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Studying for a doctorate: Wanting a strong voice

Abstract:

Studying for a doctoral degree can be an exciting, invigorating and ultimately satisfying process but equally it can be a long, arduous, frustrating and lonely journey. In this article I speak of my own experience of the process and offer some thoughts about the 'what, why, when and how' of studying at this level. I consider the excitement of developing your own ideas and project alongside the challenges inherent in doctoral level study such as coping with uncertainty and rarely having a sense of closure and offer some practical challenges to help you the reader decide whether doctoral study is for you.

What is a doctoral degree?

A doctoral degree is the highest ranking academic qualification that can be conferred by an educational institution following an agreed programme of study (QAA, 2011). Study at this level involves making an original contribution to knowledge and is understood as a period of research training. The period of study for a UK doctoral degree is 3-4 years full time or 6-8 years part-time (Vitae, 2017).

Why study for a doctorate?

You need to be very clear of your reasons for pursuing a doctorate; it is a huge undertaking which will be demanding of your time, energy, commitment and finances. Having a sound rationale and a belief in yourself and your topic will sustain you when you start to doubt yourself and your abilities as you inevitably will. Sound reasons might include: feeling passionately about something and wanting to make a difference, having a strong voice to make that difference, needing an answer to a question, wanting to keep learning, wanting to achieve something meaningful and significant, craving intellectual stimulation and wanting to further your career. Similarly there are a lot of reasons not to study for a doctorate; peer pressure, the ambitions of others and studying because your employer wants you to are all reasons which will do little to sustain you as you go forward.

Which mode of study?

All doctoral students are expected to conduct in-depth research and are deemed to be experts in their field. Choosing whether to pursue a traditional doctorate, known as a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), or whether to study for a professional doctorate is an option for those in the health professions.

A PhD is a research based doctoral programme with an academic focus; it involves little or no taught elements meaning that it has a high degree of intellectual freedom. The student normally chooses the subject area themselves, designs and carries out a research project (under the guidance of a supervisory team) and writes up a thesis. The PhD student aims to add to the knowledge base in a specific area in their field. Traditional PhDs have historically been pursued by people intent on developing a career in academia. Studying in this mode requires the student to be self-directed, independent and resourceful.

The professional doctorate is intended to create knowledge that advances professional practice and which develops the capability of individuals to work within a professional context (UKCGE, 2016). Professional doctorates normally have a two stage approach with a substantial taught element concentrating on research specific skills and professional development followed by a research stage. Generally a professional doctorate is assessed through coursework at different points of the taught components. Studying in this mode allows the student to work towards definitive goals and deadlines.

So how did I choose? I thought long and hard about which mode of study would suit me best. Initially I was attracted to a professional doctorate as I liked the idea of working towards individual assessments and getting feedback throughout the process. My reasoning being that this mode of study might fit more easily into my workload as a full time lecturer. However having previously studied at undergraduate and master's level (on taught programmes) the possibility of a structured approach to learning did not excite me. I wanted to do something different and was excited by the freedom of a traditional PhD; of finding my own way, exploring my own ideas and being in control of my learning.

How much does a PhD cost and where can you get funding?

This will vary according to country and university but generally in the UK being a self-funded PhD student will entail an annual tuition bill of around £3000 to £6000 (Top Universities, 2016). In the UK PhD funding can be provided through various research councils each of which deals with a specific academic sector. According to the Research Councils UK (RCUK) the indicative fee level for full time study for 2017-18 is £4,195 (RCUK, 2017).

A lot of universities provide scholarships, studentships and other PhD funding opportunities and some offer PhD studentship positions which are posts tied to a PhD program. From 2018-19, loans of up to £25,000 will be available to any English student without a Research Council living allowance who can win a place for doctoral study at a UK university (HM Treasury, 2016).

I studied for my PhD over a 4 year period; three years part time and one year full time. The fees and associated costs for the first three years were funded by my employer (who at that point was Anglia Ruskin University). I funded the last full time year myself. It's important to remember funding isn't just about tuition fees; you need to consider things such as travel and accommodation costs if you are studying at a distance, the cost of text books, incidentals like paper and ink for your printer (which all add up), associated research costs such as transcription costs, conference attendance and, if you decide to take any time out of work you may want to factor in loss of earnings.

What topic should you choose?

Choose your topic area carefully as you need it to fully engage you even when things are moving slowly or not going as well as you would like. At the end of the process you will become known as an expert in the area and your thesis is likely to steer all your future work and projects. You will be expected to publish from your thesis which will mean you are working with your findings and your thesis for some considerable time after you have finished. Do expect your focus (within your topic area) to shift and change throughout. A doctoral study is a dynamic entity; a trajectory of thinking, writing and learning formed by a relationship between you, the literature, the supervisory team and the data.

At the beginning of my study I was interested in the idea of 'birthing the mother', narratives and the significance of normality. My focus narrowed at the outset (so that I could frame my ideas into a feasible project) and then shifted and changed throughout my journey. I ended up exploring how pregnant women experience stories of birth based on the belief that birth stories must *surely* have a positive or negative influence on listeners, steering them towards either medical or midwifery-led models of care.

Where should you study and with whom?

This question may be moot if you are an academic as you might be encouraged to study in-house or you might find that any funding available may only be offered if you study in-house. If you are not restricted think about the experience and reputation of the researchers you may be working with, the support they might offer you and the opportunities working with them may provide. Remember any papers you publish during or post your PhD will have your supervisor's details on as well as your own. It is also important to consider whether you are happy to study at a distance or whether you would prefer to study close to home where support might be more readily available.

Initially encouraged by my Faculty to study in-house I determined that I would be better supported at another institution; I wanted to be guided by a Professor of Midwifery in a research active

university and by somebody with extensive experience of supervising PhD students. I made a case for studying elsewhere stressing the benefits of working with key people in the field of midwifery for both myself and by default the university.

I approached Professor Soo Downe at the University of Central Lancashire about the possibility of working with her as I was passionate about developing a project around the concept of normality which is one of her specialist areas; fortunately she was interested in me and my topic and following a successful interview I was offered a place.

How does the PhD process work?

The student undertakes an in-depth study of their chosen topic whilst also developing research and other transferable skills; the aim is to foster competent and independent researchers. Core to a successful PhD is an effective supervisory process; a professional relationship providing academic guidance and dialogue, intellectual direction, constructive criticism, project management, progress reviews and practical assistance (UCLan, 2010).

Over the course of my studies I had 21 meetings with my team. Some of the meetings were in person, some via Skype and some on the telephone; each meeting was recorded on a supervisory record which included: details of plans from the last meeting, activities undertaken, an agenda, notes from the meeting and agreed plans for the period prior to the next meeting. Each record was saved as evidence of progress but more importantly gave my project a sense of structure and me a means of moving forward with finite goals to work towards.

Most PhDs are broken down into a number of different stages and mine was no exception; the stages I worked towards (but which may vary at other institutions) were pre-registration, registration, progression, transfer, examination and award. At the outset I was enrolled on the programme but not registered; in the pre-registration stage I was tasked with establishing and refining my ideas and my programme of work. To register I had to produce a two sided A4 outline of my project (a research proposal) making sure the project was feasible, do-able and original. I also had to attain ethics approval for my project in order to register.

Progression is something PhD students have to navigate each year; this is a process evidencing that you are moving forward, making progress and working towards the necessary timescales as defined at the outset. I kept a progress file with evidence of attendance at compulsory university events (such as induction and twice yearly postgraduate seminar days), completion of any relevant training (in-house or external), attendance at conferences and supervision records. A progress report was completed by me with comments from my supervisory team and the research degrees tutor each

year. This was then presented to the relevant research degrees subcommittee for approval to progress to the next year of the programme.

Transfer is the process of moving from a Master of Philosophy (MPhil) to a PhD award. Most UK universities require PhD students to start their studies by registering for the degree of MPhil. A transfer report evidencing work to date, a statement of work going forward and details of the original contribution of the work is required for transfer as is a defence of the report at oral examination. The process is intended to identify that work to date and going forward is at the appropriate level.

Examination of your thesis and an oral defence of your work (in the form of a Viva Voce) is required at the end of the process; two examiners are usual one of whom must be external to the organisation. The viva is used as an opportunity to clarify any grey areas, gives you a chance to defend your thesis (helping to ensure that the work is your own), and ensures that you are worthy of a doctorate. If the examiners are satisfied with the work then an award is made either outright or subject to revisions. I defended my thesis in November 2015 and was awarded my PhD subjected to revisions. I was officially awarded my PhD in June 2016.

What about the experience?

So what is it like studying for a PhD? An excerpt from one of my early journal entries sums up my early thoughts:

> *"I feel excited, exhilarated, slightly overwhelmed, privileged, enthused, 'full to bursting with ideas', brain scrambling, in awe of others, uncertain, unsure, wanting to feel grounded, difficulty in allowing the project to 'unveil'/reveal itself…."*(Journal entry number 2)

To start with I was anxious and excited…anxious that I didn't know how to move forward, how to narrow down my ideas and determine exactly what it was I was interested in but also excited by the freedom and possibility of the process. Initially I felt out of control; in all my previous experiences of study I had followed strict guidelines, worked to definite deadlines and in so doing had not experienced any real measure of intellectual freedom. In making the decision to study in PhD mode I felt to some extent that I had thrown everything I knew and understood out of the window!

My experience nonetheless was an overwhelmingly positive one; I felt consistently engaged and passionate about my learning. I enjoyed the sense of discovery inherent in the process, was hungry for new knowledge, liked being challenged by new ideas and emerging thoughts and thrived as I engaged in dialogue with my supervisory team and with significant others who I met on the journey.

I enjoyed the creativity and spontaneity of the process; of finding myself somewhere unexpected and realising I was just where I needed to be. From the outset my learning experience was enabled by a strong supervisory relationship which allowed me to develop and grow as a researcher, and to achieve my aims.

There were challenges of course but none that I didn't learn to overcome. Feeling uncertain and never having a sense of closure was really challenging at the outset. Nothing ever felt finished, instead I had reams and reams of 'unfinished business'; a search strategy to write up, a rationale to explain, notes about a theoretical perspective to make, a reference list to peruse, an interesting article to read, a conference abstract to write, a supervisory record to fill out, a timeline to adjust, a partially written chapter to work on, an interview to transcribe. It was like having lots and lots of different windows open on a computer each interesting, informing and essential to the bigger picture but none of which I could close and in doing so feel a sense of achievement. It took a while to get used to this way of working and to understand that a PhD is a dynamic and evolving project. I became skilled at multi-tasking and learnt to read, write and think as an almost continuous process; coming to the end of the process all the windows eventually found their place and the project slotted together as a unique whole.

What did I learn?

I learnt that the whole I had created would never be completely finished or complete; it could always be explored further, another layer added by another reader, a further interpretation found and another question identified. A PhD I discovered was a beginning point, a learning journey, a way of thinking and working which would forever evolve and move forward and as such a thesis could not be a solid object put in a cupboard and admired but a living entity which could, if properly tended, continue to grow.

How should you approach your doctoral studies?

- Find the right person and team to work with – you need to be enabled and guided
- Negotiate protected time to work on your thesis
- Ask lots of questions – be inquisitive
- Read anything and everything – then decide what is useful, informative
- Visit art galleries and photography exhibitions and museum's – you never know what might inform you
- Take time out and talk about something else – family and friends will appreciate another topic of conversation

- Go for long walks – to get rid of cobwebs and help you think
- Listen to lectures on podcasts whilst walking if that works for you
- Use a Dictaphone to record your supervisory meetings – nobody can write notes quickly enough when their Professor suddenly gets an idea!
- If you are working full time at a university plan out study leave at the beginning of the year ensuring your time is protected
- Present regularly (in-house, at seminar days, at conferences) to make sure you are confident about expressing your ideas and that you will be able to defend your thesis at the end of the process
- Enjoy the process – if you're not enjoying it then what is the point?

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Why study for a PhD?

How

About what

Where and with whom

For how long

Funding