

1 Introduction and How to Use This Book

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This book provides support, guidance and ideas for anyone contemplating starting the fascinating, challenging and rewarding journey of undertaking a research degree in any of its many guises, whether they are doing this direct from undergraduate study or returning to education after a break. It is also written for those who are already undertaking a research degree, whether that be part-time, full-time, funded or self-funded, living close to their institution or studying remotely. The book also provides help for those who are looking at the next phase of their lives once their research degree is complete.

The uniqueness of this book therefore lies in its coverage of the entire process, from key considerations around choosing to undertake a research degree, through the process of getting the degree, to what you might do when you have completed your degree. Our intention is to provide a 'one-stop-shop' companion text that would support you throughout the process. The book is also different in its determination to signpost other sources of support, throughout and at the end of each chapter and to remain positive and encouraging about the benefits of undertaking a research degree.

In 2005/06 the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reported that 16,515 doctorates were awarded in the UK;¹ 12,950 full-time and 3565 part-time. This number has been steadily rising over the last decade, illustrating the increasing popularity of gaining such a qualification. But what exactly is a doctorate and more broadly what is a research degree and what makes individuals study for one? Where is the best place to undertake a research degree, how can you improve your chances of securing a place and how much will it cost you to get one? What will the process of getting your research degree be like, how can you improve your chances of completing successfully and what will you do once you have your degree?

We put this book together in an attempt to directly answer these essential questions in an accessible and engaging way, and also in a way that will provide maximum support to the individual reader. Having completed our own research degrees at a time when there was precious little help available other than our supervisors, we appreciate that our journey would have been

smoother at various points had we had access to this information and advice, as well as something to provide some inspiration! Having enjoyed working closely with research students over the last decade, we understand that sometimes it isn't easy to either ask these questions or to get clear answers.

As a brief note on terminology, throughout the book we use the term 'research degree' and 'research student'. What we mean by research degree is a qualification whose process is predominantly based around research. Some of these degrees can lead to a doctoral-level award and some to a masters-level award. When the term doctorate is used this refers to all varieties of PhDs, the Doctor of Medicine qualification, Practice-based doctorates, European Doctorates, Taught Doctorates and Professional Doctorates. We have tried to ensure the information in the book is relevant to all such qualifications. The term 'research student', which is used throughout the book, relates to a student studying for a research degree. To understand more about different research degrees see the discussions in Chapter 2 of this volume.

The book contains contributions from academics and professionals with considerable experience of the following three stages of postgraduate student life in the UK:

- 1 Considering becoming a postgraduate research student in the UK
- 2 Being a postgraduate research student in the UK
- 3 Careers following a postgraduate research degree in the UK.

We specifically sought contributions from those not only with specific expertise in the above, but also a variety of contributors reflecting the wide range of Higher Education Institutions in the UK. Chapters are therefore written by those with experience of old universities as well as new ones, and from various locations in the UK for example.

Before we go any further it might be helpful to clarify exactly what we mean by the UK, as this book is all about research degrees in the UK (which are in some cases different from research degrees elsewhere). The UK is made up of the countries of England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. The management of funding for universities in each is via different organisations. In England it is the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), in Scotland it is the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), in Northern Ireland it is the Department of Employment and Learning (DELNI) and in Wales it is the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW). The source of the funds is the same but the way those funds are distributed differs in each country.

Throughout the process of compiling this book we have been conscious that our readers will have a varied experience and understanding of the UK system of education, and that many of our readers may be considering studying in the UK for the first time. We have found the British Council website (www.britishcouncil.org/ and click on *Study in the UK*) a very helpful resource in this regard.

The book explores the three stages of postgraduate research student life as outlined earlier, and it does so for all the disciplines. Getting this view across the disciplines has been one of the central challenges we have faced; to make it general enough to be applicable across the disciplines, but specific enough to be useful and informative. We hope we have managed to get that balance right.

How Is the Book Organised?

Chapter 2

Although we have already given you a flavour of the definition of a research degree the difficult question of what a research degree actually is, is tackled much more completely here. The postgraduate research degree marketplace is a complex one and is difficult to understand for those who are not familiar with it. There are increasing numbers of research degrees available (some of which lead to the doctoral qualification); offered in increasingly diverse ways, by a huge range of Higher Education Institutions. The question of definition is so central to the whole book that this chapter stands alone before the sections begin.

Section 1 of the Book (Chapters 3 to 7)

For prospective research students, this section gives clear advice on deciding if a research degree meets your own personal needs and motivations. It then helps you to understand how much it may cost and where you may be able to find funding to meet those costs. It also helps you to choose which university is right for you before helping you through the application process.

Section 2 of the Book (Chapters 8 to 21)

For research students currently working towards a research degree, the book covers the major aspects of getting going with research; research training, communicating research, teaching, writing-up and successful completion.

It also covers what might loosely be termed 'academic integrity', that is, what being a professional researcher is all about. This includes plagiarism, copyright and intellectual property rights, confidentiality, and adopting a professional approach to working with colleagues.

Importantly, this section also includes a chapter exploring what to do if things don't quite go according to plan.

Section 3 (Chapters 22 to 27)

The final section of the book covers the interesting topic of what you could do after completing your research degree. The section begins with a detailed look at some recent research about what PhD students do, and then looks at identifying and valuing your skills. The other chapters each look in depth at one possible career path frequently taken by those with a research degree.

We have finished with a Glossary of Terms to help our readers navigate through the somewhat murky waters of the world of Higher Education, and offer two appendices:

- The first containing the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) *Precepts*, which all Higher Education Institutions in the UK must adopt in order to offer research degree programmes
- The second containing the Research Councils' *Joint Skills Statement*, which highlights the skills that a research degree helps research students to develop as the information within these appendices are referenced so often throughout the book.

What the Book Doesn't Do

The book does not cover discipline-specific material, including the methodological aspects of research (study design, data collection, data analysis etc.). The book does not explore postgraduate taught degrees (MAs or MScs) in any detail.

How to Use This Book?

Once you have read Chapter 2 and have a clearer idea of what a research degree actually is, then use the whole of the first section of the book to help to navigate through the decision-making processes you face (deciding whether to undertake a research degree, where and why and working out how much it might cost you and how you'll find the funds). There is also some detailed, valuable and practical advice in Chapter 7 about the application process itself.

Once you have started your life as a research student try to at least dip into all the chapters in Section 2. There is good advice on prevention of problems, for example, in Chapter 18 titled 'Beating the Research Blues', so don't wait until problems arise before you read that chapter. Similarly, chapter on the Viva (Chapter 21) gives sound advice about general preparation as part of the journey of the research degree that will stand you in very good stead when it

comes to your viva, so don't wait until two months before your viva to read that chapter!

When you are nearing completion of your degree the final section of the book should come into its own, but again it will be helpful if you read some of this section before that point. For example, read the chapter which most immediately appeals to you in terms of your career plans, long before you actually start applying for jobs. This will give you the chance to think about your career in advance of actually applying for posts, as you need to be clear that the path you choose is the one you really want to take.

You will find interactive material in each chapter in the form of questions, exercises and case studies. We encourage you to seriously engage with the material in each chapter by working through the interactive content, as it will help you to make more personal sense of the material and will also make the information, advice and guidance more memorable in the longer term.

Most of the chapters in this book look at processes of one sort or another, and aim to provide support for your own thinking throughout those various processes, for example, working out if undertaking a research degree is in fact the right thing for you to do, or working through the process of writing your thesis. It is helpful to accept from the outset that there are no rights or wrongs in approaching these processes and that the guidance provided may not always seem helpful to you. We encourage you to make full use of the ideas, advice and guidance that feel right for you, and to simply leave those that do not.

We hope you find this book an invaluable tool in supporting you at every stage of your journey through your research degree and on into whatever you choose to do next. Furthermore, it should help towards making sure your research degree is rewarding and successful. Undertaking research at the post-graduate level is a great challenge, and the doctorate of course is the pinnacle of the education process. The rewards therefore, personally, professionally and intellectually can be immense. May we wish you the very best of fortune along the way.

Note

- 1 See www.hesa.ac.uk/holisdocs/pubinfo/student/quals0506.htm. The data is entitled 'HE qualifications obtained in the UK by level, mode of study, domicile, gender, class of first degree and subject area 2005/06'.