

‘What advice would you give to students starting your course?’

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Embarking on a postgraduate course in any subject is daunting and personally I found the decision to undertake a PhD more or less impossible. I had a multitude of questions which only I could answer; was I sure I wanted to do a PhD, did I want to stay at Leicester and most importantly which area of geography did I want to spend three years of my life dedicated to? However, six months into my doctoral study, I realise that the decision to further my academic career is one of the best I have ever made.

For the first time in my life, at the age of twenty three, I felt as if I was standing at one of life’s major crossroads. There were several directions I could have set off on, but ultimately the decision I made during the summer of 2006 was to be absolute, or so I thought. This scared me. I thoroughly enjoyed both my undergraduate degree and MSc. however, seeing close friends embark on highly paid graduate programmes and as I had narrowly missed out on securing PhD funding, I had major insecurities. Other reservations stemmed from the fact that I enjoy all aspects of Human Geography and I was finding it difficult to pin point specifically what I wanted to spend three years of my life studying. However, after a few months of deliberation, financial support from my parents and encouragement from my tutors, I enrolled and have not looked back since.

Undertaking a PhD is challenging, sometimes frustrating but most importantly rewarding. After six months of reading, direction from my supervisors and churning out proposals, I have found a ‘niche’ in geographical thought awaiting my exploration. I am excited about the prospect of designing the specifics of the methodology and carrying out the research in a theoretically underdeveloped field. For those students who are unsure, as I was at the beginning, give it a chance, only then will you know if PhD study is for you.

Even though I am in the early stages, I feel that I have valuable advice to give to students embarking on their own PhD journeys, particularly with regard to topics, supervision and PhD life. Firstly, it is imperative to find a ‘niche’ within your subject field. The aim of a PhD is to contribute to existing knowledge, not to regurgitate.

This can be overwhelming; however, a breakthrough will come, don't give up, talk to your supervisors and other members of staff not only at your own University but in departments at other Universities; generally they are willing to give advice. It is also important to be resourceful; Universities have extensive resources available to PhD students, such as workshops, educational guides and student support services, they are all there for you use, make the most of them.

Supervisors are central to you getting your PhD, it is important that you chose them wisely. I am very lucky with mine, they are always willing to give advice, offer constructive criticism or simply listen, and being in easy reach via email is also a bonus. Personally, I like to have deadlines and have work marked regularly so that I can see that I am making progress. At the end of each meeting the next is always arranged, so I have targets to meet. This depends on the individual and the supervisors, something you will have to decide at the beginning of your course. I have friends at other Universities whose supervisors are so engrossed in their own research and academic targets that they do not give their PhD students the required attention. If this is the case, there are systems in place for you to make complaints and enquires, for example via Postgraduate tutors or the Welfare Office, don't suffer in silence.

Finally, do not put your life on hold to get your PhD, life is too short. Yes, a PhD is a huge commitment, particularly if you are self-funded; however, planning and organisation are critical to make sure that you balance your PhD commitments with having fun. Determine which working hours suit you, personally, I like to work from eight to five, I have never been productive studying through the night and getting into a routine is critical. Regular exercise is also important, sport not only keeps you physically fit, but you also feel refreshed and rejuvenated afterwards. Being a Geography student, one of my passions is travelling; I have always got a trip booked in advance whether for research or pleasure, it is important to have goals and things to look forward to. Advice I was given prior starting my PhD, was to learn not to get self absorbed in your research, broaden your horizons, Universities have a multitude of resources available for students to develop other skills outside of research. Post PhD, the majority of us will want to be employed, therefore, a student with a range of life skills as well as a doctorate will be favoured. I have become a Student Associate,

a scheme which aims to broaden the link between secondary schools and Higher Education. To fit in with my timetable I visit a local school in a deprived area and talk about my University experiences, the aim being to encourage and inspire school students and make them more aware of the opportunities available in Higher Education. Not only do I get paid but it also gives me a break from studying. I also assist with demonstrating and tutorials for undergraduate students, as well as research work for several of the academics. There are so many opportunities available to you whilst studying for a PhD, but it is up to you to grasp them.

Geography as a subject is stimulating, multi-disciplinary and ever changing. Each day the news headlines are littered with inherently geographical accounts, whether related to the political situation in Iraq, a recent earthquake and its impact on the affected population or the struggles to combat climate change; Geography is everywhere and it matters. Being a Geography PhD student, be it with interests in the physical aspects of our planet, the population and cultures which inhabit it or the more GIS elements of the discipline, will enable you to contribute to a wealth of knowledge which is vital to understanding this planet, an exciting prospect. If like me you have no funding and are considering doing a PhD, my advice would be, don't compare yourself with your peers, remain focused and just remember there are so many other crossroads and opportunities in life, so be inspired and go for it.