How to get a PhD

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Self management

- You are responsible for your own learning and for getting a PhD
- You initiate discussions and ask for help
- You do not wait for somebody to tell you what to do

opportunities – not deficiencies

Learning skills rather than knowledge

- The PhD is primarily a research training exercise to get you from being a beginner in research to the level of professional.
- You are playing a game where the goalposts are continually being moved. Thus you must acquire the ability to evaluate and re-evaluate others works and your own in the light of current development.
- Doing research is a craft skill and can only be learned by doing. That is why PhD takes time.

You are not doing research in order to do research – you are doing research in order to demonstrate that you have learned how to do research.

How *not* to get a PhD

- Over-estimating what is required
  - the work for the degree is a *research training process* rather than a major contribution.
  - You leave the idea of a 'paradigm shift' for after your PhD.

- Under-estimating what is required
  - Research requires a contribution to the *analysis* and *explanation* of the topic, not just *description,*
  - asking proper questions are as important as to develop interesting answers.

Research is not concerned with finding out something you don't know, but with finding that you don't know something.

How *not* to get a PhD (continued)

- Not having a thesis
  - A thesis is something that you wish to argue, a position that you wish to maintain.
  - the study must have a story-line: “a coherent thrust that pushes along an argument, an explanation, a systematic set of inferences derived from new data or new ways of viewing current data”

  If you do not have a good guidance in the early stages of your research, the danger is to spread yourself too widely and too thinly.

- Taking a new job before finishing

  Writing up demands the most concentrated effort of the whole process.

How to do research

- The ‘what’ questions are not research.
  - Answering the ‘what’ questions are descriptive – a sort of ‘information-gathering’, e.g. what are the age distributions of PhD students in Europe?

- The ‘why’ questions are research
  - Research goes beyond description and requires analysis. It looks for explanations, relationships, comparisons, predictions, generalisations and theories. Information-gathering is vital here. The application of theory turns information into research.

3 characteristics of good research

- A researcher's position is not knowing the right answer but looking for the right questions.
- Researchers examine data critically. They continuesly ask questions like: Have we got the facts right? Can we get better data? Can the results be interpreted differently?
- Researchers generalise and specify the limits of their generalisations - where it applies and where it does not apply. *All generalisations are dangerous – including this one.*

3 Basic types of research

1. Exploratory research
   - involves tackling a new problem/issue/topic about which little is known. Thus the research idea cannot be formulated very well in the beginning.

2. Problem-solving research
   - starts with a particular problem in the real world and bring theories to explain and solve the problem. The problem has to be defined, and the solution will usually involve many different theories and methods as real-world problems are likely to be 'messy' and not soluble within a narrow discipline.

3. Testing-out research

- is a basic research activity that supplies the theories (compared to applied research that uses and tests them).
- Here you will be working within an established framework and it gives you some degree of protection by the established nature of much of the ideas, arguments, etc.
- You can use a method on a new topic and thus give new knowledge and theoretical insights, or apply 2 competing theories to a new situation to see which is more powerful – resulting in an innovative variant of the method or theory.

The format of a PhD thesis

- Introduction
- Background theory
  - State of the art of your field - usually demonstated by a literature review (not just a description but an arguementation and evaluation of the work you present).
- Aims and objectives
  - spell out in detail precisely what you are researching and why. What is the nature of your problem? How do you analyse it? What are your 'hypotheses'? How do you use others and your own data.
- Methods: data collection and interpretation
- Results including questions like:
  - What is the justification of the relevance and validity of the material that you use to support you thesis? How reliable and valid are your data sources? Are your data properly interpreted?
- Discussion (including suggestions for further work)
- Conclusions (summary and contribution)

Your *contribution* is the final element in the PhD format

- It is concerned with your evaluation of the importance of your thesis to the development of the discipline.
- You underline the significance of your analysis, point out limitations in your material, suggest what new work is now appropriate, an so on.
- It is a discussion as to why and in what way the background theory and your contribution influence one another.
- It is not a summary. Summary and conclusions are separate tasks. More efforts need to go into conclusions where you demonstate that the 'state-of-art' is now different due to your contribution.

A clear story-line

- Material that is not contributing to the thesis position should not be there.
- A thesis should be no longer than it needs to be in order to report what you have done, why you did it and what you have concluded for your results of your work.

Often, a lot is written in order to obscure the fact that little has been achieved.

Becoming a professional researcher

- You know what is happening in your subject, World Wide
- You can evaluate what others are doing and know where you can make a contribution
- You can master techniques/methods that are being used and know their limitations
- You know the ethics of your profession
- You are able to communicate your result

If you have to ask your supervisor if your work is 'good enough', you are not ready for a PhD - you are not a professional researcher