

INSIGHTS INTO SUCCESSFUL PhD STUDY

Journeys of Discovery



UNIVERSITY
of
OTAGO



Te Whare Wānanga o Otago

NEW ZEALAND

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FOREWORD

At Otago, we are privileged to have a strong PhD programme which is embedded in a healthy research culture. While this has certainly helped to generate hundreds of top-class doctoral graduates, we thought it would also be valuable to ask some of them to put in their own words what else they felt contributed towards the successful completion of their respective PhD journeys.

This booklet is the outcome of interviews conducted with 14 recent PhD graduates from a variety of disciplines including business, health sciences, humanities and sciences. The main objective is to provide current PhD candidates with ideas and strategies to assist them in successfully completing their PhD studies.

I would like to acknowledge the support of the University's Quality Advancement Unit which funded this project through their Quality Improvement Initiatives Contestable Fund. I must also thank very much: Chris Stoddart for sparking the idea for this project; Nicola Mutch for conducting the interviews and writing up the stories so well;

the graduates for being prepared to share their personal stories; and Nick Wright of Ignition Design for the excellent design of this publication.

I hope that you will enjoy reading the stories and reflections of these doctoral graduates and that you will find some useful tips to assist you with your own PhD journey of discovery.

Dr Charles Tustin
Director, Graduate Research Services
University of Otago

January 2009



Leaving her whanau was the most important, and most painful, aspect of coming to Otago for her postgraduate years, says Dr Rawinia Higgins. The daughter of a Māori academic at Victoria University, Rawinia wanted to establish her own credentials before returning to take up academic and leadership responsibilities.

Dr Rawinia Higgins

PhD in Maori Studies | Completed 2004

Researcher, Te Ataarangi Educational Trust; Postgraduate supervisor,
Te Kawa a Maui – Victoria University

Her PhD at Te Tumu, looking at identity politics of the female chin moko, provided that opportunity. At Otago she was able to study and grow, “away from the pressures and expectations of whanau, hapu and iwi”. The trouble was, she missed them terribly.

“I had to create my own whanau environment at Otago.” Her support network included the PhD Office: “It was very personal, and really made you feel valued as you go through all the different administrative forms. They should give you a Diploma just for managing to enroll!” And Te Tumu became Rawinia’s second home, where she carried out her PhD part-time while also teaching in the Department.

After several years balancing work, study and social demands, Rawinia knew she had to put in some hard yards to finish her thesis. And if Te Tumu was Rawinia’s other family, then it came complete with extended whanau scattered around the country. While on research study leave from her teaching position, Rawinia was dispatched to Auckland to live with the Dean’s mother for six months, “to get the thing written”.

“She was like a nanny, providing spiritual support, food and care. She let me complain about my thesis and laugh about it too. All I had to do was focus on my writing and I came back with a really solid first draft. I’ll never

forget that support she gave me,” remembers Rawinia. “It might not have happened without her.”

What would she do differently? “I’d have read quicker, disciplined myself more and written sooner! You have to get into the zone with a PhD. It’s a marathon, not a sprint.”

She also believes it’s wise to expect and allow your topic to change and evolve. “It’s part of the process; you need to embrace it.”

Returning to Victoria University of Wellington, Rawinia says that having earned her PhD, she feels she can “hold my own” in the academic community that includes her mother. “My mother is very proud of my achievement though. She always makes a point of introducing me as Dr Higgins to others in the University, which culturally still feels a bit odd. I’m always saying, ‘Oh, you can call me Rawinia’.”



German-born Axel Zeitler loves New Zealand. But it did seem very far away. So while he had “greatly enjoyed” the semester he spent here undertaking a Postgraduate Certificate in Pharmacy, he felt nervous about relocating to the south side of the globe for the duration of a PhD. But when Otago’s Department of Pharmacy proposed a joint project with Cambridge University, looking at using laser technology to investigate the structure of pharmaceuticals, it felt the like the perfect solution for Axel.

Dr Axel Zeitler

PhD in Pharmacy | Completed 2007

Research Fellow, Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge

It created a situation where Axel – based in Cambridge – had three supervisors across two universities and was working in an interdisciplinary field involving chemistry, pharmacy and physics. Says Axel: “It all went surprisingly smoothly.”

The key to the success of the collaboration was flexibility, particularly at an administrative level, believes Axel, and he urges other students attempting to straddle two academic communities in this way “to find out what the enrolment requirements are very clearly in advance”.

“The universities needed to be quite accommodating, and I certainly appreciated the efficient, problem-solving approach Otago demonstrated.”

Further, his supervisors had distinct areas of expertise and roles within the supervision team, “so there was never any conflict”.

Academically, “There was lots of room to go off in different directions. I spent the first year and a half exploring the subject quite widely, doing all sorts of experiments. Then I met my Otago supervisor and had the conversation, ‘OK, how are we going to turn all this into a PhD?’ We made some decisions, and I got on with it.”

Axel became the king of the long-distance relationship, keeping his Otago supervisor up to date via email, teleconference, formal yearly progress reports and meeting at international conferences.

He says it was an advantage working in an area with little previous research. And although the infancy of the field could have been daunting, Axel believes his best research came from not taking it all too seriously.

“When it comes to experiments, give things a try. That’s what experimenting is all about. If something doesn’t work, at least you’ll know it doesn’t work.”

Above all, says Axel, “Be curious. Keep your mind open, and be receptive to new information. Go to lots of seminars, even if they’re not directly in your area, and don’t be afraid to ask simple questions. Having a broad knowledge of your field and beyond can be useful in all sorts of unexpected ways. And it keeps the experience of learning interesting.”

Axel’s thesis has been formally recognised by the Division of Health Sciences as being of exceptional quality.



When Matthew Schofield was entertaining the idea of a PhD, a work colleague gave advice that would echo for years to come: “Choose your supervisor well. It will make or break the PhD.”

Dr Matthew Schofield

PhD in Mathematics and Statistics | Completed in 2007

Postdoctoral Fellow, Applied Statistics Centre, Columbia University

Now, looking back on his research into how dynamics of animal populations are modelled, Matthew credits much of his success to his relationship with his supervisor.

It made a surprising amount of difference that his office was next door, believes Matthew. “We’d say ‘hi’ to each other every day, and just basically check in with each other. So if I had an idea I wanted to run past him, it was very easy and natural to do so.”

“Sometimes I would see him three times in one day. Other times I might go for weeks without a formal meeting.” All the while, Matthew says he felt guided by his supervisor, but never forced along any particular direction.

Above all, says Matthew, “You need a supervisor who takes an interest in your work; not one who makes you do theirs.”

This low-key, respectful relationship helped Matthew learn how to deal with the difficulties of research. When starting out Matthew and his supervisor only had a third of a project in mind. “We decided I would work with some data in the belief that something interesting would come out of it that would eventually shape the rest of the PhD.” The problem was that, come the end of the first year, both student and supervisor were stumped. It took several meetings and – quite simply – a brainwave, to find the path forward.

Despite this, Matthew reports a hassle-free PhD experience. His Bright Futures scholarship attended to his financial and travel needs. The administrative staff were “fantastic”, and the Cracking the Finishing Code workshop “allowed me to do in half a day what could otherwise have taken weeks”. Along the way he attended conferences and published three journal articles.

“I definitely approached the PhD as a job, and not even an especially full-on one. I never worked evenings or weekends, except maybe a bit at the end. I took a couple of big overseas trips. And still, I completed in just on three years.”

The day after Matthew submitted, he jumped on a plane to China, avoiding the nervous post-submission wait some students find especially gruelling. It’s a technique he recommends to others: “I pretty much forgot about my thesis altogether.”

Matthew’s thesis has been formally recognised by the Division of Sciences as being of exceptional quality.



Dr Daniela Rosenstreich recommends all PhD students ask themselves one fundamental question: “Are you there for the ride, or are you there for the qualification? If your priority is to have an expansive, academic experience you can approach your PhD very differently from if the aim is get the qualification quickly and efficiently.”

Dr Daniela Rosenstreich

PhD in Marketing | Completed 2007

Lecturer, School of Marketing & Management, Charles Sturt University

For Daniela, the goal was to achieve a PhD in three years. So every decision she made regarding how she would explore consumers’ understandings of “quality” always had this target in mind.

“When students receive feedback, people tend to give advice about further things they could do: literature you could explore, alternative angles you could take. The critical decisions for me were not about what I could add, but what I should leave out.”

As a result, Daniela treated feedback from conferences as less about motivating changes to her thesis, and more about “plugging the gaps”, ensuring her research stood up more robustly to such lines of criticism.

Indeed, while Daniela acknowledges the professional benefits of conferences, she admits to “not really being much of a fan of them. It’s such a short structure to express complex ideas.”

More helpful, she says, were the doctoral colloquia in the earlier days of the study. “The feedback can be great for gaining guidance in consolidating your actual research questions. However, in the later stages, it’s a bit late to be rethinking your questions.”

If you are to make the most of the conference experience, Daniela advises students do their homework. “Find out who is going to be there

that you wish to talk to, and then email them first asking whether they might have time to meet you for a coffee and talk about your research. It’s much better than trying to sidle up to them in the midst of the conference itself.”

This recommendation is echoed in Daniela’s approach to publishing. Rather than sending a manuscript in cold, she suggests writing a personal, journal-specific note to the editor, explaining what you’re doing and why it’s interesting, and asking whether it might be a good match for their edition.

“Every editor I have emailed has written back, with really positive suggestions. I’ve never heard of anyone getting a negative response from this approach.”

The difficulty for Daniela now, as a new lecturer, is finding time to publish at all. While Daniela sees benefits in moving to another university following one’s PhD, she actually recommends beginner academics wait a few years. “It can be such a difficult transition to a full-time lecturing position anyway, without having the added stresses of learning new systems and having to develop new relationships. You really need all the support you can get.”

Daniela’s thesis has been formally recognised by the Division of Commerce as being of exceptional quality.

Dr Helen Tregidga

PhD in Accounting | Completed 2007

Senior Lecturer, Auckland University of Technology

“I wanted to know what it meant for an organisation to claim to be ‘sustainable’. Being able to focus on something you’re incredibly interested in full-time, supported by a scholarship and supervisors who are interested in what you’re doing – what a luxury! I want to do another one.”

It’s a world away from her “great, but busy” transition to life as an academic, with the demands of teaching and pressure to publish upon her. She says she treated her PhD like a job, and conscientiously worked her way through to the end. “I worked on it every day. I didn’t want to get into the habit of not doing it.”

The secret, she says, is great supervisors. “You put so much trust in this one relationship. They will tell you when you’re ready to submit, and you rely on them not to embarrass you by letting you submit something which is not ready. If you are even considering doing a PhD, start thinking about your supervisor. Ask around, talk to other students. Make sure you are happy.”

Even when Helen’s primary supervisor moved away to Christchurch, the pair maintained a good relationship and stayed in close communication. “I had my doubts the distance arrangement would work well, but he was fantastic. He even flew me to Christchurch for a week at one stage.”

While Helen’s supervisors guided her through her project, they never pressured her to publish. “Our philosophy was, get the PhD done, publish

later. Only if a journal article was directly relevant and helped with writing the PhD did we consider it, and I only did this once.”

Her focus paid off, with Helen winning the praise of an international publishing house with the Emerald/EFMD Outstanding Doctoral Thesis Award. And as a young academic with a PhD complete and ripe for generating publications, Helen was snapped up for a lecturing position, and promoted soon afterwards.

“Then, the first article I sent off from the thesis was rejected outright! One minute I’m being told it’s an award-winning thesis, then I get a complete rejection.”

You do have to develop a tough skin, says Helen, and to take pride in your achievements.

“I celebrated getting my literature review finished, submitting my first draft, receiving my examiners’ reports. They are all significant milestones, and a PhD is a long journey – you need to congratulate yourself every chance you get!”

“When you’re at university, it’s easy to forget that having a doctorate is a big achievement because so many people in that environment have one. But it is a big deal, it’s something relatively few people ever attain and it is something to be truly proud of.”

Helen’s thesis has been formally recognised by the Division of Commerce as being of exceptional quality.



Helen Tregidga says she loved doing her PhD at the time. And looking back, she loved it even more.



Elisabeth Liebert's Master's degree led her deep into the world of John Milton, which in turn led her to Otago's John Hale, an international authority on the renaissance poet. So when she embarked on her PhD, it was her choice of supervisor that brought her – intellectually, at least – to Otago.

Dr Elisabeth Liebert

PhD in English | Completed 2006

Assistant Professor, Shreveport University, Louisiana

A single mother of two children, and based in Christchurch, Elisabeth undertook her Otago PhD by distance, working at home. "Luckily, I like working alone," she comments. She has high praise for the Library's interloan system, and their willingness to post the books she needed. And providing for her family while living on a University of Otago prestigious scholarship gave Elisabeth the only deadline she needed. "I had to get finished in three years. There was no alternative."

So Elisabeth's PhD on the use of direct speech in *Paradise Lost* became her job, "not a hobby". She started writing on day one, and says she has at least 20 versions of her first chapter on her computer. "They mostly didn't eventuate. But it got my ideas down, it got me thinking."

While Elisabeth may not have made it to Dunedin for any length of time, she took other opportunities to involve herself in an international community of scholars.

She is grateful for the generous travel grant that made it possible to attend a conference in France, and advises all postgraduate students to make themselves aware of the funding support that's available. Plus Elisabeth took up a Fulbright scholarship to study in Wisconsin, an experience she heartily recommends.

"It opened up entirely new perspectives on my research, and ultimately gave great depth to my PhD."

And despite the distance between Elisabeth and her supervision team of John Hale and Lyn Tribble, she believes their unflagging support made all the difference to her thesis. "They were both excellent supervisors. I would email them work, and they would read it straight away, and provide excellent, thoughtful feedback. At my presentation at the Milton conference, John took detailed notes and we had a thorough debriefing session. I knew I was lucky. Other postgraduate students there were impressed by the level of support I was receiving."

Nevertheless, Elisabeth urges students to be proactive about ensuring their supervisory relationship meets their needs. "Remember, it's your PhD. Go to meetings with your supervisor [prepared] to get out of them what you need. I prepared with questions I wanted to ask, and knew what direction I wanted the meeting to take to help with my thesis."



If you have a particularly thorny problem with your PhD, head for the hills. That's the advice of Matthias Futschik, whose PhD broke new ground in using computers to model the behaviour of molecules.

Dr Matthias Futschik

PhD in Information Science | Completed 2003

Group Leader in Computational Biology, University of Algarve, Portugal

Quite aside from labs and equipment, the best resource Otago had to offer was its proximity to the mountains. "I was ski-touring on the Fox Glacier and, in this wonderfully meditative atmosphere, I managed to get a fresh perspective on a scientific problem that I had been struggling with. The new approaches I came up with that day eventually led to a paper in *Genome Biology*."

Not only did the wilderness provide Matthias with a chance to clear his head, he says being away from the computer meant he was less inclined to "go to Google for the answer". "I could think more independently, and my answers ended up being less conventional and more innovative than they might otherwise have been."

Likewise, explaining your research to someone 'out there' without the help of computer presentations can improve enormously your writing. "It was illustrating the behaviour of cancer cells to a friend while kayaking down the Clutha that gave me the new ideas for how to 'tell the story' of what was happening in my research."

Indeed, Matthias says he cannot emphasise enough the need for scientists to learn to write well, and to tell their stories in an intriguing way. "You need to rise above your

dry data, and really communicate. That is what the top journals are looking for. That's what will set you apart."

The significance of writing and publishing hit home when Matthias went to apply for academic positions. "The PhD is just the entry ticket. Everyone has one of those," he points out. "What makes the difference is your publishing record."

It was the advantage of working in a brand new field, he acknowledges. "It's easier to contribute something new, and you don't have to read as much!"

Matthias also recommends taking every opportunity to make contacts with others in the discipline. Beyond attending conferences, he goes as far as to suggest spending time studying at another university as part of the PhD, to cement relationships within one's research community.

Finally, Matthias offers advice he knows is easier to give than to follow: "Relax. Dunedin is the most amazing place to study. My drive home to Portobello was the most beautiful commute I've ever had. Looking back, I cannot understand why I stressed out so much. Go to the beach while you've got the chance to do so."



Asked to describe his overall impression of his PhD journey, Paul Johnston gives a one-word answer, “Long.” Paul worked on his thesis part-time from 2001 to 2007 while also employed as a research scientist at Crop and Food Research in Christchurch, and taking time off to care for his two children. His aim for both his Crop and Food and PhD research was to investigate how to increase the genetic diversity of barley, improving its resistance to pests and disease. The overlap between roles had its advantages, and its complications as well.

Dr Paul Johnston

PhD in Biochemistry | Completed 2007

Research Scientist, Crop and Food Research

“The challenge was knowing when I had done enough to call it a PhD. As a scientist, my work required that I start applying the results of my experiments, and refining them further. But for my PhD I had to know when to draw a line under what I had achieved, and present it as a total project.”

And six years in the world of genetics is a long time. “From the time I wrote my literature review to the time I completed my experiments, they had sequenced the rice genome. Papers were coming out every day presenting new ideas and directions.” Paul’s solution was to present the thesis as a timeline, and the advances in the discipline became an integral part of the overall narrative. He gives his supervisors much credit for supporting this approach, and knows other scientists who haven’t been so lucky.

Indeed, Paul says he cannot stress enough the importance of great supervisors. His were seasoned, established academics, “with no interest in making the process more complicated than it needed to be.” Yet, he remembers realising at some point that they were also human. “You reach the stage where they are advising on what to do, yet they know less about the literature or approaches than you do.”

The realisation that you know more than your supervisors is somewhat daunting, but also quietly liberating, suggests Paul. “You need to have faith in your own thoughts, and know that if you are diligent and careful and follow a process, your confidence in your field will grow – and you will get a PhD in the end.”

In fact, Paul says his only regret is that he didn’t push the boundaries more. In particular, he wishes he’d made more of the conferences he attended where he had the chance to rub shoulders with international barley researchers, and pursued potential collaborations.

“Basically I was too shy. And so were they, probably. Science is full of introverted people.”

Paul’s thesis has been formally recognised by the Division of Health Sciences as being of exceptional quality.

Dr Bastiaan Star

PhD in Zoology | Completed 2008

Researcher, Centre of Ecological and Evolutionary Synthesis, University of Oslo

Bastiaan had entered the PhD programme with qualifications in marine biology and several years' experience working in the Dutch fisheries industry. Deciding to pursue a wholly theoretical PhD drew him into a whole new world of mathematics and computer programming – all of which he taught himself.

“I felt out of my league for a while. I realised there were some very smart people making contributions in this field.”

But having completed his PhD in just over three years, Bastiaan offers a vision of life from the other side. In fact, he describes his PhD as having been “very smooth, and not really very stressful.”

He puts his success down to a mixture of a “supportive, approachable” supervisor, like-minded PhD colleagues, fascination with his subject and a good dose of grim determination. And on the up side, he says he's pleased to have gained so much knowledge, and so many new skills.

To others who might be feeling daunted, Bastiaan advises, “Make sure you take enough time off to relax, enjoy life and keep trying! Don't be afraid of hard questions, or hard concepts. The best ideas often arise when you're relaxed.”

Just learning the jargon is a necessity for most complex concepts. And often, suggests Bastiaan, it's a case of mind over matter – the secret is not letting yourself become overwhelmed by

how difficult ideas seem. “If you're scared of something, it's harder to understand it. Just work your way through the ideas, step by step, and the logic should emerge.”

Bastiaan says that faced with the enormous new field of research he had entered, he felt incapable of producing a literature review. Instead, he went straight into writing research papers, all published in the same journal, and each looking at a different aspect of his research problem. These eventually became the chapters of his thesis. “Taking this approach was a huge boost to my productivity, and my confidence. I felt like I was actually achieving something!”

Furthermore, because all the papers were peer reviewed, Bastiaan says the process removed much of the stress at the end of the thesis.

Now, Bastiaan will be putting his knowledge to use as a postdoctoral fellow, investigating the connection between genetics and marine ecology using cod populations in Norway as a model system. He comments that one of the advantages of completing a PhD is that everything else in life seems relatively easy. “I have learned to adapt to a demanding situation before and this time, I don't have to write a thesis at the end!”

Bastiaan's thesis has been formally recognised by the Division of Sciences as being of exceptional quality.



Bastiaan Star remembers the first papers he read when he embarked on his PhD in population genetic theory. “They were completely incomprehensible. I could not understand them at all.”



It's not the fact that you have ups and downs in your PhD that took Rebecca McLeod by surprise. It's that the swings can happen so quickly. "You can wake up in the morning thinking, 'My PhD is rubbish', decide you're a genius at lunchtime and be ready to quit by evening."

Dr Rebecca McLeod

PhD in Marine Science | Completed 2008

Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Department of Marine Science, University of Otago
MacDiarmid Young Scientist of the Year, 2008

Rebecca's peaks and troughs involved more than her rugged boat trips from Bluff to Milford, during which she collected data on energy flux in Fiordland's marine communities.

Rather it included issues like "coming to grips with criticism", which Rebecca found one of the hardest aspects of moving among the higher echelons of academia, compared with her undergraduate years.

"As an academic, you have to put yourself out there. And it's hard not to take it personally when people are criticising the work that you're investing so much of your life in. But I came to realise that they're usually right. And if you do take the feedback on board, your work definitely improves."

It doesn't help that the process of "putting yourself out there" can occur in quite daunting settings. One conference in Canada involved over 2000 scientists, with 16 simultaneous session streams. "It was pretty hard," she recalls, "there were so many people there that most stuck with the few that they knew." However, Rebecca approached two of the leading academics in her field, who then attended her presentation, and gave great feedback that ultimately led to her having a paper accepted for publication.

The experience contrasts with a smaller, "much friendlier" and, she believes, more rewarding Australian conference.

These international experiences were all part of the "amazing adventure" of doing a PhD – which for Rebecca also included detours to the Canadian Rockies and Antarctica, and saw her spend a week per month in Fiordland.

"It needs to be fun. If you're not passionate about it, I can't see how you would keep going."

Passion, and a healthy dose of perspective. Rebecca took a calculated approach to deciding how long her thesis should be. "I just figured, this project is supposed to be three years full-time. So the scale of the project is something that can be achieved in that timeframe. If it's going to take longer, it may mean it's too big."

What's more, continues Rebecca, "The thesis is really a working document. It's what you use to generate papers and further research. If you obsess about it being a perfect endpoint, you'll never hand it in."

Rebecca's thesis has been formally recognised by the Division of Sciences as being of exceptional quality.



Undertaking a PhD in an area with few job prospects was both a help and a hindrance for Paul Roche. “On one hand there was always the question hanging over me, ‘what am I going to do next?’ At the same time, I knew this might be my only chance to spend years properly exploring something I loved. The fact there might not be a job at the end made the time all the more precious.”

Dr Paul Roche

PhD in Classics | Completed 2006

Lecturer of Latin, University of Sydney

Indeed, Paul believes being motivated by the PhD for its own sake was a key part of enabling him to maintain momentum throughout the study. That, and the clock ticking on the scholarship. Paul says he is very appreciative of receiving bridging grants from the University.

On writing a thesis, Paul suggests, “It’s a good idea if you know what a final version of what you want to do looks like. I was writing a commentary on an epic poem by Lucan, called *De Bello Civili*. So I looked at other commentaries, read reviews of them, and came to understand what was an acceptable level of scholarship.”

And knowing that such works are never perfect, and never finished, Paul adds that he took significant courage from one scholar’s rule of thumb, “When it’s more right than wrong, let it go.”

Beyond that, Paul’s secret to completing the thesis was making constant, steady progress. “I wasn’t too stressed, and I didn’t work all the time. Basically, I showed up most work days, and worked for most of the day. I set lots of tiny goals that meant nothing to anyone else but me. Just things like, ‘I will hand in this section in three weeks.’”

He wrote steadily, allowing his thesis to grow incrementally, noting, “You get much further critiquing something that’s written down in words, rather than an idea you’re thinking about.”

Likewise, Paul’s recommendation for communicating with supervisors is “regularly” especially at the start of the PhD process. “Even if it’s just five or 10 minutes at a time. It’s important to build a relationship with your supervisor, and to establish expectations. That’s done through actually talking to each other.”

Despite Paul’s career concerns, he landed a position at the University of New England, Armidale, soon after the submission of his thesis. He’s now grateful in hindsight for the schooling he received for life as an academic. “I entered this position with teaching experience, publications and good contacts from having attended conferences. My supervisors gave me a lot of practical advice as well.”

Says Paul, “I’m very lucky, I love what I’m doing.”



Rosanna Rahman did not treat her PhD as a 9 to 5 job. Her working day lasted more like 12 hours, with few weekends off. Such was her determination to complete her thesis within a three-year time frame.

Dr Rosanna Rahman

PhD in Pharmacology | Completed 2006

Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Neurology, Massachusetts General Hospital, Harvard Medical School

She declined distractions such as teaching positions, arguing that in the long run, “The time devoted to demonstrating can push your PhD into a fourth, fifth or sixth year, and the money made from teaching doesn’t cover the additional tuition fees and living expenses, you end up losing far more money than you gain.”

It was a “grilling degree”, Rosanna says, and looking back, wishes she’d taken a break between finishing her PhD and starting her next position. “I was pretty burned out. It took a while to recover.”

Given the huge demands a PhD poses, Rosanna has one overwhelming piece of advice to PhD students to ensure the efficient completion of their project: “Write. Write. Write.”

Rosanna was exploring whether catechins, a compound found in green tea, was effective as an acute treatment for stroke patients. “I started researching and writing my introduction from the first day of my PhD and, as soon as I finished an experiment, I wrote it up. It meant that at the end of the PhD, I didn’t go through that crazy, crippling time I saw many other students go through. I basically compiled everything together, tidied it up and handed it in.”

Rosanna explains that writing early and writing often is more than a time management technique, but a great boost to the quality of the thesis. “Your understanding of your topic increases exponentially when you write. So if you are writing from early on, you become smarter sooner in the process, and you can apply that knowledge to the rest of the PhD.”

She adds that in her research group, students would routinely contribute to one another’s papers, “even just a few paragraphs”. It was a practice that at once got students writing, familiarised them with the process of publishing, and ensured a very productive department.

Now, as a research scientist at Harvard Medical School, she points out that academia, “only gets more competitive”. Her tip: “Apply for any grant or scholarship you can. Even if it’s just a \$500 travel grant. Employers want to see that you have a track record of securing funding, and there may not be too many other opportunities to demonstrate this during your PhD.”



If Robert Peden had his way, he would start on another PhD tomorrow. “I loved every minute of it,” he says. “It was an absolute privilege. It was one of the most challenging, rewarding, satisfying and interesting things I have ever done.”

Dr Robert Peden

PhD in History | Completed 2007

Researcher/Writer, Waitangi Tribunal

Robert came to Otago to work with landscape history guru Professor Tom Brooking. After attending university for the first time in 1969, Robert spent most of his adult life working on high country sheep stations. He returned to academic life in 1999, completing Honours and Master’s degrees in history before launching into his PhD in the agricultural transformation of New Zealand’s tussock grasslands.

So if Robert found the PhD experience a bit isolating, at least he was used to it. “It is a bit hopeless though. No one else has the slightest idea what you’re up to. You can’t even start up a conversation at a party – people’s eyes just glaze over!”

But no matter what others might think of your project, Robert insists that it needs to be fascinating to you. “Make sure you choose something with enough juice to get you through to the end.” He warns against being lured to projects with research funds attached, that may not be of your choosing. “Remember, you have to live with this night and day. And it needs to be your project – you are investing so much into it and you need to feel free to pursue interesting lines of study should they arise.”

But with that comes Robert’s further words of wisdom, “Sort out your research questions as soon as possible. If you keep it too open for too long there’s a great deal of opportunity

to become sidetracked. It’s an easy way to lose time.”

Robert says he came into the project with a clear idea of what he wanted to achieve, and the momentum of the study carried him along. While he did go through a distinct “writing up phase” at the end of his thesis, he wasn’t starting from scratch. He’d had a journal article published, four chapters started as conference papers and further work doubled as a book chapter.

The worst thing about the project was finishing, recalls Robert, who now works freelance as a researcher and writer for government departments, and who has just received the Claude McCarthy Fellowship to write a book based on his thesis. “I went through some post-thesis blues, definitely. I had lived with this all-consuming project, this passion, for years, and suddenly it was gone.”

Robert’s thesis has been formally recognised by the Division of Humanities as being of exceptional quality.



Despite the good advice Mele Taumoepeau had received about seeking a high quality supervisor, reality took the decision somewhat out of her hands. Mele's preferred supervisors were overseas or busy. And as a mature student who had neither researched this area of psychology before, nor studied at Otago, she had neither the contacts nor knowledge to open the right doors, or know which ones to knock on.

Dr Mele Taumoepeau

PhD in Psychology | Completed 2006

Research Fellow, Department of Psychology, University of Otago

Ultimately she was paired up with a new academic in the department, with a similar research interest in children's social cognition, keen to help her explore how children develop an understanding of their social world. "He turned out to be fantastic. But it was luck."

All the same, Mele says she didn't rush into the arrangement. "I read his CV and the publications he'd written. I met him, took away some readings, met him again. I was sussing him out. The most important thing is that you get on, and I wanted to be sure of that."

The shift from working life as a speech language therapist to full-time study and parenthood was "tricky" says Mele. And as two newbies, Mele and her supervisor were in a similar situation, both figuring out the systems at Otago. "There was another postgrad in the department who saved me, basically," remembers Mele. "She would tell me where to get money for conferences from and how things worked."

Mele also acknowledges the support of her husband and friends, as well as the University's Pacific Islands Centre. She made the effort to attend as many symposiums and social events as possible, "often with my two daughters in tow – they came everywhere with me".

She came to rely on the University childcare and Kelsey Yaralla Kindergarten, "which became like extended families".

"Towards the end I imported my in-laws from the UK to look after the kids so I could get my thesis finished."

PhD study was, says Mele, a juggle. And a somewhat self-indulgent one at that. She was constantly aware that she was being afforded an opportunity to immerse herself in a field of study, and recalls a sense of great responsibility to make the most of it.

But, she says, "I adored it. It was difficult, and I remember looking at a stack of 30 journal articles in an area I'd never studied before and realising I needed to plough through them. But the wonderful thing was, I was allowed to!"

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