Motivations for Doing a PhD

In: Getting Your PhD

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Motivations for Doing a PhD

What this Chapter Includes:

- The main motivations for doing a PhD
- Discussion of how topics are chosen
- A PhD as career development
- The personal agenda
- Tips on key questions to ask before applying

From our perusal of other ‘how to’ guides written for PhD students we have noted that not many pay attention to the initial motivations for doing a PhD. The reasons behind and pathways to considering and taking on board this endeavour are ultimately what will get you through the difficult patches. Here we explore some of the varied reasons why a PhD becomes a likely option and how subject topics are chosen. We asked the contributors to this book the following questions, which we urge you to ask yourself:

- What were your motivations for doing a PhD?
- How and why did you choose your topic?

We hope that you will take time to reflect on these questions and explore your own motivations for taking on a significant commitment that will put you in the privileged category of approximately 2% of the population who have achieved the highest qualification in the British education system.

So why bother?

Our contributors have provided us with the evidence to suggest there are five core reasons that motivate a PhD: career development; lack of job satisfaction; research as active engagement in politics; a personal agenda; and (sometimes) drifting into the challenge. These different motivating factors will be described through the narratives of the contributors.

Career development

One of the central motivating factors in taking on a PhD is to enhance career progression and development in

existing and new occupations. Career development can be enhanced in several ways. For instance, you can already be in a job and consider this higher qualification as the route to quicker promotion, or specialisation. Or you could have reached a natural point in your career where progression to the next level would be smoother with a higher qualification. Sallyann Halliday describes how her desire to develop more critical skills through a concentrated period of research was identified as beneficial to her day job as a contract researcher:

> I felt that I had hit a 'turning point' in the work I was currently involved in as a contract researcher. For me, the motivation for doing a PhD was about being able to explore a topic I was really interested in through in-depth study, to widen my knowledge and develop different skills. I wanted to gain skills in critical thought and writing. Doing a PhD was the path I felt I should take and more importantly one I felt that I needed to go down to develop and progress further in my career (or possibly lead to a change in career focus). I saw it as a form of both personal and professional development.

For others, the desire to 'be an academic' meant that the PhD was an inevitable step into becoming a lecturer. Joseph Burridge speaks of how his desire to work in the university setting was the motivation for continually pursuing funding for a PhD:

> From the age of about fifteen I was sure that I wanted to pursue a career in academia, largely because of my love of reading and learning. A PhD was always going to be on the agenda, since it is no longer realistic to hope to begin such a career without one. I attempted to get funding immediately after finishing my first degree, but was unsuccessful and had to self-fund a masters degree as a means to demonstrate my seriousness for the next round of funding competitions. Fortunately it seemed to work and I was successful the second time around!

Self-funding a one-year postgraduate course is a popular method of finding out whether further study is the right route. Although this is a financial cost, part-time study is always an option before making a big life change by fully committing to a PhD. However, it is not always the case that a PhD 'was on the cards' in a person's life pathway. Sometimes wider dissatisfaction or a desire for another challenge can prompt enrolment onto a PhD programme.

Lack of job satisfaction

While taking on board a PhD can be born out of developing a career path, at the same time a lack of job satisfaction in current employment can be a motivating factor to seek an alternative enterprise. Melanie Shearn describes how dissatisfaction in her employment, coupled with some wider life goals, naturally led her

to consider a PhD:

> I had worked in a number of different jobs in related industries and found that I lacked job satisfaction. I wanted to do something that made, in my view, a contribution to society. But so did other people and competition for these jobs was fierce. It seemed to me that the only way to make up for a lack of particular life experiences was to have substantive knowledge and expertise of a topic area. I also really enjoyed querying things and providing answers or direction. I thought that a PhD could combine my substantive interests with research skills.

BOX 1.1 Don't enter into a PhD lightly

Make sure you understand the commitment, and try to determine whether you need the PhD to fulfil your career objectives. Also, be honest with yourself – are you *really* interested in the subject? Do you *really* have a burning curiosity to find out the answers to your questions? [Martin Smith]

Personal agenda

Often it is personal motivations that inspire people to investigate a specific topic or gives them the desire to take on the job of giving voice to marginalised groups, or in some way they want to set the record straight against tides of stereotypes and misinformation that can spuriously inform our understanding of the world. Personal insights or close contact with certain groups, lifestyles or experiences are familiar reasons for pursuing further studies in the social sciences and humanities. Below, Sonali Shah reflects on how her own experiences as an Asian woman living with a physical impairment led her to study for a PhD:

> I applied for a journalism course, passed the entrance exam and was also given a bursary. However, I was not given a place because the employers thought that my disability would prevent me from achieving and coping with the work required. This was seen as a significant turning point in my future professional orientation. It was this and previous experiences of disability discrimination, coupled with the Asian achievement-oriented culture within which I was brought up, that influenced my decision to pursue academic research to investigate what makes a disabled high-flyer.

No doubt you will meet people with interesting personal connections to their PhD topic and fieldwork site. This can often be an inspirational motivation to take the PhD forward and manage those difficult barriers to getting the job done.

Research as politics

Closely tied to personal experiences, political principles and everyday politics that influence policy and shape our lives, as well as world events, can also be triggers for pursuing further studies. Joseph Burridge describes how his wider interest in political controversies shaped his motivations and ideas for a PhD:

> I had always been interested in controversy and argumentation since it seems to me that they are fairly fundamental to the way in which we relate to one another as human beings socially and politically. I had planned to undertake a more extensive and detailed analysis of the political debate over the repeal of Section 28 – a piece of legislation which has now been repealed but is usually described as having banned the 'promotion of homosexuality' – which had been the topic of my masters thesis. However, as I was finishing the thesis, the events of 11th September 2001 took place, and the aftermath seemed to be a location in which I could pursue some similar themes to those that had interested me about Section 28.

PhDs are not isolated events that exist between the individual, the supervisor and the research subjects. Real life events, political change and the localised and globalised setting of the topic have bearing on motivations as well as the trajectory of the content of the research.

Drifting In

The final factor is not as consciously driven as some of the above reasons for pursuing PhD study. Several contributors described how they drifted into a PhD after undergraduate or postgraduate studies. This notion of drift is not necessarily something we would discourage, as, after all, none of us knows what opportunities are around the corner and we cannot all have clearly thought-out plans from the start. Yet we would add a cautionary tale to those scenarios that lead to individuals drifting into a PhD without giving very careful consideration to the entity that is being taken on. Martin Smith spent several years working towards his doctorate but in the end discontinued his studies as the need to earn cash took over. Martin remarks below on the dangers of drift:

> I somewhat drifted into doing a PhD, in a subject area that was of interest to me, but was

> not my academic passion. I was unprepared for the challenge and commitment I needed to make in the years to come, and feel now that I should have taken a masters course to see whether higher level research and study was for me.

The reality is that personal circumstances are a clear indicator as to whether a PhD is viable in terms of a drop in earnings, the prospects of the market place after completion and the opportunities that are available. Bill Armer, an older student who returned to education late, describes how his options after his undergraduate degree were fairly limited, and hence the 'drift' into further study:

> As a late returner to education, I had no clear motivation when I first undertook my BA degree. Finding myself unemployed and potentially unemployable, I really drifted into academia as an honourable alternative to the dole.

Ultimately the motivations for undertaking a PhD span the spectrum of the personal and the political, motivated by the subject or a specific project, influenced by a role model or attracted by the department, institution or even the student lifestyle! Often, career plans are somewhere in the complexities of motivations as students wrestle with the question 'Where will having a PhD get me?'

Choosing the topic (or does the topic choose you?)

An intriguing aspect of doing a PhD is the plethora of topics that people choose. One of the attractive aspects of doctoral studies is the freedom of topic and area of study, as long as the end product fulfils the criteria of originality and a contribution to knowledge. Critics suggest a change is taking place in the types of PhDs that are funded as topics are influenced by the interests of research councils, who determine which areas should receive priority funding. How people select their research topics could take the length of this book alone, as there are a myriad of reasons that involve the personal and the political as well as the rather ordinary and mundane.

Strategies of deduction

The desire to do a PhD can sometimes precede the topic of interest. It is not always the case that the topic of interest is the driving force behind wanting to study for at least three years. There can be other strategies of deduction that provide a clear direction in terms of discipline and topic. Melanie Shearn decided that a PhD was what she wanted to do before the topic was obvious:

> I drew up lists of all the things I was passionate about in the world, as well as some of the things I wanted to do in my life. I merged these and came up with a topic on which I based a research funding proposal.

Similarly, it can be the case that you are clear about the general area in which you want to study, but are not quite sure about the actual topic or how to develop a succinct research idea and set of questions. Often this entanglement can be ironed out with some ‘thinking’ sessions with your supervisor. Before starting the PhD, Sharon Elley had worked as a youth worker and was particularly interested in exploring young people's experiences of relationships but was not quite sure which angle to take. Finding a gap in the literature was a key factor. Finally, having some contact with professionals that designed and implemented the sex education programme, it was decided that this is where the gap in knowledge lay and a feasible study was designed.

Job interest

Just as a desire for career progression or career change can motivate a PhD, developments, knowledge and areas of interest you are exposed to in the work setting can be the inspirational factor for your choice of topic. Richard Heslop had been a policeman for twenty years before deciding to turn a work-based topic into a research question:

> My original plan was to apply to research for a PhD in the field of politics and policing. However, around that time my career took a change of direction and I was posted into the Force Training Department. Working as a trainer was perhaps the most rewarding role I had ever had in the police service and it sparked a strong academic interest in adult education.

The change in Richard's day job (police work) was significant as it meant that instead of a traditional PhD, a professional doctorate in education (Ed.D) was more appropriate. Relationships with employers and the work-base settings are increasingly important if studying for a PhD part-time whilst still working. You may be directly relating your PhD questions to the work setting, using contacts at work as gatekeepers or work-based resources to access key informants and respondents.

Politics and passion

Invariably you will find that people who are studying or have achieved a PhD are passionate about their topic. If they are not when they start out, they often become emphatic defenders of their territory by the end, after living, sleeping and breathing the stuff for three years (or more!). Passion for a topic and the politics that often surround the topic, are strong motivating forces for embarking on knowledge production. Teela Sanders chose to study the female sex industry after directly working with sex workers as a welfare professional and

experiencing disillusionment with an academic literature that did not appear to reflect the reality of some aspects of the sex industry. JK Tina Basi demonstrates below how her own personal history was related to her desire to pursue a certain line of inquiry about a specific group of people:

> My motivation to do the PhD was born out of a desire to produce more knowledge about Indian women. I was tired of always being told how Indian girls should be and the things that they should not be doing. I wanted to find out for myself what women in India were up to. However, I knew that to make it credible I couldn't just ‘hang out’ in India; I had to tie my curiosity in with an ongoing dialogue. Thus a feminist research project on Indian women's identities was born.

Our passion for the topics we choose is not always clear cut from the start but is vaguely in the background of a number of activities we undertake. It can be at the point of thinking about a significant piece of work such as a PhD that these ideas can become solidified. Bill Armer, who had skirted around the topic of disability and eugenics for several years, describes this natural process of arriving at a topic:

> At the heart of my PhD research topic was the interplay between eugenics and genetics, which was sheer self-indulgence. Since childhood in the 1950s, when the topic was fresh in the societal memory, I have been both repelled and fascinated by the horrors of Nazi Germany. I have, it seems forever, been vaguely aware of the dangers of eugenics. I never intended to develop an academic interest here, but looking back it was almost inevitable that I would.

There are often underlining reasons, whether personal, political or a combination of both, that usually motivate people to want to know more. While this is not something that can be measured in an interview, or can be assessed through a research proposal, the desire to want to study this very narrow and specialised area for at least three years has to be something you are very clear about. Martin Smith ended up with a research topic that he was only mildly interested in, and he recounts below how this was not enough to keep him motivated when faced with dilemmas:

> My choice of topic was not founded on having a deep interest in any particular topic, which in hindsight I see as a mistake. At the end of the day, the drive to complete the PhD has to come from oneself. It's hard to work in the library until late at night on a topic you don't really enjoy when there's always the alternative of the College bar.

Potentially the trickiest part of the PhD is taking the plunge and saying ‘yes’ this is something I want to do and

feel passionate enough about to make significant sacrifices. PhDs do mean making changes in your personal, social and work life and therefore those initial decisions should be carefully considered.

BOX 1.2 Are you passionate about your subject?

Ask yourself:

- Does your interest in the area relate closely to your personal experiences, political viewpoint or professional concerns?
- Do you hold opinions or motives that shape how you are looking at the issue in a particular way?
- What are the implications for your research questions?
- Do your interests and experiences lead you to ask specific questions?
- What alternative questions can be asked?

Key Points to Remember

- There are no correct reasons for doing a PhD but think carefully about ‘why’.
- If career development is the main motivation, assess what the PhD will give you.
- Personal or political motivations are common but these must be balanced by genuine academic interest.
- Passion for your subject is an important ingredient for success and stamina – make sure you have this at the start.

SUGGESTED READING AND RESOURCES

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