**[At the beginning of PhD research, how to balance independence with satisfying my advisor's expectations?](http://academia.stackexchange.com/questions/28572/at-the-beginning-of-phd-research-how-to-balance-independence-with-satisfying-my)**

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| I am at the beginning of the research portion of my PhD program and as is standard in this department, I am to begin my research by writing a small literature review of some relevant papers in my field, chosen by me and approved by my advisor. This includes replicating and tweaking/improving the experiments ( which boils down to code ) in the chosen papers along with discussion in the results comparing mine to the original papers, etc. Note that this paper is not directly to be published; it is part of my qualifying exam. I am given about a month of time to do this (along with other research related things I must do...).  The problem:  When sitting down to write, I am constantly blocked by the fear that the work I am doing is not quite what my advisor wants. My advisor casts a wider net with his research interests than most professors I have seen, so his students seem to do projects in various areas within engineering. That said, the research summary I am doing is largely on clustering in machine learning, and I fear my advisor has little interest in this topic, or worse.... that I am, in a sense, *not doing what I'm supposed to be doing*?  If I were doing this very same research or a class, a clustering report in machine learning, I feel I would have no problem at all just working contently and developing my ideas and trying to come up with as interesting an experiment as I could and generally adapting to wherever the project took me and doing what needed to be done to finish it, but the game is changed since I feel I am working on this problem *for* someone rather than just for myself. Additionally, in my undergraduate research, I was given very straightforward instructions so there was no ability for me to choose papers on my own ( e.g., "Replicate the results in *this* paper", "Write an abstract mentioning X, Y, and Z" ). The freedom I'm given in this research review experience is somewhat confusing, I suppose.  Is this concern a normal feeling? What do I think/do about it? The reason I ask is that i precisely am afraid to be working on the wrong thing, and I am frozen in my writing and am struggling dearly. It is an incredibly nagging feeling to think that that my report isn't focused correctly. For the purpose of this literature review, should I just follow where the research takes me or should I change the focus of it and just try to please my advisor?  To be clear, my question is of **how to balance being independent and satisfying my supervisor?** |
| |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | | Better to have done something which can be critiqued than to have done nothing at all. Make drafts and outlines, do the requested replications, and SHOW IT TO YOUR ADVISOR! – [Bill Barth](http://academia.stackexchange.com/users/11600/bill-barth) [Sep 16 '14 at 3:18](file:///C:\Users\David\Dropbox\FORMATIONS\Prendre%20confiance%20en%20soi\At%20the%20beginning%20of%20PhD%20research,%20how%20to%20balance%20independence%20with%20satisfying%20my%20advisor%27s%20expectations.htm#comment61524_28572) | | |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | | I'm not sure whether your question is, "How to handle the fear and uncertainty of doing independent work with looser constraints than I'm used to?" or "How to balance being independent and satisfying my supervisor?" - your post seems to bring up both issues, and it's kind of confusing which [one](http://meta.academia.stackexchange.com/a/1204/11365) you want answered. Can you clarify? – [ff524♦](http://academia.stackexchange.com/users/11365/ff524) [Sep 16 '14 at 3:27](file:///C:\Users\David\Dropbox\FORMATIONS\Prendre%20confiance%20en%20soi\At%20the%20beginning%20of%20PhD%20research,%20how%20to%20balance%20independence%20with%20satisfying%20my%20advisor%27s%20expectations.htm#comment61527_28572) | | |  |  | | --- | --- | |  |  | | Yes, sorry. My post was a bit of a rant. "How to balance being independent and satisfying my supervisor?" is what I'm interested in solving. I'll add that to the post. – [user27886](http://academia.stackexchange.com/users/21907/user27886) [Sep 16 '14 at 3:29](file:///C:\Users\David\Dropbox\FORMATIONS\Prendre%20confiance%20en%20soi\At%20the%20beginning%20of%20PhD%20research,%20how%20to%20balance%20independence%20with%20satisfying%20my%20advisor%27s%20expectations.htm#comment61528_28572) |   add a comment |

**1 Answer**

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| Is this concern a normal feeling?  YES.  For the purpose of this literature review, should I just follow where the research takes me or should I change the focus of it and just try to please my advisor?  The correct answer is *neither*.  Given that this is the beginning of your PhD research, you haven't yet developed much of a collaborative relationship with your advisor. This is the time to start.  Consider your advisor's initial suggestions as you would any advice from someone more experienced than you. (Even if your advisor is not an expert in machine learning, he/she *does* have more experience than you in developing promising research ideas that are suitable in scope for a qualifying exam - don't underestimate that expertise.)  That means you should definitely *start out* along the path your advisor set out for you. (Unless you hate it - in which case, go set up a meeting with him RIGHT NOW and tell him your concerns.)  But, that doesn't mean you need to follow his instructions to the letter. If, somewhere along the way, you are inspired to follow up on a particular idea, don't reject it just because it's not exactly what your advisor told you to do. Part of what's expected of you is to come up with ideas of your own.  If you have an idea you'd like to follow up on, do a little bit of work to verify that it's not a complete waste of time, and then *bring it to your advisor and ask for his advice*. He/she may explain to you why it's not advisable to pursue it (e.g., maybe it's not appropriate in scope), or suggest pursuing it further after your qualifying exam, or maybe your advisor will be as excited about it as you are.  Whatever the end result, make sure to communicate honestly and often with your advisor. Especially at this early stage, it's a good idea to check in now and then with your progress and make sure you're on a path that's heading somewhere good.   |  | | --- | | answered Sep 16 '14 at 3:48[ff524](http://academia.stackexchange.com/users/11365/ff524) | |

**Balancing Independence with Support**

One of the issues that I highlighted in my last post was how I felt more independent now I was outside of academia. I was able to make my own decisions, take responsibility for my own staff and use my ‘expertise’. This was brilliant, until I had a problem and then I felt a complete lack of support. I was expected to handle the issue all by myself. It was hard, in fact it was impossible and I left soon after. Now while this was more the organisation I was working for rather than anything else it did make me think: As Early Career Researchers how much autonomy do we really want or need?

Having been outside of academia more or less since gaining my PhD, even when I was in academia I worked in professional services rather than in an academic department so it did, at times, feel that business came before professional development. From participating in and hosting #ecrchat and #ecrchat (west) I’ve noticed people repeatedly talking about the support they have or haven’t received and where they should go to get it. I have been lucky in that my PhD supervisor has remained my first port of call when I have needed advice. She is always there for me and I value that relationship and the way it has changed over the years. However, at the same time I wanted to be independent. From #ecrchat I have also seen the difficulties faced by colleagues who are either part-time or who have moved locations, even entire countries to start their post PhD lives.

In the UK there is the Concordat …

The Concordat is an agreement between the funders and employers of researchers in the UK, setting out the expectations and responsibilities of each stakeholder in researcher careers – researchers themselves, their managers, employers and funders. It aims to increase the attractiveness and sustainability of research careers in the UK and to improve the quantity, quality and impact of research for the benefit of UK society and the economy (Vitae, 2012).

You can find more out about the Concordat on the Vitae web site[[1]](file:///C:\Users\David\Dropbox\FORMATIONS\Prendre%20confiance%20en%20soi\Balancing%20Independence%20with%20Support.htm#_ftn1). It appears to be an important step in enabling researchers to develop their independence and autonomy whilst ensuring they have the correct support. Interestingly it is not something I have heard people talk much about much. Either that is because researchers do not know about it or are not interested or that institutions are not promoting it beyond the stamp of approval on their web sites?

So how do we manage to be independent as well as get the guidance we need? I think the **most important thing for any ECR is a mentor**, whether that is your PhD supervisor, one of your examiners, a colleague you work well with etc. you will know the right person when you find them. Use this person as a sounding board for ideas and talk through any issues you have. For me I have my supervisor but also two other senior colleagues who have shown interest in my work and have encouraged me to carry on when I have felt down.

**Remember you are not alone**: this was what I wish I could have told myself in the middle of last year. I didn’t start telling people I was unhappy with what was going on around me until it was too late. Had I talked about it earlier a tactical withdrawal could have been made that was less painful for me. There is #ecrchat and we are all here for each other. These communities make a great deal of difference in my opinion and that level of peer support is important.

**You will make mistakes**: again acknowledge that and learn from them. While you may have got to the top of the student tree you are now at the bottom of the staff tree and its time to work your way to the top again. This felt exhausting to me at first but then I realised I didn’t need to be perfect, in fact the only one who expected me to be was me! I’ve learnt a lot from the past year and I am now a far better judge of character and I know what I want from my career and how to work to get it.

**Be clear about what you want from your new position**: It’s not just about what they want from you – any job is also about your own professional and personal development. Talk with your boss / PI about what your goals are, where you see your career going. 12 months ago I thought PDP was a pointless faff however, through my MA course in online and distance education I can see the importance of both reflective practice and PDP. To be able to be independent you need to continue to develop your skills.

**Everyone has a responsibility for you and your career development:** The Concordat sets out different responsibilities for those involved with a researchers career. Even if you work outside of academia your success is as much a reflection of the way you are managed, as it is about the way you apply yourself to your work. It may be more difficult to discuss these issues outside of academia but it is necessary. I have heard horror stories from people saying that they have been told that work is different to being a student and they just had to do as they were told or that they took up too much management time. Don’t let people fob you off it is a collective responsibility and for you to succeed you need a good team around you. This is something I have now and I truly value.

I don’t know whether the feelings of autonomy or independence are different depending on discipline but I do feel from the social scientists I know both inside and outside of academia that there are people debating the need to establish themselves but also the need for support. What I have learnt in the last 12 months is that you can not be independent without support.