

How not to get a PhD

Discover how to avoid failure in this extract from Estelle M. Phillips' and Derek S. Pugh's **How to get a Phd**

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We want now to examine some very well established ways of not getting a PhD. While most examples in this chapter are drawn from business studies, in our experience, these tried and tested ways of failing apply to all fields and have to be pondered continually by research students. You have to be clear what your position is on each of the seven ways of failing that we shall discuss if you are not to fall foul of the traps they offer. And as we shall see, just to have them pointed out to you is not enough to avoid them. Most offer real blandishments that have to be determinedly resisted.

Not wanting a PhD

The first method of not getting a PhD is not to want a PhD. This may seem very strange, considering that a student is likely to be 'starving in a garret', living on a studentship pittance, perhaps having given up a job in order to study, or relying on the earnings of a spouse to put them through the course. At the very least, you will be devoting a great deal of time and effort and energy to research. Surely, you might say, considering what I am giving up to the project, can there be any doubt that I really want a PhD?

Well, strangely enough, there can be. We think an analogy would help here. It is the case, isn't it, that none of us, research students and research supervisors, want to become millionaires? We should quite like it if someone gave us a million pounds and we didn't have to do anything for it, not even buy a lottery ticket - that would sound like a good idea. But we don't want to set out to become millionaires. Obviously we don't; otherwise we wouldn't be considering how to do research and get PhDs -we would be considering how to build a better mousetrap, how to play the property market, how to write a bestselling book. There are many ways of making a million pounds, but doing a PhD is not likely to be one of them.

Exactly the same phenomenon occurs in regard to PhDs. People think it would be a nice idea to do a PhD, they come with views of what they want to do and then they turn round and say: 'Please can I have a PhD for it?' And the answer is often 'No'. PhDs are given for a particular form of research activity and if you do not wish to carry out this form of work then you effectively do not want to do a PhD. It is precisely the same distinction as that between hoping to become a millionaire and setting out to make a million pounds.

Clearly the purpose of this book is to help you to set out to obtain a PhD; and for this you need a degree of single-mindedness, a willingness to discover what is realistically required, and a determination to carry it out. This is the sense in which you must want a PhD. And this 'wanting' is important in that it has to work very hard for you. For example, it has to carry you through occasions when what you are doing may seem very pointless or fruitless, or when you ask yourself the question 'Why have I got myself into this?' or 'Why am I inflicting this on my family?' You cannot expect with an activity as demanding as doing a PhD that the intrinsic satisfaction (such as the interest of doing the research, the enjoyment of discussing your subject with other like-minded researchers) will be sufficient on its own to carry you through. You must always have a clear eye on the extrinsic satisfactions (your commitment to the whole exercise of doing a PhD, its necessary place in your career progression, and so on); you must want to do it.

There are, unfortunately, many who turn up as beginning PhD students who do not want to do a PhD in this sense. Particularly vulnerable are those who are using the PhD process as a vehicle for a career change:

- Iris, a teacher for many years, developed an interest in a particular specialism (multi-ethnic curriculum development) and thought she would like to do research in order to establish herself in this new subject. She found that doing research was taking her farther and farther away from dealing with what she saw as the real issues of pupils in the classroom in favour of a measurement- orientated form of 'science' to which she was unsympathetic. She left.

- Jim was a journalist specializing in industrial issues. He wanted an academic career and started a PhD on a politically topical issue. He continued to write occasional newspaper articles to earn money as a student. After producing a series of articles as his inadequate research proposal, his supervisor told him he had to design a questionnaire. He did so and got a group of managers to complete it, but he never analysed it- he said that he didn't see the point. And, of course, there was no point -for him. He withdrew.

Not understanding the nature of a PhD by overestimating what is required

The words used to describe the outcome of a PhD project -'an original contribution to knowledge' -may sound rather grand, but we must remember that, the work for the degree is essentially a research training process and the term 'original contribution' has perforce to be interpreted quite narrowly. It does not mean an enormous breakthrough which has the subject rocking on its foundations, and research students who think that it does (even if only subconsciously or in a half-formed way) will find the process pretty debilitating.

Of course, if you are capable of a major contribution then go ahead and make it (there are still, for example, a few scientists who have an FRS but not a PhD) -but this is a strategy for getting an honorary degree, not for getting a PhD! For those not in that position- i.e. most of us -an original contribution can be rather limited in its scope and indeed should be: apply this theory in a different setting, evaluate the effects of raising the temperature, solve this puzzling oddity or review this little-known historical event.

We find that when we make this point, some social science students who have read Kuhn's (1970) work on 'paradigm shifts' in the history of natural science (science students have normally not heard of him) say rather indignantly: 'Oh, do you mean a PhD has to be just doing normal science?' And indeed we do mean that. Paradigm shifts are major changes in the explanatory schemes of the science, which happen only rarely when the inadequacies of the previous framework have become more and more limiting. Normal science is the ordinary research that goes on between major theoretical changes. It serves to elaborate the general explanatory paradigm used and to tease out difficulties and puzzles that are not yet sufficiently well explained. It is the basic useful activity of scientists and scholars, and PhD students should be pleased to make a contribution to it.

You can leave the paradigm shifts for after your PhD. And, empirically, that is indeed what happens. The theory of relativity (a classic example of a paradigm shift in relation to post-Newtonian physics) was not Einstein's PhD thesis (that was a sensible contribution to Brownian motion theory). Das Kapital was not Marx's PhD (that was on the theories of two little-known Greek philosophers). Of course, while doing their PhDs Einstein and Marx were undoubtedly preparing themselves for the great questionings that led to the big shifts, but they were also demonstrating their fully professional mastery of the established paradigms.

It is this professionalism that the PhD is about. To think it is more than that can be very debilitating. You can wait for a long time for a new paradigm to strike. Overestimating is a powerful way of not getting a PhD. Here are two classic cases:

- Bob insisted that it would not be 'real' research if he read up in books and journals what others had done on the problem that he wished to tackle; his thinking would be entirely shaped by what they had done and he would only be able to add something minor. He felt that his only chance of being really innovative was not to read anything further in the field (he had a bachelor's and a relevant master's degree in the subject) but to sit down and design an investigation into the problem he was proposing to research (concerned

with adult learning of skills), which he knew well from a practical point of view as an industrial trainer. This took quite a long time, as his knowledge of research methods was not that strong.

When he did present his proposal to Dr Bishop, his supervisor, she was not impressed. As this field was not her own particular speciality, Dr Bishop went to the library and looked up all the current year's issues of the relevant journals. In one of them she found a paper reporting a study on Bob's topic that (not surprisingly, since it was completed and published) was considerably better than Bob's attempt. She used this paper to support her argument that he would have to make a comprehensive search of relevant published material if he were to have a chance of designing an adequate study which would make a contribution. But Bob saw this as a negation of what he wanted to do and withdrew.

• While Phil was carrying out the fieldwork stage of his research into the motivation of managers, he became very involved with his subjects. He felt that it would be a betrayal if they were to get no benefit from his research because it was written up in a dull academic book that no one would read. Most research was like that, Phil maintained, and was therefore neglected by everyone except the next lot of researchers. What was needed was a research report that could really communicate. Why couldn't we have a PhD thesis that would read like a novel so that it would become accessible?

Phil took this idea very seriously. He wrote to a novelist whose works he admired for some suggestions on how to write his thesis. He took an extra year to write up the material, letting no one see anything on the way, on the grounds that you don't show a novel to anyone until it is completed. When he did finally present his complete thesis, his supervisor thought it was inadequate, unrigorous and indulgently subjective. Phil was asked to rewrite it, but he refused and thus did not get a PhD.

We hasten to emphasize that this example is not intended to deprecate writing research results for lay people, a very necessary activity that all researchers should take seriously. It is about overestimating what can be done with a PhD and therefore falling flat on your face. Nor does it mean that in writing for your academic peers you should neglect clear expression and interesting presentation.

Not understanding the nature of a PhD by underestimating what is required

Underestimating what is required is, we find, particularly a problem for those researching part-time and continuing in their jobs, and for those coming back to academic life after a long period in the 'real world', as they see it. It is basically the difficulty of understanding what is meant by 'research', since the word is used much more strictly in the academic than in the non-academic sphere. We shall discuss the nature of research activity in later in this book, but here we can just note that the lay person's view that 'research is finding out something you don't know' is not adequate: that most of the activities described as 'market research' or 'research for a TV programme' do not fulfil the criteria of research required for a PhD.

PhD research requires a contribution to the analysis and explanation of the topic, not just description. It requires an understanding that it is as important a part of the research process to fashion the questions properly as it is to develop interesting answers. It is an underestimation of what is required to accept a 'lay' formulation of either questions or answers -even if they somehow appear more 'relevant' -and it is a clear way of not getting a PhD. Here are two examples:

• Tom was a management consultant who decided to take a three-year sabbatical in order to do a PhD and thus enhance his marketability. He had noted in his job that the time horizons that managers used when making decisions affected the decisions made, and he decided to do his research on this topic, to explore ways of helping managers make better decisions. He took a typical consultant's approach, going round to a number of managers and talking to them about their decision-making problems. He wrote up some particular cases, some particular problems, and some suggestions for getting better decisions made.

After some months, a few of his clients with whom he had kept in touch and who knew of his new interest began to ask him for help and advice in improving decision-making in their firms. Tom felt that he helped them and therefore that his work was on the right lines. What he wanted to do was write up his knowledge and experience on managers' time horizons, present this as his PhD thesis, publish it as a book, and henceforth be an authority on this subject, thus obtaining more consulting opportunities.

It took until the end of his first year to convince Tom that, while his approach was a sensible career strategy in itself and his consulting opportunities would certainly improve if he published a book that was interesting and useful to managers, it was not a strategy for obtaining a PhD. His approach seriously underestimated what was required, and he was not doing research in the terms which are necessary for a PhD. When Tom accepted this, he decided that in that case a PhD was not worth doing anyway, and withdrew.

- Chris was a financial manager who thought that a research degree would be a good insurance should he wish in the future to become a management lecturer. He wanted to do his research on the financial control systems of his firm, about which he naturally knew a very great deal. He thought that it would be easy to do some research into a topic on which he was one of the experts, but he seriously underestimated the fact that research means finding good questions as well as good answers.

Chris was not able to formulate research questions very well himself; when his supervisor began suggesting a number of questions that he might investigate, he would take them up enthusiastically in discussion and give 'the answer' as he knew it to be. After treating a series of possible topics in this way, it became clear that he really did not have any need to do research since he knew all the answers anyway - at least at a level that satisfied him. After it was borne in on him that research requires actively challenging old explanations and finding new ones if necessary, his enthusiasm waned and he dropped out.

Not having a supervisor who knows what a PhD requires

If it is important for a student not to over- or underestimate the nature of a PhD, it is equally important to have a supervisor who does not do so. We shall be discussing issues of supervision in detail later, and so here we will just point out that: first, inadequate supervision is a major cause of not getting a PhD; and second, since the penalties to students of not succeeding are much greater than to their supervisors, in the end it is up to determined students to get the supervision they need and are entitled to.

- Sophia came to Britain on a government scholarship from a country that has little tradition of empirical research in her field. She was allocated to a supervisor who had good practical experience but who had not in fact done any research himself. She worked away by herself, with occasional comments from him that he thought a particular section very interesting. But he had badly underestimated the nature of a PhD. When she submitted her thesis the external examiner said that, in his opinion, it was so completely inadequate that there was no point in having the oral examination or in allowing a resubmission. She returned to her country sadder, if not wiser.

- Professor Shepherd is a supervisor very few of whose students finish their PhDs. This is surprising, because he is a well known academic in his field, has a lively intelligence and an outgoing personality - which is why he continues to attract students to supervise. But Professor Shepherd believes in treating research students as adults, as he puts it - forgetting that students are babes, in research terms! He believes that it is the supervisor's job to challenge his students, to shake them up mentally, to bombard them with new ideas. He goes on doing this throughout the duration of the research, even when more convergence, more limitations are required to complete the study. Because of this overestimation, many students find they have taken on too large a project, which they do not see becoming more focused. They get disheartened and drop out.

Losing contact with your supervisor

As we said above, the penalties of failure are greater for the student than for the supervisor. The relationship is not one of equality, so the student has to work harder to keep in touch with the supervisor than the other way around. The nature of the PhD process requires continual input from the supervisor if the student is to learn the craft of research and how to apply it to the particular topic under study. The details of managing this interaction fruitfully on both sides are covered later in this book. Here we will just illustrate the inevitably catastrophic effect which results if contact is lost.

- Tony got bogged down 18 months into his project. After a long session with his supervisor he decided that he wanted to change direction. His supervisor said that it was impossible to do so at this stage and he should carry on -even though it was now clear that more work would be required than originally envisaged, with a weaker outcome anyway. Tony did not agree and tried to persuade his supervisor to allow greater modifications. His supervisor explained that this was not sensible within the available timescale, and pressed him to carry on with the original design. They saw each other less and less because Tony felt that they were talking at cross-purposes. After four months they ceased to have any meetings; after six months Tony was observed rushing into a lecture room to avoid his supervisor whom he saw coming towards him along the corridor. He never submitted his thesis.

- David's supervisor, Professor Dickinson, was one of the leading academics in Britain in her field. She died tragically when David was at the end of his second year. His supervision was taken over by an experienced researcher whose range of concerns was different and who had only a general interest in David's topic.

David did not think it necessary to tell his new supervisor in any detail what he was doing, having it clear in his mind that Professor Dickinson would have given her approval. He thus worked without supervision for a further 18 months. When he came to submit his thesis the examiners felt that he had suffered from lack of supervision, which in the circumstances should be taken into account, but that they could award him only an MPhil, not a PhD. He appealed, but in due course the university confirmed the decision.

David's enforced change of supervisor was due to a particularly tragic event. Supervisors leave for happier reasons too, and often it is necessary to be handed on to another supervisor. In these circumstances it is particularly incumbent on the student to make good contact with the new supervisor, whose knowledge and skills are a crucial input to getting a PhD.

Not having a thesis

Words develop in meaning, and the word 'thesis' is nowadays commonly used to refer to the project report of the research undertaken for the PhD. Thus the regulations of your university may say that your thesis may be not more than a certain number of words in length, that it must be presented in black/blue/red binding, and so on. (Incidentally, these regulations differ for different institutions and they also change over time, so it is important for you to check those which apply to you.)

But there is an earlier use of the word 'thesis' that is very important to the task of obtaining a PhD. A thesis in this sense is something that you wish to argue, a position that you wish to maintain (the word 'thesis' derives from the Greek for 'place'). For example, the Reformation began when Martin Luther nailed a list of 95 theses to the door of Wittenberg church -statements of his beliefs, which he wished to maintain against the Roman Church of that time. C. P. Snow propounded the thesis that British intellectuals inhabit two separate cultures-literary and scientific - which hardly overlap. It is our thesis that it is crucial for students wanting to obtain a PhD that they understand fully the objectives of the exercise and the nature of the processes involved, which is why we have written this book.

Your PhD must have a thesis in this sense. It must argue a position. At the minimum this means that the study must have a 'story line', a coherent thrust which pushes along an argument, an explanation, a systematic set of inferences derived from new data or new ways of viewing current data. Often, when trying to come to grips with the tough-minded pruning of material that this involves, you will feel that you

are losing useful data, or important points. But relevance to the argument is the stern criterion. Your thesis has to organize data to increase the richness of your work, and focus argument to increase its cogency. It is not enough for your thesis report to be 'a short trot with a cultured mind'.

It may be that the thesis you are arguing has been decomposed into a number of 'hypo-theses' (usually pronounced hypotheses) each of which will be tested for its adequacy. In this case you must relate them to each other to maintain the general thrust of your argument. If you are not working in the hypothesis-testing mode you must still ensure that your discussions add up to a coherent argument. This is how the adequacy of your contribution is judged.

As with all the other ways of not getting a PhD, this is easier to say than to do, particularly if you do not have good guidance in the early stages of your research, when the temptation to spread yourself too widely and too thinly is greatest.

- Harry started out to study factors affecting industrial marketing strategies. This is a large field and he was able to tackle the issues only rather superficially. Some of the chapters in his thesis report made some good points, others were rather poor, but none of the aspects was at all related to the others in a cumulative way. The examiners said that his thesis 'did not add up to anything' and rejected it.

- Graham was the administrator of a voluntary organization. He registered for a PhD because he felt that not enough was known about how to manage such organizations; more research was needed to make administrators in this field more professional. He spent his first year reading a great deal about administration and thinking how the ideas could be applied to help administrators in voluntary organizations. When he was asked how his research could help them, he said that he wanted to write a textbook describing good administrative practices. There then followed a long period of trying to get through to him that without a thesis his work would not earn a PhD, though it might well be a useful thing to do in itself. In the end he reluctantly accepted this.

We must emphasize that it is not the notion of a textbook per se that makes it inadequate for a PhD but the lack of a thesis. A textbook which incorporated a well argued, justified thesis -for example, that accepted views are inadequate when the data are critically re-examined, or that the field can be reinterpreted fruitfully in the light of a new theory -would be very acceptable.

Taking a new job before finishing

Doing a PhD is an intellectually demanding enterprise, and this is true at all stages of the work. It is especially true of the final stage of writing up. Most students radically underestimate the amount of time and effort that this stage will require. They somehow think that having surveyed the field, designed the study, collected and analysed the data, it is downhill from then on to the presentation of the thesis. It is not so. Writing up demands the most concentrated effort of the whole process.

There are a number of reasons for this. The first is emotional: it is difficult to avoid feeling that this is a chore, after the 'real' work has been done. There are always ambivalent feelings about the study itself and a barely suppressed desire to run away from it all, now that the data are actually there for others to see. The second reason is intellectual: unless you are extremely lucky and everything turns out exactly as planned, there will at this stage be quite a lot of adjustment to be done in your argument, in your interpretation, in your presentation, to put the best face on the material you have available. This is an extremely demanding test of professional competence, and it is in fact at this stage that you have really to demonstrate that you are worth a PhD.

There is a third reason concerned with limitations in writing skill and experience. Few students have written anything as long as a PhD thesis before, and to complete it requires a considerable effort.

For all these reasons, writing up is not the time to take a new job. Apart from the physical dislocation, which makes intellectual work difficult and therefore easily postponed, a new job is likely to require you to concentrate your attention on a new range of issues, which, particularly if they are academic ones, will inevitably get in the way of writing up, through intellectual fatigue.

The only job it is possible to do, perhaps one which you are doing already or have done before, is one which allows you to operate in 'intellectual overdrive'. Taking a new job before finishing is a way of not getting a PhD. At the very least it will put off completion for several years (in our experience six to eight years and more), until the intellectual learning curve of the new job allows it -or else you join the ranks of those whom the Americans call the 'ABDs': the 'all-but-dissertation' brigade.

Action summary

Be aware of the seven ways of not getting a PhD:

- not wanting a PhD;
- overestimating what is required;
- underestimating what is required;
- having a supervisor who does not know what is required;
- losing contact with your supervisor;
- not having a 'thesis' (i.e. position, argument) to maintain;
- taking a new job before completing.

Work to understand the implications of these traps fully in your own situation and determine not to succumb to them.

Re-establish your determination regularly when blandishments to stray from your programme of work recur.