

# Le Bon Journal

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**P**h.D. Dphil. Doctorate of philosophy. Doctoral degree. What does doing a Ph.D involve?

## **Doing a PhD**

Doing a PhD wasn't something that I had grown up wanting to do. In fact, I was quite put off when I visited a graduate school of engineering in upstate New York during my senior year in college. The feeling I got from the doctorate students was bleak and despondent.

Long after I had obtained my Master's degree and worked as a salaried employee, I went to London seeking a new career direction. While looking for a job and waiting to hear from my postgraduate applications, I started helping the friends I was staying with. They were running their own business, and each day I became more and more involved, applying the stuff I learned as a management consultant.

One way to stay in the country and be able to earn an income was to get a student visa and work part-time. I thought doing a PhD at a business school would give me an MBA education at the lower price tag of a PhD but the flexibility of a PhD. How wrong I was!

Whereas the MBA was two years of structured course and team work, the PhD was anything but structured. It was a long dark tunnel of solitary confinement and do-it-all-yourself. It was very difficult getting used to the isolation and trying to stay awake reading the passive tense of academic writing.

Doing a PhD, as it turned out, was about learning what a PhD was all about. And the longer I was doing it, the longer it was going to take me. There were horror stories of people who quit before reaching the finish line. If you quit or fail anytime before you actually get the PhD, you would get nothing to show for it except that the required course work. You would have gotten nothing to show for the endless hours of

solitary research until you get the PhD itself!

Why would anyone want to do a PhD? For me, I rationalised that it was an insurance against unemployment for life. At least I would be qualified to teach at a high level. I might need a PhD one day. "Dr Ku" would disguise whether I was single or married. The extra letters after my name "Anne Ku, PhD" would lengthen my name. I wanted to show that I was just as smart as my friends who had it.

Little did I realise that doing a PhD was a huge risk. Until I got the PhD itself, I had to manage uncertainty.

A PhD, just like any other qualification, is only as good as it is kept up-to-date or being used. To anticipate the final end, I would often sign myself "Dr Ku" on scrap paper and dream about being introduced as "Dr Anne Ku." But as soon as I got the damn title, I dropped it. Nowadays I only use it to command respect from my bank manager and immigration officers.

Many people, having succeeded in their careers, feel that they deserve a PhD. They think that they should be able to go back to school and get one easily. What they don't realise is that the older you get, the more commitments and responsibilities you have, and the less you are able to devote 100% to it. The pursuit of a doctorate degree is a very selfish indulgence.

Doing a PhD is like digging into a long and narrow tunnel. The longer and deeper you are in it, the less likely you will be understood by others.

Towards the end, I became paranoid that somebody else might have chosen and pursued my research in parallel. Although I passed my oral exams, my examiners had only grilled me on the theory part of my subject. The examination of the practical part arose when I interviewed for a job in the energy industry.

## **Empathy**

Last night I spoke to a friend finishing her PhD. Before she started the programme, I had told her some horror stories of what I went through.

She reminded me that I had fretted over whether or not to spend 30p on a bus ride or to walk 30 minutes. Whenever I was to see friends for dinner, I'd rather cook a meal than spend money going out. I was penny pinching to the max. In my final year, I deliberately declined all teaching, research, and consulting work so that I could concentrate on finishing. Thus I did not receive an income for more than a year.

What I didn't tell her was how I felt at the beginning of my PhD. As my friends compared notes on how much money they were making and discussed the trials and tribulations of climbing the career ladder, I worried quietly whether I had made the right decision to forgo the most productive years of my career to pursue a degree that was not necessary in my profession.

During the one week of overlap between my last job and starting the PhD, I moved from a high tech office in the City to a basement office with no telephone or computer. I moved from a fast paced dealing room to a slow paced campus. I didn't want to hear about my friends' promotions because I wasn't even sure that I had the mental capacity to get a PhD. All I could see and feel was UNCERTAINTY. Can I do it? Will I make it? Is it worth it?

My friend said she too had to cut out friends who did not empathise.

## **Piled higher and deeper**

We all have our category C's, the things that we don't want to do and leave to the last. That's why our desks get piled up with bills, magazines, leaflets, and other documents we can't be bothered to pay attention to right away. After awhile, the pile gets too

mountainous, too daunting to tackle. And we procrastinate even more.

Someone told me that PhD stood for "piled higher and deeper." While I was anxiously trying to get to the end, I didn't know what it meant. I only learned the true meaning of a PhD and the legacy it left years later.

I am now a victim of the "piled higher and deeper" syndrome.

Doing a PhD nurtured a comprehensive, exhaustive, and risk averse approach to everything. You collect it, keep it in case you might need to refer to it, and you keep collecting. You become reluctant to throw anything away in case you might need it. So you never really "deal" with it.

### **Sharing a house**

The last place I lived while doing my PhD was a five-bedroom four-storey house above a French restaurant. My room faced north and away from the busy main street.

During my three years there, I transformed the house from a dirty, smokers' dump into an orderly household of MBA and PhD students who followed a rigorous house chore schedule.

One by one, I replaced each departing housemate with a non-smoking student.

I viewed sharing the house as a microeconomic model in which common areas never got cleaned because no one paid directly for it. Known as tragedy of the commons, the public good became the public bad. It encouraged pollution.

Since every housemate paid a different rent (based on market rates negotiated at time of entry), there was no incentive to pay extra for shared facilities such as the bathrooms, kitchen, and living room.

I decided that getting to know each other would increase mutual accountability and responsibility. Furthermore, if we were all students going to the same school, we would care about our individual reputation.

To increase communication, I initiated monthly dinners for which we all contributed a dish.

To solve the cleaning issue, I hired a cleaner. This didn't work because my housemates did not agree on paying an equal share. And it encouraged them to pollute.

Eventually I got everyone to agree to follow a schedule of house chores, ranging from cleaning the bathrooms to taking out the trash.

When the council tax rules changed, we agreed that everyone living there had to be a full-time student – to avoid paying the council tax as a household. This of course meant that I had to leave – once I graduated and found a full-time job.

### **Going back to school**

Sometimes I think it's easier to pursue a PhD as a continuation of the master's degree. I had worked three years before going back to school. And those three years changed me.

Having worked in industry, I treated my lecturers as service providers. If I didn't do well on an exam, it was because I got bad service.

I didn't understand why I had to take certain required courses. Why should anyone tell me what to do? I was the paying customer!

Likewise, I ignored the PhD programme director's advice to apply for an overseas student scholarship. I didn't think 3,000 pounds was worth my time.

Ironically, in my final years of my PhD, I refused to pay the 300 pounds outstanding on my phone bill year after year.

As much as I wanted to hurry the process so that I could return to the faster paced world outside, I was reluctant to leave once I found the answer to my research question. I had gotten used to the unstructured life of a PhD student and no longer wished to join the rat race outside.

### **From alpha to omega**

In the beginning, I thought doing a PhD would give me the flexibility

and time to run a business while allowing me to work in the UK.

A year on, I was still struggling to find a topic for my research. In my third year, I searched for an argument around which my thesis could be based. My third year was tumultuous on a personal level. In my fourth year, I finally accepted that I had to do the PhD full-time and not try to juggle work and study. Only then did I see the light at the end of the tunnel.



Anne Ku, editor, writes from personal experience of doing a PhD at London Business School. Afterwards, she tested her research hypotheses by working in the energy industry, concluding them in the form of a multi-contributory book which she proposed and edited, "Risk and flexibility in electricity: introduction to the fundamentals and techniques." Her entire thesis can be downloaded from [analyticalQ.com](http://analyticalQ.com).

### **Feedback from readers:**

*I'm pleased to learn that you have become the more empathetic and sentimental Dr Ku to complement the Analytical Q. (I suspect these attributes were developed over longer than the "3.524" years elapsed since your web site went live... I also assume your thesis entitled you to a DPhil or Ph.D., which now explains why you so easily assimilated the arcane characteristics and depictions of price forecasting models, etc. Apparently, you have been there and done that.) I am relieved that "analyticalQ" is a pseudonym, not an anagram. Regarding the forthcoming Diary of Anne Ku -- once you become a media darling, you may need new skills and attributes Beyond empathy and Beyond Q.*

*My retired writer friend Dr Yang described his process in earning his PhD in comparative literature as an ordeal or even a jail or limbo. He cited three essential conditions: young (spend 8 or 9 yrs and don't care); rich (so he need not do laborious assistant's chores); and persistently interested in literature (including studying Latin, French, etc) He could be a novelist, but I told him no novelist has a PhD, so he can only be a prose writer or review writer.*

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