Chapter 6: Developing networks near and far

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Perhaps the most exciting part of doing a PhD is the potential for where it might take you. If you asked anyone who has been through the doctoral process whether their career went the exact direction they imagined it would post-PhD, the majority would likely reply with an emphatic no! That’s because doing a PhD opens doors to new and unforeseen opportunities to use your skills in ways you could hardly have imagined at the beginning – on projects that test your expertise, on topics that stretch beyond your PhD, and in places (near and far) you never imagined working. But key to these experiences are the people you work with and the relationships you develop along the way.

In academia and beyond, innovative projects or ideas are often developed informally – for instance, over coffee, in between sessions at conferences, or while eating lunch in the office. These opportunities frequently happen through personal connections, when someone takes a mental note of their network and thinks, ‘Oh! [insert your name here] would be great for this!’ If you look at many large-scale collaborations, particularly in academia, you’ll find that oftentimes those involved already knew one another or had secondary ties through a common network (this very book is the perfect example, as authors were invited via the editor’s network). That is to say, personal relationships during and beyond your PhD matter.

Beyond future opportunities, building sustainable personal relationships with supervisors and staff provides other tangible benefits to PhD students. For instance, recent research has suggested that PhD students who have good relationships with staff members, and especially their supervisors, are often more satisfied with their programme (Pyhältö, Vekkaila, & Keskinen, 2015). Connecting with staff can also help PhD students develop and navigate their new academic identities as members of a scholarship community (Gardner, 2010). Not to mention, staff members can be helpful resources on a wide range of academic subjects, research methods, and administrative processes.

Yet all too often, PhD students struggle to develop personal networks and relationships with staff in their department or across their wider field. For example, we recently completed a year-long research project into the social transition experiences of PhD students (Mittelmeier, Jindal-Snape, & Rienties, 2018). In our analysis across three institutions in England, Scotland, and China, participants almost universally desired stronger relationships with staff members and assistance with developing their personal networks. In particular, PhD students struggled with developing personally meaningful connections with their supervisors and other staff. As an illustration, when one international student participant was asked what he wished his supervisor knew about him, he responded:

‘I’d like them to know I’m not only a student. I am a human being. I have perspectives about life. I have issues about life. I have different views about life, about everything here. About the system, the culture, the relations, about everything. This is what I am. Only a small part is a student.’

Such sentiments were common across our findings, which demonstrates the strong social barriers that often exist between PhD students and staff.
Altogether, it’s clear that there’s typically more work to be done, both by students and staff, to bridge the barriers that commonly socially divide the two groups. In this chapter, we aim to counter this by providing a series of concrete action points for developing, managing, and maintaining social relationships with supervisors and staff to build lasting connections. In doing so, we first turn our attention to the number of common barriers experienced along the way.

**Common barriers**

There’s often a gap between the kind of social relationships PhD students would like to have with staff members and the kind they ultimately develop during their programme. Reasons for this can vary widely and be extremely individual to students’ unique circumstances, including their supervision team, institutional or personal circumstances, and the country where they completed their degree. However, there are a number of common barriers that exist, which can frequently derail social relationship development between PhD students and staff.

**Power Distance**

Power distance can be thought of as the hierarchical inequalities between members of a society or organisation, where some members possess more power or authority than others and over others. In this way, social relationships between PhD students and staff members inherently operate across unequal power dynamics. After all, staff members, and particularly supervisors, often have strong authority over a PhD student’s success and opportunities. For example, PhD supervisors provide regular evaluations of their student’s progress and must approve their thesis to be examined. Other staff members are often gatekeepers to needed resources, participants, research-related opportunities, or post-study career prospects. This means that by their very nature, social relationships are skewed toward the favour of established staff members. However, the degree to which that hierarchy matters can vary widely by country (discussed below), institution, or even between individuals. Similarly, the degree of comfort PhD students have within that power relationship can vary widely, with some students preferring to keep a healthy distance from those ranked higher than them, while others feel that interacting within those environments is more natural (and, we argue, there’s no right or wrong perspective on this). However, power dynamics almost always exist and often function as a foundation for social network development between PhD students and staff.

**Cultural Differences**

Higher education has become increasingly global with students and staff members more internationally mobile than perhaps ever before. For many PhD students, this means working with supervisors or other staff who are from a different country or culture than themselves. With that in mind, the PhD process and expectations of how PhD students are treated can vary widely between different countries. In the Netherlands, for example, PhD students are often treated the same as staff members and it’s not uncommon for staff to interact informally outside of campus with students (by having a drink together in a pub, for instance). In Japan, these types of social relationships between students and staff are virtually unheard of, as much stronger hierarchies and formalities of respect exist. This means that students and staff in intercultural environments often have very different ideas about the ‘place’ of PhD students and the degree of comfort they feel with informal interactions. These differences can lead to ambiguities and uncertainties in how PhD students should approach or navigate social relationships with staff members. Without making these norms explicit, PhD students and staff may also misinterpret one another’s actions or expectations. For example, a PhD student may choose not to sit with a staff member at lunch as it’s their cultural norm of respect, which may then be interpreted negatively by that staff member, who assumes the student doesn’t care to get to know them. Altogether, these intercultural interactions can create uncertainty or confusion as PhD students and staff navigate their roles from different cultural norms and perspectives.
Different Perceptions on the Supervisory Relationship

Visions of what the PhD experience ‘should be’ can vary widely across different fields of research or between individuals within the same institution (and even on the same supervision team). Supervisors all have unique perspectives and philosophies about how their PhD students should be working and to what extent they should be involved in it. For some, the supervisory relationship might involve working closely with one another on a regular basis, with the supervisor supporting the PhD student hands-on with their research design and development. Other supervisors might feel that PhD students should primarily work toward their goals alone, with the supervisor there to occasionally guide or review the work undertaken. This means that PhD students, even in the same department, can spend time with their supervisors and other staff in very different ways and to different degrees, which can impact the social dynamics and degrees of comfort that they have working with one another. At the same time, many PhD students enter into their programme with their own ideas about how the supervisory relationship ‘should’ look and what role they want their supervisor to play in their work. These ideas may or may not line up with their supervisors’ visions, meaning it’s essential that PhD students and supervisors develop mechanisms for negotiating working patterns and managing expectations from both sides.

Attendance vs Isolation

Expectations for how often PhD students should be physically present within their department can vary by country, academic discipline, or institution. PhD research, especially in fields such as social sciences or humanities, is often undertaken on your own and there isn’t frequently a ‘need’ to work in an office setting. This means that PhD students might not always have a strong physical presence in the department, particularly if they are not required to teach or attend classes (although this can look very different for those undertaking laboratory-based research). While the flexibility to complete work in other locations (at home, in libraries, etc.) can be beneficial, this means that PhD work can often be isolating. Isolation can also be a cyclical process, whereby working from home leads to a lack of social connections in the department, which makes working in the department feel awkward or uncomfortable, leading to more working from home.

Tunnel Vision

PhD students typically spend a tremendous amount of time honing in on one very fine-grained research topic in a small subject area within their larger field. Oftentimes, there are only a handful of staff in the department that also focus on this topic area. This means it’s easy to develop ‘tunnel vision’, whereby PhD students focus their network only on those who work on topics similar to their own. This often leads them to develop social relationships with a select few staff members, at the expense of widening their networks to other staff in the department. Staff, as well, can be frequently guilty of this, leading to artificial social barriers between those working in different research strands.

Fear of ‘Bothering’

It’s widely known that staff members at universities often have a heavy workload with demanding (and often conflicting) commitments. After watching staff members run around the department lost in their own worlds, many PhD students to feel they should not ‘bother’ staff members with their questions or concerns. Similarly, PhD students may feel that staff members outside of their supervision team won’t ‘care’ about students’ research topics if it does not match their own interests. While many staff members welcome discussions with PhD students they don’t supervise, this preoccupation with their growing workload can mean they don’t reach out to them if it’s not clear that their advice is wanted.

Altogether, there are many factors that impact the opportunities PhD students have to interact with staff and the degrees to which that interaction is formal or informal. In outlining some of these, it’s important to stress that there’s no single ‘right’ way to develop social relationships with supervisors.
and staff. Indeed, that process is highly individual and depends entirely on your own personal, cultural, and philosophical assumptions of how you want to develop social relationships with staff. To develop a clearer personal understanding of this, important questions to reflect on are outlined below. If you’re a supervisor or staff member reading this, we also encourage you to think about these questions from your own perspective toward students.

- What kind of social relationships do I want with my supervisors and other staff?
- What degree of formality or informality with staff do I feel comfortable with during my PhD?
- What do I want to know about my supervisors? And what do I want them to know about me?
- What kind of social relationships are advantageous for my future career goals?

With these thoughts in mind, the remainder of this chapter provides advice and actions for developing the social relationships you want, in light of the aforementioned barriers. In doing so, we focus on the lifespan of the PhD process: from prior to beginning, during the programme, to transitioning out of the PhD.

Prior to beginning
To start your social experiences off on the right foot, we suggest undertaking the following actions before your first day.

*Carefully consider social elements when selecting your institution and supervisors.* Chapter 1 has provided a good overview about how to select supervisors; we feel that it’s important to also consider social factors when making this important decision. In particular, reaching out to potential supervisors to have an informal conversation (either in person or online) about the prospects of working together before committing to the institution can be a valuable experience. When evaluating a potential supervisor after that conversation, try to move beyond their academic reputation and think about whether you like them as a person. Would you enjoy spending the next few years working with them? Do they have the degree of formality or informality towards you that you desire? Also look at their publication track record – do they have wide and varied networks themselves? Do they continue to publish and work with their PhD students after they finish? Keeping in mind your answers to the questions above, you can start to piece together whether potential supervisors’ social values match your own. In this regard, it’s important to remember that selecting a supervisor is a choice that you have agency in. Working with the top scholar in your field might not always be advantageous if you simply don’t like one another or they aren’t able or willing to develop the supervisory relationship you seek.

*Talk to other PhD students or junior staff members.* Perhaps the best source of information about what it’s like to be a PhD student in a prospective department or institution comes from those who are currently PhD students or early career researchers there. Often these individuals are more than willing to speak informally about their experiences, both when developing your application and after accepting a position. Speaking with current PhD students or staff before you arrive, even if just by email or Skype, can answer questions about departmental cultures towards social relationships between students and staff, thereby alleviating uncertainties about your own role. This can particularly be advantageous for those who live a long physical distance from the university and may not be able to visit prior to starting the programme.

*If you’re moving to a new country, do some research about its cultural norms for PhD students.* As we highlighted earlier in this chapter, perceptions of what PhD students do and how they are treated compared to staff can vary widely by country, even across a small physical distance. If you’re planning to move to a new country for your PhD, doing some research on the history and norms of its educational institutions can provide clarity on how you should go about connecting with staff. Similarly, your supervisor might be from a different country than both you and your new institution.
In this case, it can be helpful to also understand the systems that they have studied or worked in as well, as these norms will likely will be reflected in their supervision practices.

**During the PhD process**

Developing a network with supervisors and staff in your new department takes effort. After arriving, there are several key actions that can help you build the social relationships you desire.

*Start off your first supervision meeting candidly.* Supervisors can have a wide range of perspectives towards connecting with their PhD students, which are influenced by many things, including cultural background, philosophical views towards education, and their own PhD experience (among others). These can often be difficult for students to decode, particularly given the aforementioned power imbalances. For that reason, having a candid discussion about your supervisors’ views at the start can ease ambiguity and provide more clarity on your role. After all, the first supervision meeting usually is designed to outline initial goals and concrete steps for working with one another. Within that meeting, we suggest asking your new supervisors the following questions: 1) What is your personal vision of how a PhD should be undertaken? and 2) What role do you see yourself playing in my PhD project development? Their answers to those questions will provide important clues into the type of supervisory relationship they likely lean towards. As you will have (hopefully!) given a critical thought about how you would like to see your supervisory relationship develop (see above), this discussion also provides an opportunity to ask questions or make comments when their answers don’t quite line up with your expectations. By being frank with one another in the beginning, you can save yourself uncertainties in the future, while also making clear your own preferences.

*Take your supervision meetings into more informal spaces.* Supervision meetings often take place in physical spaces that accentuate the power distance between supervisors and PhD students, such as meeting rooms or staff members’ offices. These spaces are often conducive to more formal feedback at the expense of informal, friendly discussions. While there is, of course, a time and place for more formal feedback throughout your PhD, occasionally taking those discussions into a more informal environment can help enhance the student-supervisor relationship. To break up the stuffiness of a meeting room, we recommend asking your supervisor(s) whether they will meet you in the campus coffee shop or to walk on a nice day.

*Reach out to staff.* In many departments, you’ll find that staff may not always make a concerted effort to reach out and introduce themselves to new PhD students. Part of the reason for this is that academic departments are often large and segmented by research or teaching strands. Therefore, it’s not uncommon for staff members to not quite be able to place everyone who works within their own department. Coupled with the relatively quick turnaround of many early career researcher contracts and sometimes large number of PhD students present in the department, don’t be surprised if there are people who don’t initially know your name. However, that doesn’t mean that they don’t have time for you or don’t care to learn about your research topic - they just need a small nudge. Don’t be afraid to send an email or drop by their office to introduce yourself, even if you don’t have a particular need or question. Taking an initiative can open up doors to new social connections that may not have been made had you waited for them to come to you.

*Be physically present in the department (if you can).* We outlined above that self-isolation can limit social relationship building with staff members. Indeed in our own research, we identified that PhD students who were more frequently physically present in their department felt a stronger sense of belonging with peers and staff (Mittelmeier et al., 2018). While we recognise there are a variety of factors that can impede upon a person’s ability to work on campus, we suggest that PhD students should be physically present to the strongest degree they can. Being known and seen in the
department, coupled with the many micro-interactions that occur in day-to-day working environments, can help develop your network.

**Attend a wide range of departmental activities.** Your new department likely has a lot going on – research groups, seminars, workshops, trainings, and everything in between. Many of these events won’t necessarily align directly with your own research topic or specific areas of interest. Nonetheless, they represent important opportunities for connecting with staff members outside of your supervision team. We outlined at the start of this chapter that it’s highly unlikely that your job after the PhD will connect exactly with your thesis topic. Yet, there’s often a tendency for PhD students to have tunnel vision, ignoring the opportunities outside of their own research areas. However, we argue that using your PhD experience to expand your knowledge and network by attending a wide range of department events can provide a foundation for employability and new opportunities.

**Use social media to share your personality.** If you want to see the lighter side of academia, then look no further than academic Twitter. Beyond being an excellent place to share your research and increase the impact of your work, Twitter offers opportunities to connect informally with scholars in your own department and around the world. Hashtags such as #PhDChat (for all things PhD-related) or #AcWri (for tweets about academic writing) can help you join a virtual conversation about undertaking a PhD, while communities such as #WIASN (Women in Academia Support Network) can provide important forms of support. Using social media can also provide an outlet for sharing your personality beyond your research (see, for example #AcademicsWithCats or #AcademicsWithBeer). Beyond that, it’s an invaluable tool for developing new contacts and maintaining connections with those outside your institution.

**Transitioning out of the PhD**

As we’ve highlighted throughout this chapter, it’s important to nurture your networks. These networks might be academic or in the public/private sector depending on where you’d like to work after finishing your PhD. Some people aspire to become postdoctoral researchers or university lecturers, while others might want to work for governmental or non-governmental agencies, return to their existing jobs, or work in the third sector. Given the wide opportunities available post-PhD, it’s important to start doing research about your career options at least a year before you complete your studies. This length of preparation is important, as it will give you time to build the right networks.

Transitioning out of a PhD can also require a re-envisioning of your role in your workplace and society. Finishing your programme means you’re now considered an expert in your chosen research area, which can be a new or uncomfortable position for many new PhD holders. For those who remain in academia, this also means transitioning from a student to a staff member and, eventually, a supervisor yourself. In this way, you should be prepared to renegotiate the norms of practice in your daily life and self-conceptualisations of your own identity.

Further, be mindful that you might experience what is known as ‘reverse culture shock’, which might be especially felt by international students. Your PhD experience likely will have transformed you and your thinking. However, during those years your country, family, and friends might not have changed in the same way. Your new perspective and lens might lead you to see things differently compared to others as you transition out of being a PhD student. Some students can also experience this mismatch if there’s no one else in their family and friends who have studied to this level.

Altogether, the transition out of the PhD involves as much preparation and transition as beginning your programme. While finishing is an exciting and joyous feeling, thinking about the social transitions and changes to your network afterwards can help soften the shock of exiting your programme.
Tips for supervisors and other staff

Get to know your students from the very start. To build optimum academic and social relationships with students, it’s important to understand the different perspectives, experiences, and support needs they have as individuals. The first supervision session is the best time to start to get to know them by asking questions such as:

- What are your expectations of me as a supervisor?
- What type of supervisory relationship would you like to have?
- What degree of social interaction would you like to see outside of supervision meetings?

During this first meeting, it’s also a good idea to discuss your own expectations of them, including how you envision their PhD process developing and the degree of your own involvement. However, it’s important to keep in mind that this may not line up with your student’s visions and you may need to negotiate with them to develop the right plan that works for both of you.

Keep in mind the power dynamics driving your relationship with your student. Many PhD students don’t feel comfortable to challenge their supervisor or speak up when they are not receiving the support they desire. This is particularly true when students envision a large power distance between the role of students and supervisors, which is common to many cultures around the world. Oftentimes, PhD students carefully read their supervisor’s social cues and allow them to lead on the social relationship development front. We recommend being mindful of these power dynamics and taking the initiative to help students feel more comfortable and welcome.

Take your students out of the formal supervision sphere. Developing a lasting social and working relationship can be difficult to do fully within the walls of an office or meeting room. Occasionally taking your student out for coffee or for a walk can help students build a sense of comfort and confidence.

Talk about things that aren’t related to work. Both you and your student have lives outside of the university – families, friends, pets, hobbies, non-academic interests, and so on. Maintaining an interest in your students’ lives and sharing information about your own life can do wonders for developing a personal and social connection, which can in turn enhance the academic relationship. As such, we implore supervisors to get to know their students as ‘human beings’ (as stressed by the student at the start of our chapter) and share their own humanity in return.

Conclusion

Doing a PhD is a stimulating journey and an opportunity to expand your networks (near and far) by building lasting social relationships that can carry through the rest of your career. Developing the social relationships you seek with supervisors and staff takes concerted effort and starts by recognising, understand, and working against the complexities of building and sustaining those networks. However, we hope you look forward to and embrace that challenge, opening up doors for exciting new adventures and possibilities for your future.

References
