

My exciting PhD journey!

This blog is about my PhD journey at Glasgow Caledonian University!

My first year PhD regrets!

Posted on November 25, 2010 by [elenaphd](#)

I have just submitted my PhD transfer report to my supervisors. What a relief! I was dreaming about this day for weeks, and am so glad it has finally arrived. Although I really hated the process of writing this wretched report to begin with, by the end of it I actually acquired taste for it, and saw the benefits. This important milestone in my PhD life made me reflect on my year of doctoral studies, and the things that I should have done, or have done better! So I thought I would write down some of my thoughts that might be useful for all those who have just started their PhD, and want to avoid disappointment.

- **Start with...passion.** When you start working on your project, the topic that you choose may be too broad, and needs narrowing down. Well, make sure that you narrow it down to something that YOU want to do for 3-4 years, not something that your supervisors or advisors want but something that YOU are really passionate about. My topic was too vague to begin with, and it took me ages to find the right focus but now I am quite happy that I am working on a research project that will contribute to the existing knowledge but at the same time can make a difference to policy and practice! The only disappointment is that it took me too long to focus the topic.
- **Read more around the topic.** The first year of your PhD is possibly the only time when you can really plunge yourself into the world of reading. If you are lucky, you can make sense of it all soon... before submission of your first report. I regret that I was not systematic with my reading... bits and pieces here and there. Well, this probably reflects what a disorganised person I am! But I am learning...slowly. So do be systematic! The books that I found really useful are [Doing a literature search](#) and [Doing a literature review](#) by Chris Hart. They provide a pretty good picture of how you should go about your reading and writing in the initial stages of your PhD. Record everything you read and save references. There are a number of great web-based tools available out there. I personally use [Zotero](#) for organising research papers, and [Delicious](#) for bookmarking useful websites, blogs etc. Choose whatever suits you! But take my advice, start using them from the very beginning, and it will save you loads of time later on.
- **Make a better use of your supervisors.** One of my supervisors always says: We are not supervisors, we are collaborators on your project! Only now I probably understand the full meaning of these words. Don't simply sit and wait for your supervisors to tell you what to do (that's what I did at the beginning). When working on collaborative projects, people challenge each other, share ideas, and create solutions to the existing problems TOGETHER. Supervisors are members of your team! I agree, your situation might be different, and some supervisors have a very traditional Master-Apprentice approach. But still, the sooner you take the ownership of your project, the better! Remember, in 5-6 months you will become an expert in your field!
- **Establish 'love' relationship with theory** early on! What is the theory underpinning your study? I've been struggling with this bit for a year! It's not relevant to all social science studies since some of them adopt a grounded theory approach. But even to arrive at the conclusion that the existing theories don't meet the needs of your study, you need to know them first. I thought I hated theories until I started understanding them. It's actually really cool when you realise that there is enough brain in your head to see the shortcoming of some theory, criticise it and try to find an alternative approach.
- **Learn to manage yourself!** Still struggling with this bit... PhD is the time when you learn so much about yourself, the ways you prefer to work, and what motivates you to work. I am interviewing PhD students just now, and a number of them mentioned that a key to success in your PhD is DISCIPLINE! Can't but agree with

that. There is always a temptation to do some other things rather than concentrate on writing your thesis chapter. Learn to set the priorities! [Priority matrix by Steven Covey](#) might be helpful to you in this.



Well, enough regrets for one PhD year, I guess... But I think we should remember that PhD is a learning process, and we are allowed to make mistakes. The main thing is to reflect on your experience and try to improve it.



What are your PhD regrets?



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**About elenaphd**

I am a PhD fellow at Glasgow Caledonian University, Scotland. In my research project I am looking at employability of social science doctoral researchers.

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28 Responses to *My first year PhD regrets!*

**karthik says:**

November 25, 2010 at 4:49 pm

Hey, Congrats 😊



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**elenaphd says:**

November 25, 2010 at 5:50 pm

Thanks a lot, Karthik! Hope your PhD is going well!?



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**Dane says:**

November 25, 2010 at 5:20 pm

Hey Elena, I agree with your comments. I especially wished I have read even more in the first year, now it always slips away. But like always we should reflect on the past only to think about the present and the future. Like they say in the Lord of the Rings: “All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us” 😊 Congrats for submitting the transfer report



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**elenaphd says:**

November 25, 2010 at 5:54 pm

Thanks a lot, Dane! Like Tolkien's quote! I am so glad that I have such a great PhD peer who always has a phrase of wisdom at hand:)



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**Sara says:**

November 25, 2010 at 6:33 pm

It's all so true but 2 years of my PhD have passed and I still have similar regrets – I talk the talk but can't seem to put the plans into action! Still, I am muddling through and learning a lot about myself in the process. You never know I might even have a thesis finished one day.



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elenaphd says:

November 25, 2010 at 6:52 pm

Dear Sara! Welcome to the club!:) It's always easier to talk about something than do it. I try different things to organise myself better from online calendars to setting strict deadlines. That's actually one thing that really works for me. Ask your supervisors to set strict deadlines for you for the remainder of your PhD studies to make sure your complete on time. Working under pressure helps me to be more productive! You still have a lot of time. One of my PhD advisors once mentioned a guy who completed a thesis within 15 months. You can do it!

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Ahmad says:

November 26, 2010 at 12:48 am

I arrived here while i was researching about blogs & Ph.D.. i was thinking of starting a a blog as international student doing his Ph.D. i was thinking of informal blog...but i have not made my mind yet.

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elenaphd says:

November 26, 2010 at 12:54 am

Hi, Ahmad! Sure, go for it! It's always useful to reflect on your experience, and you can also help other international PhD students to better understand the PhD process, and adapt to an educational system! I am sure it will be very interesting! Good luck, and give me a shout if you need any help.

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My PhD says:

November 28, 2010 at 1:46 pm

hi elenaphd, i just opened my micro blog at <http://myphd.posterous.com/> thanks for your inspiration..

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elenaphd says:

December 3, 2010 at 5:26 pm

Hi, so glad for you! Look forward to your blog posts! Good luck!

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Gul says:

November 26, 2010 at 6:16 pm

hi elenaphd i am Gul llm student i am studying from university of london but i am his international programm i am also interested in phD but in law subjects and want to get admission in uk do you know any good universities where i could get an admission ?

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elenaphd says:

November 26, 2010 at 6:47 pm

Hi, Gul! Glad to hear that you are going to do a PhD. It's the best learning experience that I've ever had in my life. Not sure about Law schools but you can check some ranking here <http://www.llm-guide.com/most-popular/uk-ireland>. Good luck!

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Jeffrey Keefer says:

December 31, 2010 at 3:12 am

Just stumbled across your work, and can relate in many ways to your sentiments. Great that you are sharing this. Alas, if you regret all this after only one year, then perhaps you are too hard on yourself!

So, with all this said, what is this topic about which you are so passionate, and what theory are you hoping to use?

Jeffrey

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elenaphd says:

January 21, 2011 at 1:38 pm

Hi, Jeffrey!

So sorry, just realised that I still have not replied to you. Thanks a lot for your comments. In my research I am looking at the process of developing employability skills by doctoral researchers in social sciences. There is a lot of attention being paid to the formal approach in this area so I am trying to look more deeply into non-formal and workplaces learning activities that PhD students are involved in which I believe have a greater impact on development of employability skills. I am using various learning theories. The central theoretical framework for my study is an Activity theory. How about you? What does your research focus on?

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Jeffrey Keefer says:

January 23, 2011 at 1:51 pm

What an interesting area of study!

When you speak of “developing employability skills by doctoral researchers in social sciences” are you referring to research-focused degrees, or professional doctorates?

Jeffrey

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elenaphd says:

January 27, 2011 at 1:44 pm

I am looking at full-time PhD students enrolled on traditional PhD programmes (3 years, full-time research).

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Mahesh Sharma says:

March 21, 2011 at 8:39 am

your story is so inspiring for research scholars like me. i am even a slower learner. My writing skills are very poor. can u help me out mentioning some names of the books which i should consult to improve my writing skills

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elenaphd says:

May 18, 2011 at 1:02 am

Dear Mahesh! So sorry for delay. Writing skills are smth that you master all life I guess. Are you using Delicious bookmarking. Here is a link to my collection of bookmarks on academic writing <http://www.delicious.com/elena.golovushkina/writing>. Hope you will find smth useful there! Good luck with your PhD!

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Zed says:

May 3, 2011 at 3:43 pm

I'm in my first year. Your reflections contain some good advice. Seven months in and feeling really lost at the moment.

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elenaphd says:

May 18, 2011 at 1:00 am

Dear Zed! Sorry for delay! Feeling lost...sounds familiar. No worries...you are not alone! Are you on Twitter at all? there are some interesting discussions going on there every Wed at 7.30 at #phdchat. Lots of useful advice and peer support. Join in! And chin up! Take it as a learning experience whatever happens on your PhD journey! Good luck!

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Adnan says:

June 9, 2011 at 10:27 pm

Hi,

Thanks GOD, I got something at least to define my current state. You right, its my 4th month of PhD and I was in a situation like "What the hell going on :P" . In fact assuming my previous knowledge is just multiple with zero. Now after reading your article, again my energy level is up.

*1-2 years PhD students, please do share your experience .

Cheers

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theshanshuprophecy says:

January 15, 2012 at 1:00 pm

Hi

I stumbled onto your blog tonight after a google search and just wanted to say that you list is great but – perhaps you should consider thinking of it as ‘things I learned in my 1st year’ rather than regret – although you are a year further in now, I would love to hear your list from 2nd year or, are you no longer posting?

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nagulmeera says:

February 18, 2012 at 7:52 pm

HI my name is nagul.i need a statement of purpose for my phd in information systems,i have completed my MCA in (2011). i dnt know how to wright the this letter will you plz help me for this.after submitting this sop letter,they will decide and sent a mail about my admission.is it compulsory a student(fresher)must have a subject knowledge?or not.plz guys reply for this query.even i dnt have that much of knowledge about my subjects but my aim is to do phd.if there is any chance to learn in phd deeply about my subjects.my area of interest in databases.

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BeingmrsdrD says:

March 10, 2012 at 9:50 pm

So glad I found your blog! I'm also on the PhD journey (and blog about it) and relate to many of the points you raised here. All the best with your studies

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Clement says:

July 12, 2012 at 5:42 pm

any tips on how to narrow your research topic down? I'm really struggling with defining my thesis at the moment, and I'm approaching the end of the first year.

Thanks

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ahmed says:

July 24, 2012 at 4:21 pm

please i need help how to do plan for the first year PhD in engineering

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Vicky says:

November 7, 2012 at 12:06 am

Tell us about your transfer viva? Highs Lows Hints & Tips would really help. I've got mine next week!

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elenaphd says:

November 12, 2012 at 11:05 am

Hi, Vicky! Sorry for delay, having a mad time trying to finish my thesis. I actually did not have a transfer viva but I had a transfer report. Basically an extended research proposal that reflected all the stages of my thesis writing. I submitted it after one year when I had a clearer idea of the thesis content and structure. Hope the viva went well



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My exciting PhD journey!

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