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Positional Challenges and Advantages of a PhD Student Researching the PhD

Chang Da Wan

Universiti Sains Malaysia, ipptn.wan@gmail.com

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Abstract

It is fairly uncommon for a PhD student to conduct a study that looks at PhD education, and this paper discusses the challenges and advantages of my experience as a PhD student in conducting a PhD research about the PhD. This PhD research project was not an action research or self-reflective of my own educational journey. In this paper, I identify the challenges concerning my position as both a PhD student and a researcher exploring the educational processes of the PhD, and illustrate the ways I adopted to overcome these challenges. I also point out that having addressed these challenges; there are advantages due to the concurrent position of being a PhD student and a researcher that contributed to the development of new knowledge in the field of PhD education.

Keywords

Doctoral Research, Insider-Outsider, Reflexivity, Sensitivity, Hierarchical Pitfall, Interviewer-Interviewee Relationship, Doctoral Education

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Positional Challenges and Advantages of a PhD Student Researching the PhD

Chang Da Wan

Universiti Sains Malaysia, George Town, Malaysia

It is fairly uncommon for a PhD student to conduct a study that looks at PhD education, and this paper discusses the challenges and advantages of my experience as a PhD student in conducting a PhD research about the PhD. This PhD research project was not an action research or self-reflective of my own educational journey. In this paper, I identify the challenges concerning my position as both a PhD student and a researcher exploring the educational processes of the PhD, and illustrate the ways I adopted to overcome these challenges. I also point out that having addressed these challenges; there are advantages due to the concurrent position of being a PhD student and a researcher that contributed to the development of new knowledge in the field of PhD education. Keywords: Doctoral Research, Insider-Outsider, Reflexivity, Sensitivity, Hierarchical Pitfall, Interviewer-Interviewee Relationship, Doctoral Education

It is fairly uncommon for a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) student to undertake a PhD research project that examines PhD education, even in the field of higher education or doctoral education. Throughout my candidature period as a PhD student, my introduction about my research that is focused on PhD education has always been met with an interesting remark or question, “Are you studying about yourself?”

Admittedly, almost all literature in the field of PhD education has been carried out by established scholars to understand this area of higher education. As argued by Boud and Lee (2009), PhD education, or more broadly doctoral education, is a relatively new area that emerged in the recent one to two decades, where there has been a gradual but significant shift from thinking of the PhD in terms of its research output to a greater focus on the educational dimension. This educational dimension has led to the use of the term ‘PhD education’ that implied an explicit focus on the educative work in the form of activities and relationships involved in preparing and developing new researchers in the course of the PhD.

This paper is an autobiographical account of my experience as a PhD student who conducted my PhD research project in exploring the educational processes of the PhD. While the concurrent position of a PhD student and a researcher examining PhD education posed some challenges to the methodology, the concurrent position also has unique contribution to the findings of the research project. The first section of this paper provides an overview of the PhD research project. The second section identifies the challenges and discusses ways in which they were overcome, as well as the advantages of the concurrent positions of a PhD student researcher in the field of PhD education.

The PhD Research Project

My PhD research project focuses on gaining an understanding of the educational processes of the PhD (Wan, 2015). This includes examining the relationship between the PhD student and the supervisor(s), as well as formal and informal activities undertaken at the individual, interpersonal, departmental and institutional levels that shape the development of

PhD students in developing knowledge, skills and capabilities to produce a thesis and become a doctor. This project consisted of six case studies of six departments across three disciplines in four universities in England. The three disciplines are chemistry, economics and history. Across these six case studies, I interviewed PhD Programme Directors, supervisors and students, and these interviews were complemented by analysis of institutional and departmental documents to enable the following research questions to be answered:

1. What are the similarities and differences in the educational processes of the PhD across the six case studies?
2. In what ways, and to what extent, do the similarities and differences lead to complexity in the educational processes within and across institutional, departmental, interpersonal and individual levels?
3. What are the forms of complexity in these processes, and in what ways and to what extent does this complexity influence the development of PhD students?

The four universities were given pseudonyms – Taylor, Keynes, Smith and Hodgkin Universities; where Taylor and Keynes Universities are members of the Russell Group, and Smith and Hodgkin Universities were members of the now dissolved 1994 Group of Universities. The six case studies were (i) Department of Chemistry of Hodgkin University, (ii) Department of Chemistry of Taylor University, (iii) Department of Economics of Smith University, (iv) Department of Economics of Keynes University, (v) Department of History of Smith University, and (vi) Department of History of Taylor University. Having identified the six case studies, I began to negotiate access with the PhD Programme Directors. Invitation emails, along with the information sheet for the research project and a letter of support from my supervisors, were sent. This was followed by telephone calls to discuss the possibility of conducting interviews in the department. With the exception of the Department of Economics of Smith University, the first interview in each department began with the PhD Programme Director.

After gaining initial access and an interview with the Director, three potential supervisors were identified either independently or with the help and advice of the Directors. Where possible the selection of supervisors took into account differences in terms of gender, seniority and area of specialisation. Again, invitation emails were sent along with the necessary introductory documents and followed by telephone calls to arrange a date for the interview. During the correspondence with supervisors either before or during the interview, I asked the supervisors to suggest a list of their students, whereby the plan was to interview two students of a supervisor. Where possible the selection of students also took into account differences in terms of gender, domicile (international/domestic) and year of study. However, as it was difficult to get hold of the students' telephone numbers, I relied solely on email correspondence to approach the students. Thus, the response rate of students in terms of agreeing to participate in an interview was much lower due to the lack of interviewer presence (Dillman et al., 2009) as I did not have the opportunity to speak directly and invite them to participate. Moreover, for ethical considerations, I did not approach the students through their supervisors as they may feel compelled to participate and violated the principle that their participations were voluntary. In circumstances where students declined to participate or the fact that a supervisor only has one student, the students of the PhD Programme Directors were approached.

A total of forty-seven participants were interviewed, consisting of six PhD Programme Directors (as one of the departments has two PhD programmes), eighteen

supervisors and twenty-three students. The distribution of PhD Programme Directors, supervisors and students is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Participants, their Areas of Specialization, Departments and HEIs

Department & HEI	Area of Specialiation	Supervisor	Student
Department of Chemistry, Hodgkin University	Physical Chemistry	D2	St8
	Organic Chemistry	S1	None
	Inorganic Chemistry	S2	St6 & St7
	Physical Chemistry	S8	St9
	Doctoral Training Centre	D6	None
Department of Chemistry, Taylor University	Physical Chemistry	D5	None
	Materials and Inorganic Chemistry	S9	St16 & St17
	Computational Chemistry	S10	St11 & St15
	Organic Chemistry & Chemical Biology	S11	None
Department of Economics, Keynes University	Microeconomics & Applied Econometrics	D1	None
	Macroeconomics	S4	St1 & St14
	Macroeconomics	S7	St3
	Applied Microeconomics	S12	St12 & St13
Department of Economics, Smith University	Microeconomics, Management & History	S14	St20 & St21
	Applied Microeconomics & Econometrics	S15	St23
	Developmental Economics	S17	None
Department of History, Taylor University	European & Modern History	D3	None
	British Empire & Modern History Roman and	S3	None
	Ancient History	S5	St2
	Medieval History	S6	St4, St5 & St10
Department of History, Smith University	Rural, Economic, Social & Political History	D4	None
	British Political & Labour Movement	S13	St18 & St19
	History	S16	None
	American History	S18	St22

Source: Wan, 2015

As a PhD student researcher, I conducted all the interviews alone and the conversations were audio- recorded with the permission of the participants. I typically began the interviews with pleasantries and took the opportunity to thank the participants for their willingness to participate and make time for the interview. I then briefly explained the project in a general way, and reassuring them about confidentiality and anonymity. I also asked the participants to sign the informed consent sheet before proceeding to the interview.

Being an Insider and Outsider

One of the biggest methodological challenges of this research project was the paradoxical positions of me as an insider and outsider concurrently. The paradoxical roles and positions of an insider and concurrently an outsider of a researcher undertaking qualitative research cannot be fully resolved (see Acker, 2000; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). On the one hand, my position as a PhD student conducting this research about PhD education has shaped my position as an insider. There were instances where participants assume that I know what they were talking about in terms of their research activities or the structure of the

PhD programme in their universities and departments. There were also more than one instances where students began to talk about the problems they had with their supervisors, peers, departments and universities. For example:

One of my main problems has been my relationship with my supervisor and that has been a big part and integral to my research. ... I fought with my [former] supervisor and she no longer has anything to do with my studies here at Smith. And I have changed supervisor and that has been the sort of main problem that I didn't feel part of the university. ... I don't really want to bore you with the sort of my relationship with the first one, but it was quite a personality clash. She was very focused, ambitious and my project was moving away from what she thought was going to be, and my thinking was also moving away from hers. And I think the tension and clash came because she did not like where I was going, it was not her area and therefore she did not want anything to do with it. And that caused turmoil in my PhD and I did not really want to be here at all. That is why I am now quite behind. (St19, History, Smith University)

In addition, there were also participants who attempted to divert the interview towards talking about my experience of doing a PhD in another university from theirs.

On the other hand, I was an outsider to the participants. I was a student in the field of education instead of chemistry, economics or history, and at a separate university from the ones that were being studied. The position as an outsider was particularly obvious when participants took the trouble to provide a lot of background and contextual information in describing and explaining a particular point during the interviews. For instance, S1, who is a supervisor, explained the process in which a new student is matched to the supervisor:

So the two students who started with me, and the student who will be starting [soon], are what I would consider a traditional chemistry PhD. That is to say, that I am their sole supervisor. The university requires that every student have two supervisors. So there will be another staff member be listed as supervisor. But in reality, it is just me. That other supervisor, I guess will take over their project if I die or something [like that]. But essentially it will be just me, one supervisor and they applied formally to the university to be admitted into the PhD course but in reality they apply to me. So they email me, or called me up or I met them in the conference and they specifically discuss with me, my area of research and their motivation was primarily wanting to work for me on that area of research and I am the sole supervisor. (S1, Chemistry, Hodgkin University)

As S1 has to explain at length the matching process of a student and supervisor, this may be inferred as his perception that I was considered an outsider to the field of chemistry and Hodgkin University, which otherwise may be a known and typical process for students in chemistry or those at Hodgkin University. Similarly, S7 went at length to explain a unique feature of PhD in the field of economics where the emphasis on counting has been translated into a PhD thesis having three essays instead of one coherent monograph. Presumably, if S7 is explaining to a PhD student in economics, he might not have explained with such details and length on a disciplinary norm, except with an outsider to ensure he or she has a clearer picture, for instance:

Has that changed considerably from the time you actually did your PhD?

I think at the core, no. How the UK PhD training in my own area has changed is that it's become much more technical, much more focused, [and] much more specialized. For instance, this used to be a difference, and is no longer the case. And it used to be that in the US at the top universities when people wrote their PhD dissertations, they immediately wrote their dissertations in terms of 4 or 5 essays. They would immediately be transformed into articles for publications. So all there was needed to tie all of these things together as the dissertation, was that they were in the same field. They could treat totally different questions. I think that is a specialisation and a focus in expertise is quite different from all traditional centres of higher learning, where the idea is you actually have a single large important question and your dissertation explores all the different aspect of that question. The way, in which UK PhD training has changed, is that they just converge to the US model, and there are plusses and minuses on that, I think the profession almost demands that PhD students studying at the UK universities, if they want to be successful in the US or worldwide market. I think PhD dissertations everywhere, even in Singapore, China, are now converging on the US model.

Is this a unique feature of economics?

I think yes, because economics, promotion for advancement in the field, what people count are journal articles. Journal articles in certain selected journals. That's until maybe at the very end when someone is up for a Nobel prize, all the way the promotion prospects, the advancement prospects, prestige prospects, are based on almost just a sheer count of the number of articles you publish in the top journals. Now at the very end of that process, when places like Nobel committee look back and said, "Well, who should we give the price to?", they do take into account the collection of coherent ideas that would make someone a potential candidate for the prize. But up until that stage, for each step along the way, it is almost a mechanical count. And I think that vision falls back into people's PhD training. How many, can I get 5 of my essays published in the top journal. (S7, Economics, Keynes University)

Thus, in recognizing the potential paradoxical insider-outsider perspective, I maintained a principle of being open-minded and deliberately probed the participants and asked them to explain, describe and elaborate the points they made when I know or they assumed that I know what they were saying. Having a set of questions and probes also helped me to avoid assuming or inferring what the participants were saying during the interviews.

Avoiding "Hierarchical Pitfall"

As pointed earlier, a large majority of studies on PhD education were conducted by established scholars. The qualitative research methods commonly used to gather empirical evidence in relations to PhD education were predominantly from interviews and observations, whereby the interviewer- interviewee or researcher-participant relationships can play an important role in influencing the empirical data and findings. However, in this case, my position as a student researcher contributed to a different dynamic in the

interviewer-interviewee relationship. Through minimising the status differences between interviewer and interviewee, this is a potential way to avoid the “hierarchical pitfall” (Reinharz, 1992).

My position as a student has certainly bridged the differences and levelled the status between my role as the interviewer and the role of participants as interviewees. With students, my position gave the perception of equal status, and this may enabled them to be more open in sharing their opinions, experiences and problems. With the supervisors and PhD programme Directors, my position as a PhD student certainly gave the perception of being hierarchically lower. Hence, this may have been seen as less threatening for academics to share and talk about their role, involvement and opinions about the training and development of their students, as compared to an interview with external evaluators or more established researchers.

For example, there were academics who have been forthcoming in providing a critical assessment about the PhD programme in their institutions. S11, who is a supervisor in chemistry, has openly commented during the interview about the provision of generic and transferable skills, known as the Robert’s agenda, whereas in Taylor University, students have to earn certain number of Robert’s point by attending these training sessions. He described:

I am not a huge fan of Robert’s point. I am trying to think about precisely what it is that I dislike. Essentially, I think quite a lot of students find that there are scrambling around for things that will give them points and they end up almost forced to go on courses that they are not interested in, just to get the points. We need to go back on one of your earlier questions, maybe this is a way in which PhD training has changed, in that, there is almost this necessity to do stuff not directly related to your research. There is this necessity to go and gain transferable skills, go on your course on business management or spreadsheets or whatever that you don’t actually need to complete your PhD but, now someone up there is saying, “Yes, you do need to do this.” (S11, Chemistry, Taylor University)

Presumably, the comments provided by S11 would not have been gathered with such tone and frankness, such as using words like ‘someone up there’ or ‘I am not a huge fan of’ a programme, if the conversation has been done by external evaluators or more established researchers. Due to the perception that I was a student researcher, the hierarchically lower status may have encouraged S11 and other academics to be much more forthcoming, open and critical about the educational processes of the PhD.

Similarly with students, the equal status of being a fellow PhD student also might have contributed to a more open conversation, especially involving their supervisors. The excerpt of St19 in the earlier section was an example where a student shared about the problem he had with his supervisors. Likewise, St20 was another student who openly discussed about the difficulty of meeting her supervisors in the interviews:

One thing is the quality of supervision. I do not know of other students, but from my own experience, quality of supervision is not good because one thing is I have no chance to meet [my] supervisors whenever I want. We need to get an appointment and we need to wait for two to three months to get an appointment. And it is really difficult to meet informally. I have two supervisors and we meet together, even in the first two years, I met them once a month. And then my final year, they were so busy, and then one of my

supervisors worked part-time, so then he only come here [the university] three days of a week. So it was really difficult to get an appointment, even once in three months or once in four months. The quality of supervision is not good. The other thing is when I send in my chapters to them, they did not correct them or even comment on them. I got most of the comments from going for conferences. And I submitted three chapters as a paper for conference and they read the paper and gave some comments. That is how I developed my thesis chapters. So then that is why I am not happy about the quality of supervision. But personally, they are very kind, very helpful and very cheerful. But academic-wise, the quality of supervision is not good. So for my final two years, because my PhD was more than three years, I had a lot of difficulties in meeting my supervisors and they did not comment much on my work. Comment and feedback are important, and if not, it is really difficult to move on. (St20, Economics, Smith University)

Although my position as a student researcher has an advantage in terms of students and academics being more open, critical and forthcoming in sharing their views and more importantly their problems and negative assessments, nonetheless, my hierarchically lower status also posed another challenge. In one of the interview sessions with S17, I waited outside her room for more than 30 minutes as one of her students turned up to meet her. During the 30 minutes, she got into heated argument with the student and scolded the student rather loudly that was audible in the corridor. As my interview took place after her student left the room, and having introduced myself as a PhD student researcher, she was clearly not in the mood to “entertain” another “student” whereby she remained with the computer and gave one word answers to several of the questions. The fact that my status was a PhD student may have given her the impression that she did not need to treat the interview in a professional manner. Hence, the interview lasted for only 10 minutes, as compared to other interviews that lasted on average between 30 and 60 minutes.

Respecting the “Space”

Furthermore, due to the nature of the sampling framework where participants were known to one another, there was a need to take into consideration the ethical issue of maintaining confidentiality and respecting the “space” between participants (see Raffe et al., 1989). For instance, supervisors and PhD Programme Directors were colleagues from the same department. Moreover, the reason a student was chosen was because of the participation of his or her supervisor. In most cases, PhD Programme Directors were aware that I would interview other colleagues and students, and supervisors were aware that I would interview their students. The students were also aware that I had interviewed their supervisors and that their supervisors knew that they were being interviewed. Therefore, there may be risk that information shared by the supervisor and student might potentially be revealed to the other party.

For this, I adopted an ethical principle in respecting the space between participants, which was not to share any findings from the interviews with any of the participants either during or immediately after the interviews. If a participant was interested in the findings, I arranged to contact them at a later date and share information after it had been analysed and was not identifiable to ensure I did not reveal any information and opinions from other participants. In addition, I also did not attempt to raise any of the concerns raised by a participant, directly or indirectly through the interviews with the other participants. For example, when a supervisor commented about his or her student’s progress, I did not attempt

to probe the students concerning the issue raised, and instead, remained steadfast to the interview protocol developed to also ensure that I did not at the spur of the moment reveal the comments of the supervisors.

Developing Trustworthiness and Credibility

As with all research, there is a need to establish trustworthiness in demonstrating the quality of the research and its findings. More so, as this research project involved a PhD student researching on the PhD process, the need to develop trustworthiness and credibility of the findings became much more crucial. Robson (1993) suggested that this would mean establishing the validity, generalisability, objectivity and credibility of the research design and the analytical procedures of the research. Importantly, this research study was not claiming generalisability, which is argued to be more applicable to research adopting an experimental design or quantitative method to generalise beyond the sample and make inferences about a population (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Punch, 2005). Instead, this study sought to establish trustworthiness and credibility by following Corbin and Strauss (2008) whereby:

Credibility indicates that findings are trustworthy and believable in that they reflect participants', researchers' and readers' experiences with a phenomenon but at the same time the explanation is only one of many possible "plausible" interpretations possible from data. (p. 302)

First, a major strategy to ensure the credibility of the research design and analytical procedures used in this study was to provide a clear "audit trail" of the research process (see Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In describing the methodology, I detailed the methods used, how the sampling framework was developed and how data were organised, sorted and developed, as well as the decisions I made when working with the data. The detailed description is much more important to this study given the fact that as a student researcher researching about a subject that I may be influenced or "blinded" by my own experiences and biasness the clear account supported the claim for rigour of the research process and allowed the research process, especially the analytical process, to be understood clearly by others.

Second, as to ensure the rigour of the research process, a number of principles were explicitly applied in the study. For example, purposive sampling of the case studies was based on the principle of selecting contrasting cases (Schofield, 2002), the research adopted an iterative approach to organising and analysing data to ensure consistency (Schutz, 1982; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009), and all findings, claims and arguments were grounded in data developed through the interviews and documents analysed using the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These principles and strategies were intended to ensure the rigour of the research process in that it was grounded in empirical evidence that fully reflected the participants' experiences of the educational processes in the PhD.

Becoming a Reflexive Researcher

Recognising the challenges as well as potential advantages of being a PhD student researcher, I was conscious of the need to be reflexive. Specifically in terms of analysing the data, Mays and Pope (2000) suggested that as a way to develop reflexivity, researchers should focus on the notion of sensitivity. In this respect, Corbin and Strauss (2008) propose three practical advices to enhance sensitivity of researchers, which are:

The first is to always compare knowledge and experience against data, never losing sight of the data themselves. The second is to always work with concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions, because it keeps the researcher focused on the similarities and differences in events and prevents being overwhelmed descriptive data. A third point is that it is not the researcher's perception of an event that matters. Rather, it is what participants are saying or doing that is important. (p. 33)

Taking onboard the advises to enhance sensitivity and reflexivity, I chose to remain grounded in the data, focused on the findings that emerged through comparing the similarities and differences, and giving the highest priority to the perception and experience of participants throughout the analytical procedures. For example, all claims made have to be substantiated by data through interviews or documents, and not by my personal experience or biasness as a PhD student.

Thus, my PhD research project is not about my own PhD experience. The project is entirely based on the views and experiences of the participants. Although my position both as a PhD student and a researcher in PhD education gave some advantages in terms of avoiding hierarchical pitfalls and developing more insightful, critical and frank findings; there were also challenges to overcome in negotiating my dual and paradoxical positions to establish trustworthiness and credibility of the research project and myself becoming a reflexive researcher.

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Author Note

Chang Da Wan (C. D. Wan) is a lecturer at the National Higher Education Research Institute (IPPTN), Universiti Sains Malaysia. He earned his Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Oxford in the field of higher education and was trained as an economist at the University of Malaya and National University of Singapore. His main interests lie in higher education and economics, and uses qualitative and quantitative methods to undertake a number of research and consultancy projects with the Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia, UNESCO-Bangkok and OECD including the Review of the Malaysian National Higher Education Strategic Plan, doctoral education, academic profession, academic governance and leadership, research and innovation management, transition from secondary to higher education, and prospects for Malaysian higher education in the Middle East and North African region. Currently, he is leading a team of researchers to prepare a policy paper on doctoral education in Commonwealth Africa for the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Facility, and also a co-researcher in Malaysia for the Asia Pacific Higher Education Research Partnership (APHERP) Research Cluster on Hybrid Universities in East Asia. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: ipptn.wan@gmail.com.

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