

Completing a Ph.D. – Does it have to be a lonely existence?

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Abstract

The co-authors of this paper are current Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) students with the University of Wolverhampton. We embarked on writing this opinion piece to share our experience of the first year of our Ph.D. and suggest how higher education institutions (HEIs) can enhance the academic development of doctoral researchers and minimise the detrimental experiences which studies have shown to affect this group of students.

Keywords: pedagogy, higher education, Ph.D., well-being

1. The problem

During their Ph.D. training – and over and above the inevitable academic demands of their research – students face numerous barriers and challenges, such as threats to their well-being, a lack of social support or a sense of loss of control. While the literature on student transition to undergraduate study is extensive, that covering the shift to a postgraduate research degree is scant, perhaps because it is assumed that postgraduate students are already higher education (HE) ‘experts’ who find such steps ‘natural’ (McPherson *et al.*, 2017).

This lack of research on doctoral-level study may seem surprising, considering recent trends and changes here: in the United Kingdom (UK), the proportion of doctoral students who successfully complete a Ph.D. is decreasing yearly (HESA, 2022) and, since 2009, the sector has been adapting to the establishment of the ‘Researcher Development Framework’ (RDF), a major shift in the design and evaluation of doctoral programmes. While the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have contributed to lower completion rates, many other factors are also at play, so warranting further investigation.

McPherson *et al.*’s study (*op.cit.*) showed that students on postgraduate taught degree programmes found the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study to be challenging, not only academically but also emotionally. For example, participants reported difficulties in fully understanding what the expectations of the course were and cited limited opportunities to connect with others and to gain a sense of belonging. We would argue that these findings are likely to also apply to doctoral students – and, perhaps, to an even greater extent. The implication is that success in navigating prior transitions does not guarantee that support will be unnecessary in subsequent ones.

In our own lived experience, we agree with the conclusions of this research that there are substantial challenges in moving from previously regimented and structured studying at an

undergraduate level to conducting independent research. Having to cope with such contrasting approaches to learning is at least disconcerting and may in fact cause much more deleterious effects: on personal academic development, on confidence and on self-belief. Moving on to a Ph.D. can feel like a 'factory reset'! There is a danger that the confidence gained can quickly be lost again and the dreaded 'impostor syndrome' can set in.

2. What can universities do to help?

In our experience at Wolverhampton the Ph.D. starts with workshops provided as part of the doctoral programme. Although not mandatory, these workshops provide many opportunities for students to grow as researchers, to acquire knowledge and gain new transferable skills as detailed in the RDF. In our university, over eighty-five workshops take place over the academic year, covering such topics as career planning, critical analysis of research and writing for scholarly publication. Participation in these sessions, alongside working on the thesis, not only enhances students' research skills and knowledge but is an excellent opportunity to meet fellow research students. We would urge PhD programme leaders and supervisors to encourage students to prioritise these opportunities.

The literature has clearly identified that, for doctoral students, deterioration of mental well-being is a cause for concern. Surprisingly, most Ph.D. students recognise poor mental health as the 'norm' (Hazell *et al.*, 2021). Busy PhD students may neglect their physical health and sleep needs, when both of these are important for well-being (Rizzolo *et al.*, 2016).

This is worrying, because good mental health is "a state of wellbeing in which the *individual realises their abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community*" (WHO, 2021). Socialising with the academic community has been identified as one of the most significant influences on success during Ph.D. training. It can also contribute to good mental health, but finding the time to create networks and foundations within a community can be difficult when conducting an independent study (Janta *et al.*, 2014). From our own experience, peer support improves motivation better than anything else.

We discovered that peer support really helps to ground thinking and provides some stability in mental well-being. It is good to know that you are not alone! Mantai *et al.* (2019) found that students see social support as very helpful to research identity development and to achieving a sense of belonging and community. To this same end, we would urge universities to provide networking opportunities for their research students; such an important resource needs to be visible and promoted widely. Furthermore, institutions should not lose sight of the fact that students may not be able to access this peer support or may have barriers to accessing it; they should accordingly make explicit their awareness that individuals who embark on a PhD often have other commitments, like work and caring responsibilities, and demonstrate their flexibility, by offering students a range of choice as to how and when they might access opportunities. By doing so, they are more likely to encourage engagement and prevent anyone from 'falling through the cracks'. The emphasis must be on clear communication of information about why involvement in activities is important and how access to them may be achieved.

In addition, we feel it would be advantageous for HEIs to acknowledge Ph.D. students' mental health and well-being by 1) providing specific mental health workshops and 2) embedding mental health awareness in key Ph.D. processes, such as induction and annual reviews. To do these things will help ensure that students have access to appropriate support when needed. Additionally, 'mental health check-ins' by trained individuals and a mentoring/buddy system are also worth further discussion. It is important that institutions make it clear to students from the start that they understand that to pursue a Ph.D. will involve highs and lows, days of achievement and days when nothing is going right. They must emphasise that, at times, it is normal, appropriate and beneficial to reach out for support.

3. Conclusion

We argue that there is scope for greater recognition of the need both to support students through the transition to doctoral research and to acknowledge the challenges that the work entails. Opportunities to connect with the peer group should be prioritised. Mental health should be openly discussed and support provided. Research students have in common the desire to become experts in their chosen fields, but greater openness is needed about the barriers they will need to overcome and the bumps in the road that will unsettle them; universities must help them to navigate a way through the obstacles and demonstrate to them that they are not alone in their endeavour.

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