Topic 1. Reasons for Embarking on a PhD

“I wanted to do it because I wanted to do it.”

Summary

The ten PhD researchers interviewed were all creative practitioners of one kind or another. A majority already had well-established careers, often combined with a successful creative practice. In taking the important step of embarking on a lengthy, rigorous and impecunious formal research degree, they were inevitably influenced by more than one reason, including personal circumstances at the time. It is clear from the effort involved that the decision to embark on a PhD was far from lightly undertaken. In most cases, there were a number of barriers to be overcome: a lack of reliable funding for some, relocation across the world for others, as well as difficulties in finding the right environment for their particular research needs, and inevitably, employment and time pressures.

As is to be expected, the answer to the question ‘why do a PhD?’ was different in each case when taking account of all the individual factors at work. And yet, a common impression emerged overall that the principal underlying reason was a drive to satisfy a personal need: being serious, excited, having energy, concentration, interest, freedom, opportunity and understanding, characterised the words used in most responses to the question. Thus, the main motivation overall was an intrinsic one rather than from a desire for extrinsic reward. Nevertheless, whilst being clear that doing the work for its own sake was of primary importance, for a majority, the prospect of career benefit was highly influential in the decision to take the PhD route.

Having access to funding, technical resources, expert guidance, networking, collaboration and institutional support was, in most cases, an additional rather than central influence in steering them towards the PhD research path; these were additional to the primary intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and more significant in the actual choice of institution. An important additional influence was having access to a local network comprising other doctoral level researchers, supervisors and other academic staff. Contact with like-minded people within the group and others associated with it, was considered very important, especially where the students’ own research involved collaboration with others. Drawing on expertise to support doctoral research requires more than library and laboratory resources: having people with expertise on hand appeared to be highly valued and added to the comfort of working in a supportive environment.

The reasons for choosing a particular institution ranged from the presence of particular supervisors and the characteristics of the associated groupings coupled with the availability of personal funding. The existence of a collegial environment was cited as an attractive feature of the research culture. For this group of students, the supervisor was viewed as an important part of the PhD process and in some cases, the overriding consideration in choosing a particular university. The supervisor had been located mainly through personal face-to-face introduction. Qualities of a good supervisor mentioned were: knowing the candidate’s area of research to a sufficiently high level from a broad perspective rather than specific knowledge, being sympathetic and a good communicator.

There were many changes from the initial expectations of what it would be like to do a PhD mentioned. Aspects of the research process that had not been anticipated included how much new knowledge in terms of tools, writing for publication and methods for conducting research, proved to be necessary. More broadly, some had learnt that it takes time to establish a true research focus and making real progress can be a slow business.
1. Introduction

The first interview topic explored the various factors that led the interviewees to decide to enrol for a PhD. Four areas were explored:

1. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors
2. Access to resources and expertise
3. Choice of university institution
4. Changes in initial expectations

The results of the interview analysis across ten cases follows.

1.1 Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivational Factors

For the purpose of this study, ‘intrinsic’ motivation implies taking a decision on the basis of seeking satisfaction, pleasure, curiosity, stimulation, social contact and other types of personal needs and wants. This is differentiated from motivation in expectation of rewards such as job promotion, increased employment opportunities and achieving organisational recognition, factors which are generally ‘extrinsic’ to the actual research process itself.

As is to be expected, the answer to the question ‘why do a PhD?’ was different in each case when taking account of all the individual factors at work. And yet, a common impression emerged overall that the principal underlying reason was a drive to satisfy a personal need: being serious, excited, having energy, concentration, interest, freedom, opportunity and understanding, characterised the words used in most responses to the question. In all cases but one, the primary motivation for embarking on a PhD was an intrinsic one rather than from a desire for extrinsic rewards. Nevertheless, whilst being clear that doing the work for its own sake was of primary importance, for a majority, the prospect of career benefit was highly influential in the decision to take the PhD route. Only one person raised the question as to whether he would have taken the formal step to enrol for a PhD without also envisaging career advantage. By contrast, two respondents said that they were motivated only by intrinsic factors: nevertheless, one of these was later to realise how important it had proved to be in changing her career path and opportunities.

In all cases, a clear differentiation was evident between reasons given arising from intrinsic motives and those arising from extrinsic motives. The overwhelming majority of the PhD researchers (9/10) interviewed gave intrinsic reasons as their primary motivating factors. At the same time, a majority (7/10) were also influenced by the anticipated opportunity for career advancement having a doctorate implied. Thus, a common feature of this group was that whilst intrinsic motivation was of primary importance, this was in most cases accompanied by some form of extrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic reasons given were:

- having a structured framework to bring together and continue past and present creative activities
- having appropriate space and dedicated time to focus on personal pursuits/and interests in an environment sympathetic and supportive of practice related research
- having an opportunity to develop one’s creative practice, knowledge, skills
- having freedom to explore and share ideas and experiences through contact with like-minded people driven by similar interests
- having a capacity to follow desires and concentrate on seeing work through to completion.

Extrinsic factors given were:
- promotion requirements of academia
- enhancement of employment opportunities
- structure for achieving multiple career goals
- social recognition
- invitation by academic teacher
- enabler for acquiring funding

1.2 Access to Resources and Expertise

Having access to funding, technical resources, expert guidance, networking, collaboration and institutional support was, in most cases, an additional rather than central influence in steering the practitioners towards the PhD research path; these were additional to the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The reasons for choosing to embark on a PhD set the student on course but when it comes to the actual choice of institution, faculty and academic supervision, other considerations such as access to expertise and resources begin to figure more highly. The financial support that universities offer to all would be research students include scholarships and special allowances for employees to improve their qualifications as well as backing for grant applications. Most of those interviewed were in receipt of institutional funding of one kind or another, but this was mentioned as important only by a small minority. Possibly the importance placed upon such funding recedes once it has been obtained.

Only one person did not think that being able to have resources and support played a part in her reasons for doing a PhD: nevertheless, as responses to subsequent questions indicated, having sophisticated tools and expert guidance would be vital to the success of the planned programme. This is, perhaps, illustrative of how the implications of initial goals for available resources are not always easy to anticipate at the onset of a research programme. The initial proposals for PhD projects are typically over-ambitious in scope and often under-informed about the practical necessities required for realising the research goals.

Although being able to match initial research goals to precise requirements for resources and expert guidance is recognised as difficult to do when starting any PhD research, in a majority of the cases here, there were clear ideas as to what was of value to the research process. The following were cited as important factors:

- finding a supervisor with appropriate knowledge and communication skills
- having ready access to a group of like-minded people
- having good access to technical resources
- access to wider networking that university research offers
An important factor across cases was having access to a local supportive environment comprising other doctoral level researchers, supervisors and other academic researchers. Contact with like-minded people within the group and others associated with it, was considered important, especially where the students’ own research involved collaboration with others. Drawing on expertise to support doctoral research requires more than library and laboratory resources: having people with expertise on hand appeared to be highly valued and added to the comfort of working in a supportive environment. For some people, they were attracted to research because it provided an opportunity to share ideas with other people and a way of enabling them to shift personal goals in a search for true partnerships in collaboration. There was disappointment in two cases that more sharing and intra-group critiquing had not taken place to the extent that they had hoped. For a majority, the group they joined was a relatively new one in the local area and offered an opportunity to pursue the type of practice-based research not previously available. News of its creation and its mission travelled by word of mouth and via the university web site.

Identifying the right kind of supervisor was noted explicitly to be very important by two people and implied indirectly by others. To be able to work with a particular individual involved relocation to Australia from the UK and USA in two cases. Qualities of a good supervisor mentioned were: being able to support cross-disciplinary work, knowing the candidate’s area of research to a sufficiently high level from a broad perspective rather than specific knowledge, and being sympathetic and a good communicator. The existence of an appropriate supervisor in a given university has traditionally been the main attraction to researchers wishing to embark on a PhD: this is not always recognised by the institutions in which they work if the emphasis on research on university websites is anything to go by. However, it is clear that for this group of students, the supervisor was viewed as an important element of the PhD process and in some cases, the overriding consideration in choosing a particular university. In follow up questions to clarify whether or not the supervisor was significant all respondents confirmed that this was the case. A majority had located the supervisor either through personal introduction or following up information provided on his website.

1.3 Choice of Institution

Of the ten interviewees, eight were enrolled for the PhD in a single university (UTS). Of these, three were existing employees on the university staff and one worked at another local university (UNSW). Another worked at UTS but was enrolled in a neighbouring university (UNSW) having identified the appropriate supervisor there. One respondent selected another local university (USYD) where the opportunity for full funding was the decisive factor.

Choosing to enrol for a PhD in the institution where you already worked was ruled out by one candidate on advice from colleagues but principally because of wishing to do digital media work in a more computing oriented structure. Similarly, someone else wishing to pursue knowledge in a computing related area cited this as a reason for choosing a university with that kind of expertise. Although it was not explicitly stated, it seemed that other factors might have been in play (e.g. a particular supervisor’s presence). This is suggested by the fact that the researcher had relocated from a country where several leading institutions were available and very much closer geographically to an institution that was not a world leader in the named field.
Choosing a particular university for its reputed strengths did not appear to be a significant factor overall, although a pre-eminence in digital media at UTS was cited in one instance. Three respondents came from overseas (UK, NZ and USA) whilst the remainder were already local when they applied. The geographical proximity of the Sydney based universities means that there is plenty of choice for local residents.

The reasons for choosing a particular institution ranged from the presence of particular supervisors and the characteristics of the associated groupings (CCS/COFA), coupled with available funding (though not a stated prerequisite in all cases). The existence of a collegial environment with meetings and opportunities for exchange with others was cited as an attractive feature of the culture of one research centre.

Amongst this group of PhD researchers, a majority needed to be in a university that permitted the inclusion of a creative artefact as part of the final submission but only one mentioned the need for such regulations when asked the question about initial choice of institution. This suggested that for the rest, either this was not an explicit expectation when the PhD programme was first proposed or it was not thought to be a barrier. Including practice as an integral part of the research process does not necessarily presume that an artefact will be submitted with the written thesis.

However, in responses to subsequent questions, a majority of researchers anticipated that making a work would be an integral part of their research and that they had always intended to submit it with the written thesis. Follow up discussion with the supervisor for eight of the interviewees, suggested that he had encouraged an artefact submission approach where it was appropriate to the researcher and had ascertained that the rules of the institution concerned allowed it.

1.4 Changes in Expectations

Changes from the initial expectations of what it would be like to do a PhD were mentioned in all but one case. Aspects of the PhD process that were cited as not expected included:

- the degree of expertise in new tools and perspectives required
- transformation of one’s knowledge about research, publishing etc.
- not being able to access expertise from others for necessary tasks
- how research infiltrates your professional thinking
- how everything continually changes from what you planned initially
- having opportunities for more creativity
- being able to keep one’s practice going
- research literature reading is not as hard as expected
- part time research is difficult and not a good way to get the most benefit
- how slow making real progress can be
- how long it takes to find your focus
- how much you need to prove yourself to your peers
- how important writing is and how much effort is needed