# Expectations of a PhD student

## Gilbertines Edition

*modified from a version produced by Simon Hadfield in 2019 & and Rich Bowden in 2013*

This document should provide you with an idea of what is expected of a PhD candidate. If you follow these guidelines, I am confident that your PhD will proceed smoothly, quickly, and with a successful outcome.

## Self Motivation

**I expect a PhD student to be self-motivated:** I expect a PhD student to be self-motivated: proactive, enthusiastic, and genuinely interested in their topic. If you're not curious about what you're researching, then why on earth are you doing a PhD in it? Honestly, you'd be better off getting a job—you'd get paid more and probably have fewer existential crises.

A PhD is more challenging than most people expect, primarily because it requires a serious commitment. If you're struggling with motivation, ask yourself why. Is the topic not grabbing you? Could it be tweaked to spark your imagination? Talk to your supervisor about it. I'd much rather supervise a student who's excited about their research, even if it's not exactly what I had in mind, than one who's trudging through something they don't care about and making slow progress.

Yes, some projects come with constraints, but there's usually wiggle room to steer things in a direction that makes the work more enjoyable. Use that wiggle room.

## Be Curious and Keep Learning

A PhD is a steep learning curve. You're not just doing research—you're becoming a researcher. That means developing your understanding of terminology, techniques, and research practices, and building a solid foundation of knowledge in your field.

Here's how to do that well:

### Attend Seminars (Even the Ones That Sound Boring)

In your first year, aim to attend **80–100%** of internal and external seminars. You don't yet know enough to judge what's relevant, and even seemingly unrelated talks can offer useful insights—new methods, different perspectives, or just a better sense of what's going on in the wider research world.

In your second year, **60–80%** attendance is fine—you'll have more pressure and a better sense of what's useful. In your final year, **40–60%** is a good guideline, but remember: there's *always* something to learn. And yes, 100% attendance is still the best policy.

You'll also learn how to present material—and just as importantly, how *not* to present it.

### Read Regularly

You can't do research without reading what others have done. Seminars and YouTube talks are great, but you *must* read papers. Aim for **1–2 papers per week**. Set aside time for it, and break it up with your research so it doesn't feel like a chore.

Also: **read theses**. It takes about 1.5 days to read one properly, and you'll often get far more out of it than from a paper that's been compressed to impress reviewers. Theses tend to be clearer, more detailed, and easier to follow.

And yes, **textbooks still matter**. Just because you're doing a PhD doesn't mean you've graduated from needing them. If you're stuck on something, try Googling the topic with the word *"tutorial"*—you'll be surprised how helpful that can be.

### Seek Out Opportunities

Don't just wait for learning to come to you. Look into:

- Presenting at BMVA technical meetings
- Attending summer schools
- Visiting other labs or doing internships
- Joining reading groups or informal discussions

These experiences can be transformative—and they show initiative, which is always a good look.

## Question Your Work

I expect a PhD student to question their work—constantly. Before running any experiment, ask yourself: *What do I expect to see?* Then, once you've got the results, ask: *Do they match my expectations?*

If they don't, something's off. Either:

- The experiment is flawed (dodgy code, bad data, broken protocol), or
- Your understanding of the topic needs a rethink.

In the first case, simplify. Strip the experiment down to its basics. Try a toy problem with trivial data and see if the results still look weird. If they do, congratulations—you've probably found a bug.

Too often, I'm shown a graph that a student treats as gospel, even though it clearly contradicts everything we know. Nine times out of ten, it's a code error. Why? Because the experiment was meant to test understanding, and the results make no sense.

If the experiment *is* sound, then follow the scientific method:

- Dig into the results.
- Look for patterns (even if you can't explain them yet).
- Revise your hypothesis.
- Design a new experiment to test it.

This is the heart of research. Don't just collect data—interrogate it.

## Ask for Clarification

If an experiment is suggested and you don't understand *why*, ask. If a course of action is offered and you're not sure *how* to implement it, ask. Nothing derails progress faster than misinterpreting

instructions and turning up with something completely random—or worse, doing nothing because you didn't quite get it.

If you're mid-week and feeling unsure, unclear, or stuck—ask. Knock on my door, or ask someone else in the lab. We're all here to help.

To quote Maria Petrou's ABC system for classifying researchers:

- "If you tell a person A, they understand A and then do A, that is a person with some research potential;
- If you tell them A, they understand B and do C, they are a person with no research potential;
- If you tell a person A, they understand A and then do ABC, that is a person with excellent research potential;
- And if you tell a person A, they understand A and go and do B, that is a person with issues!"

To which I'll add:

If you tell someone A, they understand A, do ABC, document it all in their meeting brief, raise it under "points for discussion" and "future work," and then suggest "we might like to do DEF"…
Then they are my perfect PhD student.

## Be Prepared

Under normal circumstances, I expect to meet with each of my PhD students for one hour per week. These meetings are only useful if you're prepared. That means:

- **Take notes during meetings.**
- **Write a meeting brief.**
- **Send it to me in advance.**

Do *not* try to cobble together your meeting brief five minutes before we meet—it'll be awful. Instead, start next week's brief *right after* this week's meeting ends. Jot down the outcomes, then add to it as the week progresses. Drop in any exciting results, figures, or thoughts as they emerge. This way, the brief becomes a living document of your progress.

**No meeting brief, no meeting.** Simple as that.

Your meeting brief should include:

**a. Summary of last meeting + current objectives**
What did we talk about last time? What did we agree you'd work on this week?

**b. Overview of work done**
What have you actually done? Include key results, graphs, images, tables, and a brief explanation of how you got them. Don't pad it out with waffle or dump raw code—keep it tight. The best briefs are clear, concise, and could be dropped straight into your thesis or a paper. Figures (qualitative or quantitative) are especially useful—they give us something concrete to discuss.

**c. Questions for discussion**
Often the weakest part of the brief—especially if part (b) is thin. What do you want to talk about? What's puzzling you? What feedback do you need? This meeting is for *your* benefit, not mine. If you show up with no work and no questions, I'll take over, moan about progress, and tell you what to do. If you bring work and questions, you steer the meeting, and the research.

**d. Future work (short, mid, long-term)**
What's next? What are your proposed next steps? Be proactive. Don't just wait for me to tell you what to do.

**e. Reading summary**
Include a short (one-paragraph) summary of any papers you've read, with proper BibTeX references and citations. This helps build your knowledge base and your bibliography.

## Use Those Around You

One of the main reasons we have a lab is so that people can help each other. There's no point banging your head against a brick wall when the person behind you has already solved the problem.

As a rule of thumb:
If you've been Googling something for 20–30 minutes and still can't figure it out, ask the room. Someone probably knows the answer—or at least knows where to look.

Also, make use of **downtime**. Chat about your work during coffee breaks. You'd be surprised how often someone spots a flaw, suggests a better approach, or mentions a related paper you've never heard of.

And here's a bonus: **explaining your work to others is one of the best ways to clarify your own thinking**. If you can't explain it simply, you probably don't understand it well enough yet.

## Be Present in the Lab

I expect PhD students to be physically present in the lab on our three office days—currently **Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday**. Working from home is fine occasionally, but there are good reasons to be around others and build a research community (see Point 8).

We're flexible with working hours, but as a general guide, aim to be in the lab during **core hours: 10am–4pm**. Some people are early birds and slope off early; others are night owls. Try *not* to be a night owl. It's understandable around deadlines, but re-establish a regular routine as soon as possible.

Personally, I sympathise—I often work late myself. But I still make sure I'm in the office during core hours, and so should you.

Historically, students who "work the night shift" or spend less time in the office tend to take longer to finish their PhDs and face more difficulties. The main reason I insist on core hours is so that people in the group can help each other. You might feel awkward asking lots of questions in your first year, but don't. Everyone was a first-year once, and others helped them. Later in your PhD, I'll expect *you* to help new members.

If someone has made a significant contribution to your work, raise it in a meeting—we can discuss whether they should be included as a co-author.

Beyond collaboration, there are **psychological benefits** to being active during daylight and interacting with peers. If the office chatter is distracting (I get it), use headphones. It's better to block out noise and still be available than to not be there at all.

Finally, **don't burn the candle at both ends**. If you're pushing for a deadline, you might work late and get up early—and I'll be right there with you. But that's not sustainable. The more tired you are, the

more mistakes you make, and the more time you waste fixing them. I'd much rather you get a solid 8 hours of sleep than spend an extra 2–3 hours in a caffeine-fuelled haze.

## Keep Me Informed (Holidays & Sickness)

If you're not going to be in the lab, **let me know**. It's that simple.

When I'm sick, I have to call the university at some ungodly hour like 8am. I also have to get my holidays approved by managers and heads of department. Thankfully, we don't run quite such an onerous system for students—but I do expect you to keep me in the loop.

- **If you're ill**, drop me a message on the morning of your sickness.
    - If it's long-term, you'll need a sick note from your GP.
- **If you want to take a holiday** (which I actively encourage), let me know well in advance.
    - I'll make a note in my diary so I don't chase you if you disappear.
    - Holidays should be approved *before* they're taken.
    - Try to avoid booking holidays right before conference deadlines.

Also, consider **extending conference trips** to include a bit of holiday in exotic places. It's one of the perks of the job and totally acceptable. Just make sure there's a clear line between what's covered by the conference budget and what's part of your personal holiday.

## Own Your Timeline

A PhD is a long-term project—more marathon than sprint—and managing your time well is one of the most important skills you'll develop. You're not just doing research; you're managing a multi-year project with deadlines, milestones, and a final deliverable that's meant to be original, rigorous, and publishable.

You are responsible for your timeline. I'll help guide you, but ultimately, it's *your* project. That means:

- **Set goals**: Break your research into manageable chunks. Think in terms of short-term (weekly), medium-term (monthly), and long-term (yearly) goals.
- **Track progress**: Use whatever tools work for you—Gantt charts, Miro boards, OneNote, Google Sheets, or even a wall covered in sticky notes. Just ensure that you can see how your work fits into the broader picture.
- **Plan backwards from deadlines**: Conference submissions, progress reviews, and thesis submission dates should shape your timeline. Don't leave things to the last minute.
- **Expect MANY setbacks**: Experiments fail. Code breaks. Papers get rejected. That's normal. Build in buffer time so these things don't derail your entire schedule.
- **Review regularly**: Use your weekly meetings to reflect on progress. Are you on track? Do goals need adjusting? Are you spending too much time on something that's not yielding results?

If you feel stuck, overwhelmed, or like you're falling behind—**talk to me early**. Don't wait until the wheels fall off. We can adjust your plan, rethink priorities, or find support. The earlier we catch a problem, the easier it is to fix.

And remember: **your timeline is not just about finishing—it's about finishing well**. A well-managed PhD is less stressful, more productive, and far more enjoyable.

## Be Professional

Treat your PhD like a job. Yes, it's a research degree, and yes, it's flexible—but it's still a professional commitment. That means:

- **Show up** (physically and mentally).
- **Communicate clearly**—especially when things aren't going to plan.
- **Meet deadlines** (or renegotiate them early if needed).
- **Be respectful** to colleagues, supervisors, admin staff, and anyone else you interact with.

Academia is collaborative. Your reputation matters—not just for getting through your PhD, but for future jobs, references, and publications. Be someone others want to work with.

This doesn't mean you have to be formal or stiff. You can be relaxed, funny, and human—but also reliable, considerate, and constructive. If you're not sure how to handle a situation professionally, ask. It's part of the learning curve.

## Take Care of Yourself

A PhD can be intense. There will be deadlines, setbacks, long hours, and moments of doubt. That's normal. What's *not* normal is burning out and pretending everything's fine.

Make time for rest, hobbies, exercise, and socialising. You are not a machine. You'll do better work if you're well-rested, mentally balanced, and occasionally reminded that there's life outside your thesis.

If you're struggling—mentally, emotionally, or physically—**talk to someone**. Me, a peer, a friend, or university support services. There's no shame in asking for help. In fact, it's a sign of maturity.

Also: don't compare yourself to others. Every PhD is different. Some people publish early, some take longer to find their stride. Focus on your own path, and don't let imposter syndrome set up camp in your brain.