

## The Research Student's Guide to Success (Book Review)

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### **Textbook Details:**

The Research Student's Guide to Success  
Third Edition

Pat Cryer

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This is the third edition of Pat Cryer's self-help book for graduate students with specific emphasis for those research graduates in the UK. The material is a collection drawn not only from her long experience but also from students and supervisors. Keeping these two facets in mind, the book becomes a practical guide, a potpourri of hints and tips, applicable in some part to all graduate and potential graduate students.

To get a taste of this edition of the book, use your browser to explore "Resources from Pat Cryer" which is a website outlining the content of and containing many segments from this third edition of her book. On the link [http://www.postgrad\\_resources.btinternet.co.uk/student-resources00-book.htm](http://www.postgrad_resources.btinternet.co.uk/student-resources00-book.htm), note the "Resources for Graduate Students" and "See inside this book". These give access to some segments of the book and specifically to all of Chapter 1, the table of contents, and the Index. Don't miss the extra segment on 'Originality in Research' noted at the bottom of webpage.

Rather than describe the layout which is well portrayed on Pat Cryer's website, the following material considers her approach and the worthiness of the book for graduate students and also those contemplating becoming a graduate student.

This book serves as an overview of the many challenges for those considering registering or already in a graduate program. The book does focus on the research PhD process in the UK but other graduate students should find much of worth.

Potential students should note the sequence of events as noted in the first few chapters of the book but not get ahead of themselves by jumping too far too quickly. The importance of being prepared is essential groundwork for success. Getting a broad view by exploring opportunities and making the right application as indicated in chapters 2 and 3 should not get short shrift. Some readers may find the choppy style with many headings and short burst of information disconcerting. Note that this book does not provide much detail in any of the topics covered. It carries you from crest to crest and prompts you to delve into other books or the Internet and/or to ask knowledgeable people for details. You are the responsible agent who must take the material in the book and act upon it.

Once into a program, the students then must contend with managing four main streams through the process. One stream is the administrative components which include dealing with such components as complying with department or school regulations on progress reports, due dates or ethical issues as well as developing funding requests, taking on teaching assistance work, transferring to another degree stream or being a student from overseas. These are elements running through chapters 9, 11, 16 and 18. Understanding the hurdles and accomplishing these in a timely fashion is critical.

Another stream is writing or presenting your material such as, the initial research proposal, department or conference presentations, and the thesis. These are treated in chapters 4, 16, 17, 19, 20, 23, 24 and 25. Closely related to this

stream are chapters 7 and 8 which focus on reading and evaluating quality of literature in the topic chosen. Cryer brings out several key facets in her writing, i.e. set and keep within boundaries, understand the departmental style for reports/theses, stay open minded to recognize originality and creativity, and remember that writing takes longer than you think. One eddy that really should be strong current through the work is the mention of when to start a thesis. Six lines on page 176 suggest that reports written during the years of study often form parts of the thesis. This reviewer would rephrase that to say that all reports should be seen as being part of or chapters in the final thesis. There should be more emphasis on having students plan ahead, choose a thesis topic and focus all work on that topic. However, Cryer does take the more realistic approach in stating that the students should begin the thesis at the earliest possible time.

A third stream that the book introduces is that of personal development which flows through chapters 10, 12, 13, 14, 21 and the Appendix. While the thesis is the ultimate tangible product of the graduate program, personal growth is the greatest intangible and most worthwhile facet in this reviewer's opinion. Cryer makes it clear that students must take control of their own development by understanding their skills and abilities such as emotional traits, working style, learning style, planning abilities and computer skills. Cryer mentions clearly that students do not often know themselves well enough to engage in activities that support their learning and work styles or foster a positive emotional state. Contacting the institutional learning centre or student support facility to seek help to assess emotional intelligence, learning style or preferred working environments is very important. Cryer also stresses the need for personal development planning (PDP) which, developed by the Quality Assurance Agency, is an important activity in UK graduate schools. This PDP approach prompts students to reflect on their learning and performance in order to structure their personal, educational and career development. In the Appendix there is a valuable list of specific skills that graduate students should study and aim to develop where appropriate. Cryer is correct to emphasize this because students do not do enough self-reflection in today's fast paced educational environment.

A fourth stream is that of personal interaction which Pat Cryer covers in parts of chapters 5, 6, 10 and 15. Cryer emphasizes the importance of dealing with others while in the graduate program. The most important person is the supervisor because having a respectful relationship here can mean help in complying with administrative rules, in refining the research work and successfully preparing and defending the thesis. Cryer's various suggestions on how the student should develop an appropriate relationship here are extremely important to the student's success and should not be underestimated. Cryer also comments that networking and team playing are also important not only in assisting the student through the stages of the program but also as well as in coping with isolation and stress. Becoming familiar with the 'community' be it academic staff, fellow students or local resource people provides the student with many opportunities to gather useful information, to understand administrative processes and also to resolve issues that might otherwise stall progress.

This book requires close reading. It is easy to miss important points because the staccato writing style of so much material in so many headings promotes skipping. Because of this style, a detailed index would prove a useful tool in finding and referring back to the information. Cryer has many illustrative examples separated from the text in numbered boxes. She also has other boxes for 'Suggestions' and 'Points to Ponder' which prompt the students to reflect on the text or begin a related activity. Having these noted in the index would facilitate finding them again. The references to books and websites are most useful as is the introduction of the many UK agencies such as the Quality Assurance Agency and the UK Council for Graduate Education but product placement of Microsoft Office products seems to be out of place!

There are many useful points in Cryer's book that any graduate student would be well advised to take to heart. Of the many points there are several crucial personal issues touched upon and of which graduate students should be especially mindful. These four important survival or success factors are

- self-awareness as embodied in emotional intelligence (page 120), in learning style (page 151), and alluded to in Chapter 2 and in Chapter 21;
- commitment as introduced in Chapter 2 and again in Chapter 21;
- supervisor relationships as noted primarily in Chapter 6; and
- community support as noted in Chapters 5, 10 and 14.

Cryer's book, for those looking for an overview of challenges facing them in a graduate research program, would serve well as a first guide.