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# Researching the journey of a lifetime

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# Researching the journey of a lifetime

## **Abstract**

This newspaper article describes factors prospective higher degree research students should consider when deciding whether or not to commence PhD studies, where and with whom. The conceptual framework underpinning the advice provided is that of occupational socialization as applied to the development of research roles. The factors identified are those that have been demonstrated to enable, impede and accelerate acquisition of productive and engaged research roles.

## **Keywords**

researching, journey, lifetime

## **Disciplines**

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## Postgrad research - it's a journey

### Anne Cusick

So you are smart, thrive on intellectual challenge, have a good academic record and perhaps relevant practice experience; and you're thinking of doing a research doctoral degree. Suddenly you can see yourself hanging that framed certificate on the wall. You can hear the call centre operator asking for Mr or Ms and can picture yourself replying, “it's Dr actually”... Ah, happy thoughts.

Such wishful thinking comes to just about everyone on the brink of a research doctoral degree – aka Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). But if dreams are your main motivation – quit now. Thinking about the *destination* might get you started; but you need more than that to keep going.

Short of caring for loved ones, a research doctoral degree will probably be one of the biggest projects you will ever do in your life. According to the Australian Qualifications Framework, a research doctoral degree will “apply a substantial body of knowledge to research, investigate and develop new knowledge” using supervised independent study. In Australia this process takes the typical PhD student between three and four years full time. Double that if it is part time. Lengthen it some more if you take leave of absence for major life events.

So, deciding to do a PhD is as much a decision about the next few years of your life as it is about the topic you are going to investigate. To focus on one topic for 3 to 4 years, you need to get in-charge early and make the PhD part of your life, before the PhD makes you its life-support system.

PhDs are research training degrees. You learn along the way how to do independent original research and what it means to be a researcher. There are two sides to this. The functional side, where you learn advanced knowledge and specialised skills: what to investigate, when, how, where and with who. And the personal side; where learning is less about doing and knowing particular things and more about discovering and reflecting on what it means to be a researcher. By the time you graduate, good research training will have you develop both – a strong skill and knowledge portfolio, and a unique research identity.

So, how to get to graduation? Apart from working hard, four things will help ...

**ONE: Have good reasons.** Common ones are to:

- Make the world a better place;
- Help people;
- Copy the work-life style of real-life or fictional research role models;
- Fulfil expectations of 'significant others';
- Support organisations or causes;
- Maintain an employability edge;
- Get or keep employment in research-related careers;
- Keep-on studying, being intellectually challenged and creative because it's FUN.

**TWO: Have good personal support.** If family, friends, colleagues and sponsors understand your motivations, they will better support you. Talk over your institution, topic and supervisor choices with supporters. Their opinion matters. You will make sacrifices to study but so will they: doing without your time, energy and resources and even contributing their own. Keep them in touch with your progress. Even though they may not understand the technical details of your topic, share other things to keep common ground – visit the campus or send photos, invite them to presentations or events. You don't want to end up holding a PhD with no-one you care about around to hold you.

**THREE: Get research training that suits you and your topic.** What supervision, training and institutional support will you need? Institutions organise their research training differently. Choose the combination of institution + school/department + research group + supervisors that will suit you best. How? Start at the institution homepage getting to know everything about an institution's approach to your field and to research training; then work down to find a relevant supervisor. Or start at the bottom, finding supervisors you would like to work with and then go up web pages to see whether the institution's research training approach works for you.

Also look at services and infrastructure. All institutions have specialised research supervision, but what else is available? Is there project money, research seminars, study spaces, computers, technology training or support? Are there accommodation, welfare and career/employment services? Do you like the location or organisational culture? Always have a back-up plan in case you are rejected, because there are usually more applications than places – especially if you want a scholarship.

**FOUR: Keep connected and realistic.** It might feel like you are the only person doing a PhD, but there are a lot of you around. There are well over 100,000 people with PhDs in Australia according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. For the past couple of years Australian universities have graduated close to 7000 new PhDs annually, with many more than that starting their doctoral studies. So you are in good company. Anyone doing postgraduate research will have something in common with you. Make sure you connect with other postgraduates. Any journey is easier with fellow travellers.

If you plan to work post-PhD, stay in touch with the work-world by maintaining old connections, and building new ones. Post-PhD employment can be challenging if you hit the market cold or if old connections cool. If you have a good job and the PhD is related to it, see if you can take leave or work part-time rather than quit. If you don't have relevant employment, build connections: using university career and employability services, doing internships or work-integrated learning, getting

involved in industry events. Leverage your association with the university as much as you can before you graduate.

If you plan to work in traditional post-PhD roles in higher education or research, be realistic. Only a small minority of PhD graduates get work in these fields; many are only on contracts. For the thousands of PhD graduates each year, alternative employment paths in business, government, industry or community service are more common now. Employers may want specialised knowledge and skills from your study topic, but most want generic and transferrable skills that can be applied in a wide range of areas. Generic capabilities include: advanced project management, written, oral and multimedia communication skills, leadership, entrepreneurship, networking, teamwork, and use of information technology. More universities are offering embedded coursework options, professional development programs, simulation, or group activities to help research students develop generic capabilities.

The research higher degree journey is a long one, but with the right reasons, supporters, training, connections and a realistic approach to post-PhD careers, it can be one of the best journeys you will ever make.

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