

PEOPLE

How to Treat a Dissertation Like a Start-Up



Julian Kirchherr

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By Peter Monaghan | JULY 15, 2018

Julian Kirchherr wants to revolutionize the writing of doctoral dissertations.

His recommendation: Think like the founders of start-up companies; at every stage, work quickly toward a "good enough" product; then gather feedback and refine your prototype.

In his new book, *The Lean PhD: Radically Improve the Efficiency, Quality and Impact of Your Research*, issued in Palgrave's Palgrave Research Skills series, he advocates an approach quite different from a traditional one in which advisers exhort their charges to just knuckle down and get the thing written.

That can conceal an ugly reality, says Kirchherr, an assistant professor of sustainable business and innovation studies at Utrecht University, in the Netherlands, who wrote his Oxford geography dissertation in 21 months. "The average supervisor often requires from you a draft that's as polished as possible while providing the minimum guidance imaginable."

Traditional approaches, he suggests, no doubt explain why so many doctoral candidates struggle — often, while suffering from psychological distress — and why more than 40 percent never finish "the thing."

He derived his approach from such experiences as working with start-up companies while he was a project manager at a large consultancy. The principles of his approach include letting statistics about most-cited articles and discussions with potential supervisors suggest a topic that will elicit encouragement and even collaboration from academic peers and "end users" in industry or other arenas.

Then, start writing, shaping ideas. Write journal articles, go to conferences, and generally solicit feedback, just as start-ups with early prototypes do. Always, he says, be ready to "pivot" — to adapt a dissertation in response to good feedback. Aim to produce, as soon as possible, a "minimum viable dissertation."

Kirchherr hastens to add that he is not advocating that students knock out a shoddy "good enough" dissertation as an end product; rather, the first-draft "minimum viable dissertation" will present core ideas. The process of gathering responses to those, he says, can serve both to help sharpen arguments and analysis, but also to evade a common pitfall of dissertation preparation: grinding, often crippling isolation.

To dodge that, he recommends that dissertation writers choose a young, untenured adviser who can share the excitement of scholarly discovery. Also helpful is to involve master's and undergraduate students, and even interested professionals, journalists, and members of one's social circle.

And journal editors, too. Kirchherr wrote six peer-reviewed articles in prominent journals while enrolled in Oxford's geography doctoral program. He says he was in part guarding against any doubters of his novel dissertation-writing process. But he clearly does a lot of things fast. His book, at around 110 pages, is itself an exercise in lean design.

The book, he says, is merely "an MVB: a minimum viable book," one that he hopes will provoke and inform discussion about the clearly problematic modern-day Ph.D. dissertation. He says he wrote it because, when many fellow Ph.D. students asked him how he was doing his dissertation the way he was, "I said to myself, 'If this works out, I'd be keen to bring it to a wider audience.'"

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