



## ***I did a PhD and did NOT go mad***

Before reading these wise words advising you how to do a PhD (inspired by three years of the author carefully and diligently banging his head on a table) you are requested to read and digest the following irony...

*The only way to find out  
how to do a PhD is  
to do one.  
Therefore all advice  
is useless.*

To say that I enjoyed doing my PhD would be a lie, not just an ordinary lie mind you. More the sort of lie one would normally associate with Tory party conferences. A big wobbly lie with a dusting of sugar on top. At times I hated my PhD, so why do I have any authority to give advice on doing a PhD? Well, I don't claim to have any -- other than the fact that I completed and passed the thing, so I must have done something right.

This page is an attempt to...

- disillusion any prospective PhD candidates who think its going to be fun,
- offer solace to current PhD students who might be under the impression that they're the only ones having a crap time, and
- generally show off my cartoons.

## **There's only one way of doing a PhD and that's your own, that's your own, that's your own...**

A PhD, by its very nature, is a very individualistic venture. There is no right way to do a PhD (there are however a multitude of wrong ways). This is the first big surprise for people who are starting their PhD having completed their undergraduate degrees -- there are well defined correct ways of getting a degree (usually 'turn up to lectures, do course work, revise for exams, use a modicum of common sense') but such prescriptive techniques don't work for research degrees. The award of a research degree effectively says 'This person knows how to do research in his/her chosen area' and 'research' is a nebulous, difficult to nail down thing which relies on insight, lateral thinking, inspiration and a lot of hard work. An undergraduate degree is a lot of hard work, but doesn't put so much emphasis on inspiration. Most (if not all) people cannot sit down and say 'right, today I'm going to have some inspiration'. The unpredictable nature of progress in a PhD means you spend a lot of time not sticking to the deadlines you set yourself. This is dispiriting.

In most departments there's always one smartarse who loudly proclaims that doing a PhD is easy and he (it's usually a he) can't see what all the fuss is about, and he's just written another three chapters this morning, and he's submitted another five journal articles. People like this are lying, showing off, from Mars or over-compensating for inadequacies in other areas of their lives (if-you-know-what-I-mean). Ignore them.

## **The loneliness of the long distance researcher**



The next big surprise for people who are starting PhDs after an undergraduate degree is just how excruciatingly lonely a PhD is. When you submit your thesis you have to sign a piece of paper that says 'This is my work, my work alone, nobody else's, all mine, nobody but me did it. Honest.' A PhD is so narrow and focused that the chances are that you and only you are going to understand anything about it. This is known as the Loneliness of the Long Distance Researcher and you have to get used to it. It means you're going to spend at least three years wandering around with a great chunk of bizarre, irrelevant nonsense in your head that only you can relate to. Get used to people's eyes

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glazing over and them shuffling in their seats when you try to explain exactly what it is you're doing. Try to avoid emotional entanglements with people who say 'penny for your thoughts' during romantic moments. If, like me, you say 'the problem of formally refining liveness properties stated in a temporal logic for reactive systems' then you're likely to find yourself rapidly emotionally unentangled. Or at least they ask for a full refund on their penny with a written apology. Anyway, quite frankly, after a couple years of doing my PhD the last people I wanted to spend any time with were the sort of people who would be remotely interested in my work. To quote Groucho Marx 'I wouldn't want to join a club that would have me as a member.'

Many departments have well integrated research programs with seminars and meetings and other such social gatherings. This is A Good Thing and will go a long way in relieving the loneliness of the long distance researcher. Many departments are, however, abysmal in this respect. If you're an active go-getting sort of person you may try sorting out social gatherings but be prepared for knockbacks. I did my best to get my colleagues down the pub, but the world record for number of research students in one pub at the same time was (from memory) nine out of forty -- and that was only when two Christmas parties accidentally went in the same pub at the same time. Remember, if you can't persuade other researchers to leave the sanctity of their computer screens and come down the pub it's probably not your fault -- they've probably forgotten what a pub is, what you do in one and why. When you start your PhD you'll probably think that they're a sad bunch of Herberts, but believe me, by the time you've spent three years doing a PhD you'll have a lot more sympathy for them.

### **Thank you for your support. I shall always wear it.**

Although doing a PhD is an individual thing your department should give you as much support as possible. I fear that the attitude of some departments is rather Victorian to their research students -- that having a miserable time when doing your PhD is character forming and uplifting and you'll thank them for forcing you to spend three years in an unheated office with only a wasp nest for company in the long run. Such sentiments are usually followed by 'anyway when I did a PhD we didn't have offices -- we did our research in the departmental lavatories and were hosed down once a month by the cleaning staff. You have it lucky'. Anyone of this attitude really deserves a kick in the pants of the most severe measure, but I bet you'll come across at least four of them. If you get treated badly by your department then don't be shy -- moan. Don't moan for the sake of it because you'll just get peoples backs up, but make sure that those in authority know about your grievances and don't have the excuse once people get fed up and leave their degrees halfway through (as they do) that it wasn't known how upset they were. It is likely that you have a good first degree and could therefore be In The Real World doing a job that pays about ten times as much as the pittance you get as a stipend for a research student. Really you're doing your department a favour by publishing results and upping their research credibility and hence they should show you at least a little respect and common decency.

## Use your hanky



There are going to be times when it all gets to you and you can't cope any more. (The day I found a paper that I'd missed in my literature survey that covered all the 'new' stuff I'd done in the previous nine months was my own personal nadir.) What do you do in such circumstances?

Cry.

Your eyes out.

Since the tragic death of the Princess of Wales we all now know how to express our negative emotions fulsomely and publicly without caring a jot. So forget your stiff upper lip and let it tremble. But don't waste that outpouring of emotion -- make it count as much as possible. In a sentence, burst into tears in your supervisor's office. If you're really determined to gain dramatic effect then wait until he/she's entertaining some important guests -- Profs from other universities or co-authors on important papers. However if your supervisor is one of those 'My door's always open' types who spend all year at conferences in the Yemen or can't be seen without booking two months in advance with his secretary then you may have problems. An email isn't very effective in this case...

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To: Prof Vacation [vacate@never.here.ac.uk]
From: Hopeless inadequate useless bag of rubbish
      [self_pity@here.now.ac.uk]
Subject: Bleeaaaaaaah!
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Dear Prof,

Boooooohoooooo, snivel, snivel, bleeaaaaaaah...

/END MESSAGE

Its not the same is it?



While we're on the subject of dealing with emotional catastrophes I should mention the crucial role that chocolate played (and is still playing) in my academic career. There is no problem known to

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science that cannot be cured by the liberal application of chocolate. Leading doctors have testified to its mystical curative powers -- it is known to contain all sorts of wholesome, bracing chemicals that get straight to the happiness centres of your brain and get them working at full pitch, scattering love and joy and contentment all through your cortex. Leading dieticians and skin care specialists may make the odd carping comment, but take no notice. Just consider the following scientific breakthroughs directly attributed to chocolate...

- Sir Isaac Newton may have noticed an apple falling out of a tree, but it is a little known fact that he'd just popped out for a crafty Marathon bar (as they were still called in those days) in the garden.
- Leading thought on the formation of spiral galaxies originated from Stephen Hawking's observation of a box of Galaxy Swirls under laboratory conditions.
- Pavlov's dog was in fact fed chocolate eclaires -- the bit about meat powder is a lie made up by the St Petersburg Meat Marketing Board.
- Einstein's hair went like that due to a sugar rush after eating twelve Whispas. Before that he had a side parting.

Need I say more?

**In case of emergency...**



There are of course several methods of stress relief to be tried -- popular ones include Staring Out of Windows and Watching Old Black and White Films. Obviously with minimum effort you can combine these with Eating Chocolate for a previously unprecedented amount of stress relief. It is more difficult to combine Staring Out of Windows and Watching Old Black and White Films though, at least not unless you put your telly outside your window. (Not recommended during inclement weather or for those in high rise buildings.) I have been advised on medical and moral grounds not to include Getting Monsterously Bladdered and Uncomplicated Sex in my list of stress relievers, but you'd probably thought of those already.



In order to not become entirely divorced from reality it is a good idea to get a hobby and the less your hobby has to do with the subject of your PhD the better. If you are considering doing a PhD on a subject you really enjoy and find fascinating then beware -- the chances are that after three or so years of studying nothing but your chosen topic you'll hate the very mention of its name. Do you really want this? My PhD was in a Bizarre Corner of Computer Science and during my PhD some of the hobbies I'm willing to admit to are learning to play the mandolin, taking watercolour lessons, going on some very long walks and sewing. My chocolate consumption skills also improved dramatically as I think I may have mentioned elsewhere.

### **Its the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine (sort of)**

So, in summary...

- Do not just blithely start doing a PhD because you can't think of anything better to do -- that's what Masters degrees are for.
- Just because you sailed through your undergraduate degree, do not expect to do the same with a PhD.
- Do not expect to enjoy doing a PhD.
- Do expect to go mad.
- If you do enjoy your PhD you're probably mad already.
- If you finish you can tell people that you really have done something that's big and clever.
- Three years is a long time to do something you really, really hate and your life is finite. If you're really not a happy bunny mid-PhD consider dropping it - - worse things happen at sea.
- Make sure you get full support from your department and complain if you don't.
- Try to have some sort of functional life outside your PhD, although this can be surprisingly difficult.
- If all else fails, eat chocolate.
- Eat chocolate anyway.

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### Further reading...



If PhD horror stories particularly interest you and you feel it a subject worthy of further investigation then you should have a look here.

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