Motives and Aspirations for Doctoral Study: Career, Personal, and Inter-personal Factors in the Decision to Embark on a History PhD

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Abstract

While extensive research exists for both the doctoral experience and career paths after the doctorate, less is known about the initial motives for starting a PhD. In this study, 11 History PhD holders from an Australasian university were interviewed about their reasons for embarking on the doctorate. The motives and aspirations cited by the participants validate several of the categories identified in the limited existing literature, such as improving career prospects, personal development, and intrinsic interest in their discipline. Moreover, the data support the contention that candidates enter the doctorate with multiple motives. From this History sample, however, there were no overt motives relating to the participants' sense of their own identity and pressing social justice concerns or 'research as politics'. The data reveal that third parties (friends, colleagues, family members, and academics) when consulted prior to enrolment did play a generally encouraging role in the decision to start a doctorate. A recommendation emanating from this research is that universities consider offering workshops for would-be candidates before enrolment so that initial motives for doctoral study can be explored and reflected upon before a candidate embarks.

Keywords: motives for doctoral study; admission into doctoral programmes; doctoral advising; doctoral supervision; graduate recruitment.

Introduction

Why would a mature person decide to do a PhD? It is not urban myth that a significant number of doctoral students fail in completing their degrees, nor is the stereotype of the lonely dissertation student toiling away for years and years to finally stagger over the finishing line, exhausted and disillusioned. There is a body of quantitative and qualitative research proving that deciding to do a PhD is a high-risk strategy (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Powell & Green, 2007). Why would someone commit several years of his or her life studying for a degree when there was no guarantee of success at the end? These were the questions posed in this study to 11 individuals in Australasia who took up the challenge of a History doctorate; their answers provide, from a student perspective, qualitative data to better understand the complex decision-making process.

Researchers have explored how doctoral students 'navigate stages' (Grover, 2007) of their candidacy, with special

concern over student isolation as a cause of attrition in doctoral programmes (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Lovitts, 2008). Successfully embedding or socialising doctoral students within their departments has been identified as a key factor in supporting persistence (Austin, 2009). Major studies are also tracking candidates' career paths beyond the doctorate (Aanerud, Homer, Nerad, & Cerry, 2006; Denholm & Evans, 2009). While our knowledge of doctoral students staying in and then exiting the 'ivory tower' is advancing, less is known about the entering phase (Gill & Hoppe, 2009; Leonard, Becker, & Coate, 2005).

This paper, therefore, deals with this less understood aspect of the doctorate: the initial journey taken by students to enrolment. It takes its cue from Tatham and Denholm's provocative question in *Supervising doctorates downunder*: "If a doctorate is the answer, then what was the question in relation to career development?" (Tatham & Denholm, 2007, p. 262) This study is premised on the conjecture that PhD candidates (and their academic institutions) might avoid (or at least alleviate) the difficulties that the existing research indicates are likely to be encountered during the doctorate if both parties clearly understand the candidate's motives and aspirations from the outset.

There are a few British studies that touch upon the issue of initial motivation. Salmon's (1992) *Achieving a PhD* interwove narratives of 10 mature social science candidates recounting their own doctoral journeys in the late 1980s, several of whom were motivated by social justice concerns and their own sense of identity. From their discussions with successful candidates, Churchill and Sanders (2007) in *Getting your PhD* established five generic headings to categorise motives or reasons for embarking on a PhD: career development; lack of current job satisfaction; a personal agenda; research as politics; and drifting in. Leonard, Becker and Coate's (2005) study, 'To prove myself at the highest level', using the Education doctorate as a case study, discerned from their interview data the "powerful aspirational value of the doctorate" (p. 139). This desire of Education doctoral holders to prove themselves underscored both 'personal growth' and 'training and qualification' motives.

In addition to these British studies, a recent discussion on business professional doctorates (Gill & Hoppe, 2009, p. 31) proposes five motivational 'profiles' (and an associated personal objective) that could lead an individual to doctoral study: 'traditional' (entry into academia); 'advanced entry' (professional development); 'continuing development' (professional advancement); 'transition' (entry to a new career); and 'personal fulfilment' (self-enhancement). They also suggest that the first four profiles accord with different career stages; 'traditional' and 'advanced entry' relate to early-career candidates while 'continuing development' and 'transition' relate more to mid- to late-career candidates. The final profile, 'personal fulfilment', could apply to individuals at different stages of their career. Finally, they note that more than one profile could motivate an individual candidate. The empirical research in this paper builds from these earlier studies' exploratory insights to better understand the motives for doctoral study and the decision-making process (such as seeking independent advice or exploring alternative options) using the History PhD as a case study.

Publicity materials on university websites offer prospective students multiple reasons for doing postgraduate research. They represent the official inducements to attract would-be graduate students and act as a useful digest of how universities envision the benefits of graduate education for the student, in contrast to the research literature cited above. A sample from four leading Australasian research-led universities gives a flavour of the marketing messages in circulation. The University of Otago (2009) promises: "Studying at New Zealand's top-ranked university for research quality is a great career move. Your Otago postgraduate experience will equip you with the skills and knowledge to be successful anywhere in the world." Victoria University of Wellington (2009) proclaims: "Victoria University has a huge reputation internationally for academic excellence and calibre of its research and postgraduate study. Our graduate programmes are flexible

and continually changing to meet your needs, developments in the research community and the demands of the workplace." The University of Melbourne (2009) poses the question "Why do graduate research at Melbourne?" One of the reasons is that it "enrols and graduates more re-search students than any other Australian university". Under the heading 'Prepare for an engaging career' the website states: "Graduate research does a lot more than create specialist knowledge. Research students develop valuable professional skills for the research environment and beyond. In Australia, the majority of research graduates take on professional roles in business, govern-ment and other organisations, while about one third go on to careers in academia." The University of New South Wales (2009), under the strap-line 'Make the leap into postgraduate study' pro-claims: "Upgrade your qualifications and progress your career development with a postgraduate program by coursework or research." Ali and Kohun (2007) have noted that these publicity mate-rials rarely mention the challenges of graduate study, as their purpose is to attract new students. However, they do provide a set of extrinsic motives (better career prospects and access to a high-quality research culture) for study in contrast to the some of the intrinsic factors identified in the British studies mentioned above.

Unlike the North American PhD with its structured programme of study with taught courses, comprehensive exams, and eventual candidacy, admission to a humanities doctorate in Austral-asia is generally based on a would-be candidate applying for admission with a good Bachelors or Masters degree coupled with an original research topic that has the support of an academic de-partment. While many Australasian universities will have a provisional year of candidacy to en-sure that doctorates are progressing in a timely fashion, it is fair to characterise admittance to the Australasian doctorate as having fewer formal stages to pass through than the North American one. The doctorate is awarded solely on the merits of (and, in some instances, a defence of) the PhD thesis (dissertation). This state of affairs means that would-be candidates have potentially more ownership or attachment to their research topics from an earlier stage; however, they may miss opportunities to socialise without formal courses. The History PhD itself has been generally categorised a riskier undertaking due to the solitary nature of the research compared to doctoral candidates in other disciplines (Gardner, 2008). History doctoral candidates in Australasian uni-versities are likely to be lone scholars.

Method

This research uses qualitative data from 11 semi-structured interviews. Participants in the study had all completed a doctorate in History at a university in Australasia in the early 2000s. All had significant career experience – most were in their thirties or forties – before enrolling and starting a doctorate and did not fit the traditional path of the early-career would-be academic (Austin, 2002). A local professional historical journal each year lists doctorates in progress and completed, allowing identification of the sample. Approaches were made by the researcher to those meeting the criteria asking if they were willing to take part in the research. All 11 responded positively. Ethics permission was obtained to ask questions about the doctoral experience in a 40-50 minute recorded interview that was then professionally transcribed. Participants were then sent copies of the transcripts, giving them the chance to review and if required make changes to the final ver-sion. No reference to their specific research topics is made in this paper. Academia in Australasia is an exemplar of the two-degrees-of-separation truism and revealing too much detail could unin-tentionally provide clues about the participants' identities.

The research has a phenomenological character as the participants were drawing from their own lives, allowing them to describe their experiences. Data of this kind has the potential to be anec-dotal (Silverman, 1989) with researchers homing in on interview extracts that fit existing under-standings of the phenomenon or those comments that appear to the researcher exotic and quotable (Fielding & Fielding, 1986). Nonetheless, the presentation of the data is premised on the principle

that what the participants said in the interviews is what they meant and what they remembered, especially as they had the right to review transcript data in the cold light of day. The extracts quoted focus on the line of questioning in the interviews relating to the entry into the PhD: why and how they decided to pursue a History PhD. The paper cites comments that either responded directly or made reference to the following aspects of the interview: employment and career factors; personal motivations and aspirations; and the influence of friends, existing colleagues, family members, and academics. Minor textual edits have been made to exclude 'ums' and 'ahs' from the original transcripts. Personal pronouns and other potential identifiers have been removed, elided, or made gender-neutral to further ensure the comments remain anonymous. Kenneth Plummer's (1983) ethical reminder to researchers using this type of qualitative data to reproduce findings in good faith has been adhered to.

The cohort in this study represents 11 of a potential pool of 14 graduates from the university in question: seven women and four men. The remaining three graduates from the group of 14 were overseas when the research interviews were conducted during late 2008 and early 2009. Participants also agreed to complete a simple paper questionnaire prior to the recorded interview asking about their past educational qualifications, age at entry into the doctorate, time to completion, enrolment status, and current occupation. The average age at starting the doctorate was 48. Every person interviewed had significant work experience, including professions and careers such as school teaching, government service, business administration, creative industries, advertising, archaeology, running a small business, public relations, nursing, banking, and accountancy. While the age of the group might appear at first glance atypical, it is worth noting that almost one-third of new doctoral candidates at the university in question are aged over 40 and 60% aged over 30. So while the group had some interesting characteristics in the sense that none fit the profile of the aspiring early-career academic moving seamlessly from undergraduate to postgraduate research, several were making a high-stakes decision to embark on a doctorate.

Results

The transcripts were analysed using the categories identified in the existing literature. These were broadly the employment and career factors on one side and the personal motives on the other. A third category – the influence of friends, family, colleagues, and academics – was mentioned in all the accounts as a contributing factor in the decision to embark on the History PhD. However, it needs stressing that this tripartite division does not imply the motives were self-contained entities. Participants in this research revealed complex, overlapping reasons for the doctorate.

Employment and Career Considerations

All participants were asked about employment issues and how the History PhD had impacted on their existing and expected prospects. The answers reveal 'push' factors, such as sudden change in circumstances or on-going frustrations on the one hand, and 'pull' factors such as aspirations for more rewarding employment on the other. Five of the participants mentioned specific issues with their existing employment or career path as being triggers for thinking about completing a doctorate.

> R6 "My only option open at the time was to continue my existing job, banging my head against a brick wall and becoming more neurotic with each passing year."

> R8 "Basically [it was] circumstances. Around 2001 I found myself redundant in a part-time job and my contract work which I also did, the work was getting less and less and I just found I was in a position where I had to think about where to go from there."

> R2 "Then 9/11 happened…And I felt quite uncomfortable about the amount of travel and the security aspect, and also the nature of the job wasn't terribly attractive. I'd been be-

coming interested in History, and thought at that time, 'no I will take redundancy and look at further study'."

R9 "I was going to have time out from my career and I saw that [graduate study] as an opportunity to re-invent."

R11 "I worked for three or four years in another industry that I really wanted to work in. Basically I just got sick of that in terms of not being intellectually stimulated."

At the beginning of the PhD, eight participants had some career or employment goals with varying degrees of precision. The remaining three (R2, R5, and R7) were studying primarily for personal reasons. However, all three continued in paid employment during the doctorate.

Three of the eight with career aspirations had a conventional academic career as a possible outcome of the PhD. However, as R1's reflection emphasises, an academic career was only a partial consideration. For all three, an academic career was a hoped-for rather than expected outcome.

R1 "A PhD is a basic entry level requirement into being a lecturer. That was in the back of my mind. I think that I would have liked to pursue an academic career if the possibility arose certainly, but it wasn't the main motivation. I wanted to do it just for the sake of doing it mostly."

R9 "I did strongly flirt right throughout the PhD and even afterwards with the idea of going into academia so I wasn't thinking about coming back into my former career at all."

R11 "I like the idea of writing and lecturing. I'm very realistic. I didn't really look beyond the three years in terms of idealising anything. It was important to get through the degree and not drop out as so many people do, but I knew that if I stuck with it and I did well and I managed to publish then of course I would want to be a specialist in my area."

Two participants wove academic careers into their accounts of what they thought a PhD would do for their future career but in both instances were ambivalent about whether or not academia was what they wanted.

R3 "I thought a PhD would give me the qualification that meant that I got further up the queue if I was putting in an application for a contract history. I felt that at my age that an actual academic career was unlikely and probably not something that I particularly wanted."

R10 "Academic life generally entails travel and that's not hugely easy for me to do. So I was always quite clear about that both with myself, and if anyone asked me I'd say: 'Well I'll just have to see what happens.' It's a little bit outside of my control but I always felt that if I wanted to I could return to a different sort of career and it wouldn't hurt to have done this work [the PhD]. It would always be a good thing for me, instead of looking at it as narrowing your options I believed it actually widened the scope, so I was happy to undertake it."

R4 completed a doctoral History topic that related directly to his/her full-time profession. As such, there was no clear career outcome at the beginning since he/she already had an established professional status.

R4 "So I thought well you leap in and you do it and find out what happens."

Of the remaining two interviewees R6 aspired to "expand generally into the area of research and writing" as a living while R8 believed having a History PhD would equip him/her with the necessary qualification to undertake public policy work related to his/her dissertation topic.

The responses to the career questions substantiate the 'career development' and 'lack of current job satisfaction' categories identified by Churchill and Sanders (2007) as motives for the PhD. They also validate the motivation 'profiles' for mid- to late-career doctoral candidates proposed by Gill and Hoppe (2009). However, this History sample indicates that for some participants the existing categories do not fully encapsulate the uncertainties involved. As R4 and R10 alluded to, doctorates were started on the optimistic premise that something positive would eventuate. R10 reflected on this journey.

> R10 "In the end I decided it was better to go forward into something new than to go back to something that I'd done before, even though going back to the thing I had done before was appealing because it was easier. Many times I thought maybe I should have taken the easy path."

R4, with a well-established career, was unsure if doing the History PhD was a wise career choice at that juncture in life:

> R4 "I couldn't really see that it was going to be a career move as I'm older than some students, and I was already in a position of responsibility within my profession. It didn't necessarily make sense career wise. I don't know whether anybody would have recommended that I did a PhD in History for my career, which is quite a different position from others."

R6 articulated the calculated risk taken in leaving secure employment:

> R6 "You know you're wondering where the income is going to come from when you leap in the dark out of career like that which is what I did, so as for definite career goals or aspirations not really, I was mainly glad to be gainfully occupied and with a salary, all be it a modest one, for three years."

The modest salary R6 mentioned – a three-year doctoral scholarship supplemented with part-time graduate teaching – made the abstract appeal of pursuing a doctorate economically feasible for most the participants. Limited financial support was important in the decision-making process. Without funding it is questionable whether the 'pull' of the doctorate would have out-weighed the 'push' from the former career.

R6 recalled being awarded the doctoral scholarship as the end of the beginning:

> R6 "I got a scholarship from the University and it was all go."

Personal Motives to Complete a Doctorate

During the interviews participants revealed numerous idiosyncratic reasons for embarking on the doctorate. It was striking that no one from this sample overtly mentioned doing research as a form of political or social activism and only R2 articulated a sense of giving something back to the community as a motive. Likewise, a sense of personal or cultural identity (be it gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or social class) as a motivation was lacking. The small sample size could be a factor here and possibly the nature of historical research. Nine of the participants were researching historic topics that were primarily their own areas of interest; R3 was a member of a larger research cluster and R4 was researching a topic close to his/her field of professional practice. R10 came closest to 'drifting in' of the sample, but this only related to an initial yearning to return to formal study.

> R1 "After my MA I was ready for a break. I didn't want to continue with studies just at that time, so I went out and worked in a completely different field. But it was always, as I say, a long-term ambition to come back and do further studies when the time was right,

whenever that might have been, so it was always something that I planned to do at some point in time."

R11 "I finished my Masters and did well, and enjoyed it but hadn't had a break, a working break, in my academic career and was pretty much sick of it at the time. I think I'd always intended to come back and do the PhD, because I've always wanted to reach the zenith of whatever I'm doing."

R8 "The idea of doing a PhD was just something that I'd harboured within myself."

R1 "It [the doctorate] was purely for the achievement, to reach the pinnacle of scholarly achievement."

R7 "Well I guess the primary motivation was the Himalaya syndrome. It was there, it was the final step if you like to a University career as it was available to me and I wanted to do it, it was that last jump."

R2 "[I wanted by doing this PhD topic] to, to try to give back - this gets into what do you call it, altruism."

R10 "I had been at home for a few years child minding. So (laughter) it was time to get out of house."

R3 "And the proposed historical research project just seemed like something that was relevant to me and to be part of a research team, I really thought that all those things seemed to say 'well why not go for it'."

R4 "I did the PhD because of the topic rather than the other way round."

R5 "I found myself collecting material, researching as it were as I went learning. And I had decided that I was a magpie in terms of collecting research material and primary sources. So I thought maybe what I needed to do was formalise my collection, formalise some sort of topic instead of being like a magpie and pulling in all sorts of things that seemed quite interesting at the time."

R1 "The difficulty then becomes turning what's sort of almost a hobby if you like or a long-term interest or something that one reads as an interested amateur and turning that into a professional historical study effectively as a doctorate."

R9 "I had to believe in my own head I'd be very good at this [PhD] because it's too high risk to do it as a hobby, if that makes sense."

R4 "I thought 'you know, maybe you could write a History'. But I realised I'd never write a History if I didn't have supervision and so that's when I started thinking seriously about doing it [research project relating to professional practice] as a PhD."

R2 "I looked at the websites and read a huge amount and something from inside me said 'that's definitely what I want to do'. I didn't want to do a Masters even. I just wanted to go straight through to a Doctorate. I wanted to do the in depth original research over the four year period of time, nothing less. I was quite clear about that."

R5 "It [PhD] was motivated by wanting to do research and wanting to produce something out of the research, some sort of a bottle neck that if you did the research but you needed to do something actually with that."

R2 "I knew I wanted to write, but I also knew I wanted to have the discipline, the academic discipline, rather than writing the sort of histories which are very anecdotal."

> R11 "I didn't project too far and if I could finish it and if I could publish then I'd be happy."

> R6 "But at the same time I did the PhD with the firm intention of when I'd finished it, modifying it and everything, so that it would be publishable."

> R9 "So I was quite used to people mid-career doing doctorates and being very successful so I had this idea that it was possible. So I didn't go asking if I could do it I kind of knew you could."

> R8 "There's a foreign national buried in a remote graveyard and for years I had wondered why they were buried there and my curiosity was piqued."

> R6 "Some of my younger relatives were beginning to get doctorates ahead of me and I thought 'I'm not going to have them with doctorates and me not'."

Influence of Friends, Family, Colleagues and Academics

During the interviews several participants acknowledged that embarking on the PhD was risky or uncertain. We have already encountered metaphors such as R6 referring to "a leap in the dark", R4 "leaping in", and for R10 the attractiveness of "the easier path" associated with former employment. R3, part of a research cluster, recalled an initial feeling of:

> R3 "Stepping off the cliff and thinking: 'I'm going to give this a go even if I'm not sure'."

Since deciding to complete a doctorate is a major undertaking, participants were asked to recall any conversations about their intention to proceed with the doctorate or general prior knowledge of the doctoral experience. Only R2 mentioned desktop research of publicity materials on university websites as described in the introduction. R9 recalled perusing a copy of *How to get a PhD* (Phillips & Pugh, 2000). The rest of the information gathering mentioned in the interviews was face-to-face. Five participants referred to friends or family who had doctorates or were doing doctorates when they started. Both R6 and R9 were partly motivated in seeing successful completions from people they knew as the quotes in the preceding section demonstrate. R5 also had a family member involved in a doctorate who gave support.

> R5 "It was their sort of encouragement that 'you should go with this'."

However, awareness of the doctoral experience was for R2 and R4 more nuanced.

> R2 "I knew someone who found it [doctorate] very, very hard going, because it was such a solitary experience. I'm quite happy working on my own so I knew that it would be different for me, and time had moved on – universities operate quite differently now."

> R4 "It is a lonely journey. I had the benefit of knowing that there was a model because I knew someone who had done a PhD in the [United] States just several years before. And so I was very aware of the American PhD which involves classes and there's much more support there I think. So I was actively looking for ways of establishing that support here."

There was a continuum of responses from those who did consult with others at one side and those who saw no need in getting independent advice on the other.

> R3 "I've got a friend who's a lecturer, I'm sure I spoke to her… I spoke to my partner at some length about it (laughter). We had a long discussion in a kayak one night going somewhere; that it was obviously going to be big commitment from both of us."

R4 "I knew some professional colleagues who had done their PhD and talked to them probably in more of an informal way."

R11 "I think the only person I talked to would have been somebody about funding."

R7 "No I didn't [speak to anyone]. I don't think it was because I felt I knew everything about it, but having decided that I wanted to do it I couldn't think of anything that was going to prove too much of an obstacle, put it that way. I didn't see the necessity at that time of talking to anybody else."

R10 "No I didn't [speak to anyone], I suppose I should have maybe."

Doctoral advisors – informally as departmental heads, lecturers, or departmental graduate advisors or more formally as would-be dissertation supervisors – were instrumental as sources of encouragement and motivation in many of the recollections.

R8 "As I remember I wrote to my eventual supervisor and they responded full of enthusiasm, this was going to be the first time such a topic had been tackled here and I had an appointment with them and we discussed the concept. And then they suggested that I apply to the History Department as I remember and to put up a case."

R2 "I was going to investigate other departments to do a PhD. But I got as far as the History Department and talked to the head and they suggested the format of doing the Honours Course in a year and then going on [to the PhD]."

R4 "I think they [supervisor] were fairly positive about taking me on because I guess I'd got to know them during that year [of previous study]."

R11 "I'd had a good relationship with my Masters supervisor, and remained interested in the same area and they had always encouraged me to do a PhD. So I knew when I was ready I only really had to email them, sense if they were still around and wanted to work with me."

R9 "Then they said to me 'you should stay on a do a Masters' and I said 'no I haven't got time for that, I want to do a PhD'. And they said, 'fine just put in a proposal', and I think that's when they volunteered to be a supervisor."

R3 "I just happened to come along to a public lecture at the university and was talking to them there and they said to me, 'there's a big project coming up, why don't you think about doing it?'"

R5 "I drew up a proposal, I brought it down to show the Head of the Department at the time and they said 'yes I like that, the History Department would be interested in having that as a topic'."

R10 "It's quite a positive thing to have that [doing a PhD] suggested [by a supervisor] because you think, 'well maybe I can do it' because it hasn't entered your head before."

R1 "I think that the Department and my supervisor would have been happy for me to jump straight into a PhD but it was me who wasn't quite ready just at the start."

R7 "I discussed the matter [PhD topic] with an academic who was prominent in the upper echelons of the Department, who was very helpful in their advice at that time, and I think largely as a result of whatever discussions took place then, a supervisor was proposed and I happily accepted."

Discussion

There are several reasons why this sample's data cannot be extrapolated out to all doctoral candidates. History, of course, is a discipline that looks back. Questions in the interviews were answered with the benefit of hindsight. What participants remembered about their motives, hopes, and aspirations might have been selective memories. While the group were in no way lured by the siren calls of university publicity materials – only R2 made mention of searching websites – they did have an attachment to History itself which might be a peculiarity of the discipline; dissertation topics were chosen primarily from personal curiosity about specific aspects of the past that meshed with supervisors' areas of expertise rather than for practical or pragmatic reasons. This may well differ in other fields of doctoral study where projects are elements of larger research endeavours. None of the participants were embarking on a PhD in their early- to mid-twenties, thus excluding a significant sector of most doctoral cohorts. Finally, the sample was 11 people, a robust-sized data set for the particular department in question but not large enough to be in any sense representative of all doctoral candidates.

These limitations notwithstanding, the interview data confirm the veracity of several of the existing categories for embarking on a doctorate and validate the insight that the initial motives for completing a doctorate can be multiple and complex (Leonard et al., 2005; Gill & Hoppe, 2009). Despite the relatively small number of participants, this level of "theoretical saturation" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p.102), the researcher hearing different versions of the same themes, indicates that there is a degree of reliability in the findings. Moreover, the data from this sample suggest that friends, colleagues, family members, and academic advisors can also encourage or motivate would-be candidates to proceed. Several participants from this sample were not only seeking to test themselves at the doctoral level but to prove themselves in the eyes of significant others.

The element of risk and uncertainty involved in embarking on the doctorate was expressed by several of the participants. This was not only related to the career implications but also the probability of actually completing the doctorate. R11 mentioned that being aware from the outset that many candidates failed to finish their dissertations. In contrast, R4 recalled only finding out halfway through the doctorate about the attrition rate:

> R4 "I remember going to a university workshop for PhD students and they gave us the awful statistics on how many people fell over in the first and last year. I was about to give up at that point and then I thought 'no, there's no way out'."

R4 had the wherewithal to continue with the studies to eventual completion. However, since anxieties were recalled by many of the successful History PhDs, it raises the question of the fate of those who embark on a History PhD and do not finish; the historical journal used to identify the sample in this study also lists doctoral projects that are never completed. Until a parallel study is undertaken to ask about the motivations of those who enrolled for a History PhD but did not finish it is impossible to know for sure if there is a 'good' set of motivations that mark out likely completers from non-completers.

Lovitts (2008) has coined the term 'distinguished [PhD] non-completers,' reminding us that failure to finish a PhD can be a blessing in disguise for some candidates. Manathunga (2005) has cautioned against taking the business concept of 'risk management' into doctoral advising on the grounds that using this approach could dissuade potentially successful candidates from embarking in the first place. Clearly, success in doctoral education cannot be guaranteed; nonetheless, good quality advice based on real experiences and known completion rates might help would-be students make informed choices and force them to question their motives and aspirations before enrolment, thus reducing the risk of discovering several years into the doctorate that it was not for them.

Practical Implications

Universities in Australasia typically offer 'generic skills' workshops and other academic and career guidance services for enrolled doctoral students (Kearns & Gardiner, 2007; Manathunga & Wissler, 2003). One recommendation from this research is that institutions seeking to attract new doctoral candidates supplement this provision and offer a 'thinking about a PhD' workshop or one-to-one counselling from learning advisors with no direct stake in the outcome to counterbalance the promotional messages on websites. Getting would-be candidates to articulate their motives for doctoral study with an independent third-party advisor who understood the challenges of completing a doctorate and then recording the motives and aspirations that can be used for reflection by the candidate at a later date might be a useful resource for that candidate as he or she progresses through the doctorate. To some extent these sessions would offer a face-to-face opportunity to reflect on doing a doctorate to complement the self-help guides on doctoral study (Marshall & Green, 2007; Phillips & Pugh, 2000; Rugg & Petre, 2005). Knowing what it was that initially motivated them to embark in the first place may be valuable motivational tool itself. R1 provided this piece of advice that would greatly assist those thinking about embarking on a doctorate understand the importance of choosing a topic that would keep them motivated:

> R1 "You really have to enjoy it [PhD] because you simply can't force yourself to go and do it every day if you don't like your topic. That I think would be quite soul destroying if you're simply not interested in what you're doing or you're not sure about it at first and it becomes much more of a burden or a chore as time goes on."

While aspiring doctoral candidates should be expected to proactively make inquiries about the implications of completing a doctorate, this study has indicated that there is merit in the concept of institutions pooling the experiences of recent successful graduates. This information, in the hands of a skilled academic advisor or workshop facilitator, could assist the next generation of doctoral scholars make informed choices to mitigate against unwise entry into the major commitment that is the PhD.

Conclusion

This case study has explored the initial motivations for starting a doctorate and the data suggest that each candidate had multiple reasons for embarking. One can only speculate on motives that augur well for completion; however, a strong commitment to the dissertation topic itself coupled with a desire to reach the summit of academic achievement appears to act as forceful motives. Career factors were significant too in the decision to embark but, as all of the participants already had substantial work experience, achieving the History doctorate as a specific employment outcome was not in itself a dominant motive. All participants in the study mentioned the influence of third parties in the decision-making process, providing a new category of motivation or influence worthy of further exploration.

Acknowledgement

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Biography

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