing until 1am for 2 nights on the run.

After the group there was the customary drinks in the pub. I didn't go. In the computer room James came to get me to go for a drink. I lost my temper, screaming,

swearing and cursing. I cried and cried and explained how I felt to James. I turned around and my supervisor was stood listening at the door. I think that he finally realised how run down I was and how hard I was working. I was embarrassed that he had heard me say all those things about him. Nevertheless I handed the chapter in at midnight and met my deadline. Surely he could not shout at me now.

From that point on I went to meetings - but said nothing. I avoided him and hopefully he realised that I was not happy - I kept thinking of my job - soon it would be over.

Q1 Discuss strategies for assisting students with writing a thesis.

Q2 Have you any comments on Rebecca's time management skills?

11 Year Four

On September 1st I started my new job, just half a conclusion to write. This was completed by the start of term and sent to my supervisor. I waited for comment.... And I waited 2 months later I was summoned for a meeting and I took time off work.

We went through the drafts and editing began.

It was a slow process, I was in my first year of teaching with a heavy workload, and I was also doing my PGCHE part time and completing my PhD. I met all my deadlines but my supervisor was slow. He was marking James's PhD and editing his book, these took priority.

I submitted my PhD thesis; James submitted his just 2 weeks later. James's viva was three weeks before mine - he passed with no corrections. My supervisor told me that I would do the same. He had arranged for his chum to be external. Yes, he is eminent in his field, but I had written a critical review of his latest book a few months before and my supervisor had repeatedly advised that I didn't speak to him more than was necessary.

Q1 How do you choose examiners for a PhD?

Q2 What preparations should Rebecca be making for her viva?

12 The Viva

The viva a date loomed. I was told it would be easy - you don't need to prepare. It was in the middle of term so I had little time for preparation. Anyway what could I leave the students to do whilst I was away for a few days?

My supervisor didn't want to see me beforehand. I arrived at his office half an hour before; he wasn't in. I waited and eventually he arrived and took me to the classroom where the viva would take place. A big room with exam desks. He put a chair on the opposite side of one of the desks and suggested that I sit there and left. I waited for half an hour for the viva to begin. No one had explained to me that the external's train had been delayed.

I was by this time petrified. I knew my work was not good. It had been written in a rush, my supervisor had always doubted my ability - was he just humouring me?

The first viva question was about the title - what did I mean by it? I hadn't written the title, my supervisor had given it to me as the one he had submitted to central administration. I suppose I had never thought about it before. Surely, if the thesis didn't answer the title, I would automatically fail. I panicked, waffled a garbled answer and excused myself whilst I went out for some air. I had never been so pathetic before. Outside the room I bit my lip trying not to cry and convinced myself that I had to go back in.

When I returned the debate continued and we went through the thesis chapter by chapter. I actually began to enjoy myself and had a new determination not to let them get the better of me. I would not let them take any prisoners.

I was asked to leave the room - why? I had obviously failed at the first hurdle. I went into the car park and cried and cried and cried. If my car had been there I would have got in it and driven away. I rang my Mum on her mobile (she was on her way to pick me up) I told her what a disaster it all was and that I had failed. Luckily she realised that I hadn't officially been told this and persuaded me to go back and find out what happened next.

I went to my supervisor's office and he took me back to the room. I was told that I had to insert 3 paragraphs to chapter one. No one said congratulations - no one seemed happy. The external excused himself and dashed for his train. So, had I passed? What would happen now? No one told me. I dare not ask!

I left the room, walked down to meet my Mum. My supervisor welcomed her and had a chat. I got in the car and drove away down the motorway - had I passed or failed? Surely I hadn't failed, had I? That night I went for a meal with my parents and my new

boyfriend - it was a hollow celebration. I thought, but could not admit, that I had failed.
How would I tell my colleagues at work? Would I lose my job?

Q1 What is the viva for?

Q2 What makes a good viva?

I3 Back at work

I went back to work and awaited a letter telling me what to do now. Was this my last chance, could I resubmit? I told my colleagues that everything was OK - no more. I was too embarrassed to say I had failed. Four weeks later I had no letter. I emailed my supervisor who said not to do anything until I got the list of corrections. From this I supposed that I had passed. I still didn't know whether I had to do another Viva, or indeed the number or severity of the corrections.

Three months later I got a scribbled letter with details of the inserts. It took less than two weeks (including doing my full time job) to correct and reprint. I got my thesis bound and submitted. I waited and by February I had a letter confirming that I was now a Doctor - I did it! It was more a feeling of relief than celebration.

But delays had meant I missed the December graduation - James had got there before me.

Q1 What are the possible outcomes of a viva?

Q2 What responsibilities has the Supervisor for a student rewriting or resubmitting a thesis?

14 Graduation

In July I went to the graduation ceremony. Mum, Dad, my (by now) Fiancé and me. My supervisor wanted to meet my parents so he invited himself for lunch with us. I bought him a book to say thank-you. I don't really know what I was thanking him for, but I felt like I should do something. You never know when you might need a good reference. He duly thanked my parents for it. He ate lunch and chatted to Mum and Dad. Not a word was said to me. He never thanked them for lunch. I was embarrassed of him.

At the ceremony he waived and smiled at my parents. He never once looked at me. He was celebrating his achievement and showing off to my parents. I had just been a troublesome student, which he thought would never succeed. All I did was give him the opportunity to be proud of *his* achievements.

He didn't award the PhD. It was the examiners who decided to award the PhD, not him. I have got a job and am now doing well. But, was it really good enough for a PhD? Is my work really worthy of publication?

I still have little confidence. Yes I have a PhD and call myself Dr., but is it good quality academic research work which will stand up to rigorous academic criticisms. I present lots of conference papers and convene lots of sessions. Generally I get very positive feedback, but I am scared of other academics reading my work. I can not punctuate and my work is scruffy. Will they reject me as someone incapable of the appropriate level of debate? How will I ever get a new job if my peers see how poor my PhD really was?

Q1 What should Rebecca do with her thesis now?

Q2 Have you any suggestion about publication?

15 Epilogue

I have a filing cabinet full of written papers but I don't have the nerve to submit them to journals. Is it too late now; is my work out of date?

I recently read some of my supervisor's book. About a third is based on my PhD. It is referenced, but I am not acknowledged. James of course is. So, was my work really that bad?

I still wake up in the night thinking about my PhD viva, or that I haven't done some work for my supervisor. Whenever I try to concentrate on research all my insecurities come flooding back. Will it ever be good enough? What do I need to do to make it better? I feel like I need to get away from the subject matter - but this interests me and is my area of expertise. I feel trapped but know that I need the research success in order to forget the past. The determination, which forced me to go back to the viva, will force me to become a successful academic.

I am now to supervise my own PhD student. Life will not be like this for her. I will try to offer more support and help to develop her into an individual, not a clone.

Since my graduation I have not visited Barchester or seen or heard from my supervisor. It is a shame that after three years of seeing each other every Thursday at 2pm for precisely an hour I am too scared to phone him. But he hasn't phoned me and is probably glad to see the back of his problem student.

Q1 Comment on the outcome.

On the acetate provided please list the main guidelines for

- 1. postgraduate research students**
- 2. supervisors**
- 3. institutions**