

Advice on Self-Funding a PhD

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/05/08/self-funding-a-phd/>

STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, MAY 8 2013

A story in the Times Higher has drawn attention to a blog about the plight of self-funded PhD students in the UK. According to the blog's authors, there is a stigma associated with being self-funded; with one being seen by peers as a lesser academic compared to those with funding from research councils and other public/private sponsors. As someone who self-funded a PhD myself (passed unconditionally in 2012) I can't relate to this experience. I did my PhD at a department surrounded by quite a few fully funded colleagues, and the issue was never one of note in discussions. I was happy for them and – far from being dismissive – they were respectful of the juggling act I undertook to self-fund via 2 or 3 part time jobs. In fact, I have never experienced even a whiff of stigma or disrespect.

Perhaps there *might* be a stigma in the student group, but for academics I would find it unlikely. As a PhD unfolds, academics/supervisors want to see a viable product coming together based on sound, original, research – ultimately something that can pass the PhD examination and, perhaps, be published. This process has no relation to funding status.

I had an opportunity to seek funding, and went some way towards putting in a bid under the coaching of my host institution, whose academics were pretty successful at getting scholarships for their students. That process raised a series of issues quite quickly that actually led me to choose the self-funding route out of preference, not necessity.

Firstly, if I went along the funding route and pitched in with a research council, it would have required me to get my project proposal to an advanced level at a time when I was still doing a full time graduate degree, and also working part time. I had wanted to start my PhD immediately after my Masters degree, so taking extra time to mould my proposal with the goal of securing funding was unattractive.

Secondly, aside from the vast amount of effort I would have needed to expend at a delicate time in my graduate degree to enter a sellable funding bid (which obviously is at the expense of current studies), it quickly became clear that I would need to bend my original topic to breaking point in order to suit the categorisations in effect for the major funding bodies in the application processes.

I then asked myself, why go through all this work to end up with something I do not actually want to do anyway? I had a colleague go through this very process – and his original topic became something else entirely, wrapped in a methodology he was not keen to pursue.

In the end, I decided that to spend nearly 4 years of my life on something, it needed to be something that I fully owned. Being self funded gave me the freedom to mould my topic/question over the first 6 months of the PhD – and not be locked into something that I was being paid to produce on spec by a funding body. This suited my schedule as it allowed me to finish my graduate degree without too much distraction. I also had the fortune to have a sympathetic supervisor lined up, and a supportive department who were happy to allow me a bit of formative time.

There are also many small grants that can be applied for to supplement and aid your research (though this will vary depending on your subject area). So do pursue every opportunity available. Being self-funded will not restrict you in getting these smaller grants. I can attest to that.

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The flexibility that I had in my self-funded PhD was liberating. My research ended up going on a sharp tangent due to something that came up early in my research. This opened up something that was more interesting than my original proposed topic... and I was free and able to pursue that and change my topic, and even my methodology, entirely. I did pursue it, and it worked out very well. I'm very satisfied with the end result, and it has been very profitable for me intellectually and career-wise. I can honestly say, if I had to do it again, I would not do it differently. The mistakes I did make were all part of a rewarding learning experience.

Although this piece has taken a certain course to provide a response/balance to the piece that inspired it – I would like to dispel any ideas that self-funding is wholly rose tinted. You obviously have to get the money for fees (etc.) from somewhere. For me it was working at night/weekends and lecturing during the day. For many this is something that is very hard to sustain, and it is no surprise that a large number of self-funders are enrolled part-time in order to carry out full time paid work. It is also no surprise that many do not complete their PhDs.

So... my advice would be, if you are going to consider self-funding, only do it if you have a fair bit of money put away for a rainy day. If possible, work hard for a couple of years and save up before you start. The amount of money will depend on your own situation. I would recommend it should be enough to pay all of your bills for at least 1 year if all else fails. This 'scholarship slush fund' will save you from money-stress when you need to scale back on paid work to write up ... or to handle a personal issue ... or if you need to go on an unplanned data gathering trip to rescue your research ... or if a part time job that you are relying on folds for whatever reason (and so on...). It will insulate you while you readjust and realign.

As a closing thought, if you do experience stigma through being a self-funder, don't let it get to you. Just keep your eyes on the prize. As a self funder, you have full ownership and flexibility over your scholarship – funded candidates do not. And, you probably have years of work experience, and life experience to present to future employers – which more conventional candidates might not.

About the author:

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