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Managing the second year of your PhD: Data collection and upgrading from an MPhil to a PhD

Rebecca Denniss & Catherine Talbot

Your PhD typically takes the following course: Getting to grips with the literature and necessary research skills in the first year, conversion to PhD status and data collection in the second year and third year dedicated to writing up the thesis. This article aims to provide guidance and information for the crucial second year.

Upgrading from an MPhil to a PhD

At many UK universities, prospective PhD students are enrolled on an MPhil course before transferring to a PhD. This process is usually referred to as an ‘upgrade’ or ‘transfer’, marking an important milestone in the PhD journey. The process of upgrading varies between institutions, but students are generally required to attend a mini-viva and submit a report outlining the work they have completed so far as well as their plans for the remainder of the PhD. The purpose of this process is to assess the student’s progress, their ability to complete the work within the time-frame, and whether the work is of sufficient quantity and quality required for a PhD.

For many students, the upgrade is the first real assessment of their work. It is important to remember that this is a useful process, providing an excellent opportunity to receive feedback on your work from an academic not directly involved in your research. The upgrade is a formative assessment to make sure you are on track to achieve a PhD, meaning any misunderstandings can be highlighted and discussed. Take this as an opportunity to consider other ideas and think about how your research can be improved. This can only benefit you and your research. It is also important to remember that the upgrade viva will take place between one to two years of your PhD, so by this time you will have secure knowledge about your topic area – don’t underestimate your own abilities and have faith in the knowledge you have accumulated during your studies!

It is important to work hard and prepare carefully for the upgrade to be successful, receive useful feedback, and get the most out of the process. In the upgrade report provide as much detail as possible and use this opportunity to showcase the work you have completed to date (e.g. literature review, draft journal article, etc.). By providing these examples, you can demonstrate your ability to produce PhD standard work and also receive more detailed feedback from your examiners.

For many students the mini-viva is the most intimidating part of the upgrade. You can prepare for the viva by going through your work, writing down potential questions you could be asked, and by conducting a mock viva with your supervisors or fellow PhD students.

As previously mentioned, the upgrade is a fantastic opportunity to receive feedback on your work from people who are not part of your supervisory team. It is therefore important that the examiners have experience in your area so that you can receive comprehensive feedback. Students will often be involved in selecting their panel, so it is important to choose people who are experienced in either your topic or method. If you are not involved in choosing your upgrade panel, ask your supervisor why a certain person was allocated and what experience they have.

The upgrade examiners will provide you with a lot of feedback during the viva. It will be difficult to remember all the feedback you receive as you will be focused on formulating answers to their questions. This will be even more difficult if you are trying to take notes during the examination. Ask your supervisor if they can sit in on your viva and take notes for you. If this is not possible, ask the examiners if you can record the discussion. By doing this, you will have a record of all the feedback, which you can then implement in your research and use to prepare for the final PhD viva.

Following the upgrade, postgraduate students often experience a ‘PhD slump’ consisting of a loss of motivation, focus, belief, and passion for their work. This is completely normal due to the energy devoted to this process. To get over the post-upgrade slump, take a break from your work to avoid academic burnout. After a break from your research, you can return to the PhD feeling refreshed and ready to continue with your work. Make sure you celebrate overcoming this important milestone by engaging in some well-deserved self-care – you’ve earned it!

Data collection

Ideally you want to get your data collected efficiently so it can be analysed and you can move forward. It is possible that it’s going to take you longer than you would like and it’s best to plan for it not going smoothly; this applies to whatever kind of research you are doing. Remember the hurdles you come across are only there to make you jump higher, every challenge can be overcome and you will learn from them all. Different kinds of research present different problems. Here are a few to consider:

Using dyads or groups

Here you are trying to get more than one participant in the same place at the same time, or getting the same person to turn up on a number of specific occasions. You will have times when insufficient people for your research protocol show up at the designated time and place, leaving you trying to rearrange; being aware of the potential for this to occur at the outset is important. There are some problems in data collection that you cannot prevent as they are out of your control; ensure that you are as organised as you can be in your participant communications and remain calm in the face of trying times.

Longitudinal research

Similarly there will be times when conducting longitudinal research that your participant is not able to make the specified time. As far as possible try to account for this in your research design and be understanding. In longitudinal research it is important to build a rapport with your participants to keep them engaged for the long haul, which can be very rewarding.

Use of technical equipment

When using technical equipment in your research, for example, eye-tracking, retinal imaging, EEG or biopacks (along with associated computer-based tasks) there will be occasions when one component or another goes wrong. It’s inevitable. This is where you need to have an excellent relationship with the people working in your technical resources office! Use this opportunity to engage with your participants as you try to iron out the glitches; remember everyone runs into problems in their work, whether in academia or outside it, and your participants will most likely sympathise.

Questionnaire-based research

This form of data collection is relatively straightforward and has the advantage of allowing you to collect quantitative and qualitative data. The major sticking point is numbers; you will need

many more participants than other forms of research to ensure there is enough power for analysis to allow for attrition (if the study is longitudinal) and for missing data. If you are stuck, and feel as though you have exhausted all avenues for participants, there are online services that may be helpful, for example, ‘Survey Exchange’ on Facebook.

Qualitative research

For those using interviews as the basis of data collection the number of participants required are fewer compared to other forms of person-based research, with the emphasis on in-depth analysis. For those using text-based data rather than interviews, the challenge is selecting the right original source data to analyse and whittle down. Your supervisors will give you guidance, however this is your research, you know what data you are interested in, so have the faith of your convictions.

For all forms of data collection persistence is the key. If there is one quality that all successful PhD students share it is unreasonable, unrelenting, persistence. You will get there, through hiccups, cancellations and disappointments. The flipside to the problems is that participants are generally fantastic. They are interested in what you are doing and will let you know that your research is worthwhile.

Throughout your second year remember you are an academic in training and you are not meant to have all the answers. Ask for help to find solutions, the worst anyone can say is ‘no’. Although you will have challenges as you move through this part of your PhD, take time to appreciate your achievements and reward yourself when you reach milestones.

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