

Cons - Money (lack of), the constant feeling of competition, feeling the pressure to publish, feeling isolated in a School that is dominated by social and cognitive psychology (!!), and experiencing the 'am i good enough' insecurity.

You have to want to do a PhD. Don't do it because plan A didn't work out. If you find the right supervisor/s and the a topic area that interests you then you are in the right direction - follow your gut.

Positives of doing a PhD

- Enormous scope for independent thought and development of original ideas (possibly less so if your funding is attached to a grant)
- The academics and students at UQ are amazingly talented and friendly. I have heard of some exceptions in terms of being friendly but I have not encountered them personally.
- If you are not a morning person (like me) you can, to a large extent, arrange your schedule accordingly
- I have had a few non-research jobs, and doing research is the only thing that doesn't fry my brain from boredom and lack of use.

Negatives of doing a PhD

- You feel pressure to publish in order to get a good job when you finish
- You are guaranteed to have experiments that do not work which can be frustrating
- Even when you finish it can be a while before you have any kind of job security.
- It's easy to spend all day having coffees with people and not getting any work done (This could also go in the positive column)

Good things of being a PhD student:

- You'll find the experience both challenging and rewarding -- these things go hand-in-hand, but somewhere along the line, you'll be happy that all of that hard work has paid off.
- You'll form really close friendships / network of colleagues who also went through the same PhD experience.
- You'll travel and present to like-minded people at conferences, and broaden your horizons (both personally and professionally)
- You'll understand all the PhD comic jokes -- because its essentially your life in a nutshell :)

[WL: Jorge Cham's work is online here, <http://www.phdcomics.com/comics.php>]

Bad things of being a PhD student:

- Sometimes you'll feel out-of-your-depth, stupid, like the only person who isn't mastering it, and engage in massive self-doubt, which is normal, but at some point in time, the PhD will do

your head in. Perseverance is key. And talking to others in the same boat helps because then you will realise its normal feeling like that.

- Things never go as planned.

- When people ask you the dreaded question of "when will you finish?". You'll develop ways to avoid that question, or to have that dreaded question motivate you to finish. Finishing what you started is difficult, but once you finish, it will feel like the best achievement.

Pros:

- You and your peers become part of a millennia-old quest to understand our world better. Being part of the global research community can provide a sense of purpose and belonging that almost no other vocation can beat (if you're into that sort of thing).

- As the years go by, you notice your theoretical insights and technical knowledge become bigger and better and more sophisticated. It's incredibly satisfying to develop your thinking in such a dramatic, intensive way (even if your alleged progress might feel slow or non-existent at the time!).

Cons:

- You're largely at the mercy of your supervisory team. Choose wisely! Look for supervisors who will kick-start your research career by taking you to conferences, encouraging you to publish, sharing their good ideas, and giving you as much one-on-one time as you need.

- Research isn't for everyone. Some people are driven by a blind passion for research - if that's not you, the workload and competition can seem daunting. If that is you, it'll seem like the best job in the whole world.

- the [at times mind-numbing] isolation that comes with sitting in an office and working on something that nobody else is working on. One hour a week with an advisor can be the only social interaction you have unless you go looking for it, which is difficult for some.

- a lot of the time you're either incredibly busy or incredibly bored, there doesn't seem to be an in-between.

- if you are struggling, there's often not much support out there - if you're not progressing well enough at a milestone they'll reprimand you rather than looking for ways to help.

- the flexibility is a good thing, but can also be a bad thing if you're the type of person who needs structure and is easily tempted by procrastination/early knock-off/sleep-ins/spontaneous holidays.

- lack of career direction - if academia isn't your thing there's often not much advice offered on what you could do with the degree.

In my opinion (as someone who has completed a PhD in Psychology at UQ and moved on to another postgraduate degree at another uni), the advantages of doing a PhD in Psychology are:

- Getting to help others or making a positive difference by investigating a worthwhile research question
- Getting to travel to conferences & to other labs
- In an ideal PhD project & supervisory relationship, having a lot of autonomy & flexibility in how you structure your project & working week
- Meeting a few nice academics & several inspiring postgrads along the way
- It's increasingly a necessary qualification for working in research/academia (even for teaching in coursework postgrad psychology programs)

On the other hand, the disadvantages (as I experienced them) are:

- Making the fundamental mistake that a PhD in Psychology is an end in itself. It's a means to an end, the 'end' being a career in academia/research
- Not being as employable as someone with a Masters or PsyD in Clinical or Org Psych, and not be paid as much either (especially when you consider coursework degree often take less time, i.e. more time in the workforce for them).
- Realising too late that academia/academic research is a HYPER-COMPETITIVE environment, and the competition for jobs (which are largely fixed-term/non-permanent for the first 5 years post-PhD) and grant funding never ends. By the time my PhD was awarded, I really couldn't see a future for myself that didn't involve working never-ending 60-70 hour weeks and never having a life outside of work.
- There are more people with PhDs in Psychology in Australia than jobs in academia for these people (and most of us started PhDs wanting to be academics)
- Maybe I had terrible luck, but I worked with several people (both academics & other postgrads) who I considered arrogant bordering on narcissistic and several people who were obsessive/pedantic/workaholic bordering on controlling/bullying of coworkers/students who did not share their attitudes. After a long period of reflection, I really believe academia rewards this kind of behaviour to some degree (e.g., the more hours you work, the more publications you pump out, meaning the more likely it is you get your grant funded, and so on), and some behaviours & attitudes are largely tolerated in academia that wouldn't be tolerated in other organisations. In my experience of working at 3 different unis in SEQ, these personalities are more noticeable in research-intensive universities.
- Having supervisors that weren't "well connected" and that did not really mentor me about how to get a job or a postdoc. As much as I hate to think it's about "who you know", I think it's important to have a supervisor who is well connected to their colleagues in the School/their field and who can actively seek out opportunities for their PhD students.
- That once you ENROL in a PhD (even if you haven't submitted/choose not to submit) you can never receive Youth Allowance or Austudy again (even if you do another degree afterwards and really need income support!!!)

- I didn't think getting a university scholarship would be quite so competitive. I have one last chance with confirmation scholarship.

I think most difficulties were anticipated e.g., being really really busy, and having stressful moments.

I imagine there are occasions (though not often) that a student finds themselves needing to change their research project mid-way through, either through external difficulties (can't get sample hoped for) or internal problems (supervisors leaving university)

Good things:

- Greater feeling of being part of the university, through contribution of research, more so than you can get from being undergraduate student.

- Although extremely busy, still good lifestyle (while it lasts), good campus to be on.

- ability to do relevant coursework along side the research is a good thing

Just a couple of things that have struck me over the years...

1. The sense of 'shock' when you finally realise as a PhD student that no one really cares about your research/topic as much as you do (no, not even your advisor!)

2. The strategic decisions that have to be made. If you finish within 3 years then you're likely to lack the things that will make you employable as an academic at least (publications, extensive teaching experience). But if you get these then your research is going to take longer. PhD students need to think how they will balance the absolute need to work (to live) and writing up...

oh yeah one more: how do you cope with ns finding after ns finding .. writing a PhD with very few significant findings can be very hard going (esp. when you're surrounded by cognitive people who seem to run 4 participants and get hugely sig. findings...)

Two quick ideas I had when I first read your email are:

1) The anxiety of not really knowing what you're doing for your entire first year

2) The trouble of keeping boundaries, that is, of not letting your social life, tutoring responsibilities, seminars, reading groups, lunch with friends, and other parts of life expand too much. I think this is a very common problem related to the fact that deadlines are very few and far between so it is hard to keep working solidly. The plus is that it's great and you get to spend all your time working on things you're interested in.

Good things: Very flexible in timetable. Everyday can be a holiday. You may take off whenever you like. You may get up at any time you like.

Bad things: Should be financially secure before doing a PhD. Even you get a scholarship, it may only cover you, and not be enough for your family as well.

Quite stressful until the confirmation document is finished.

A few good things:

1. office and computer supplied by school
2. tutoring/financial assistance
3. potential to go overseas

Not so good things/unanticipated difficulties:

1. finding the lack of structure difficult – I'm a structured kind of girl!
2. trying not to compare with my peers is also a challenge!

I really enjoy this process so far. It's really fascinating to look at ideas/theories starting and evolving.

But at the same time, there are also some jokes about it - PhD is for "permanent head damage" =)

Maybe sometimes you can be likely to lose the broader picture if you are too focused on answering a specific question?

1-2 Unanticipated Difficulties:

- The sense of inertia that you experience in your first year as you muddle about, trying to work out what research is about and how you are going to settle down on a topic. It can be at once disorienting and paralyzing. My advice to these young'uns is to set small and realistic goals.

- The strange identity crisis you go through as a PhD student whereby you perpetually feel like a fraud as a researcher. Somewhere between being a student and being an academic, this mid-ground can make you doubt small decisions that you have made (e.g. what scale to use), the interpretations that you have drawn from papers, and your ability to write something cogent, coherent, and above all, worthwhile.

1-2 Groovy Things:

- The wild excitement that you feel when you start to collect your data. This is a first stage of real, tangible activity, and you are gambling on the results. Will they support your hypothesis? Reveal something different? Disappoint you all together? It is a very exhilarating this to have your own research, that you are responsible for, and to be able to watch it take shape. This is an experience over and above what you experience in undergraduate or honours.

- The working relationships that you develop with other people within your field are really good and interesting. I am not talking about social relationships, but rather that you are working from within a large team of people who are committed to the same type of research as you. Through talking with your supervisor, and others in your department you can enhance your knowledge, and develop ideas that intertwine different areas, relatively organically.

Here is a list of the pros and cons of doing a PhD from discussions I had with a few other postgrads:

The pros:

- Opportunity to study in-depth and conduct research on a topic that interests you, and, therefore, to contribute to knowledge
- A challenge
- Intellectual development, really sharpen your thinking, research, and statistical analysis skills
- If research-only PhD, there are no exams!
- Flexible working hours/lifestyle
- Opportunity to travel (both domestically and internationally) as part of conferences with funding from the school/department
- Opportunity to lecture or tutor during PhD
- Rich intellectual environment; exposure to new ideas (seminars, reading groups, informal discussions with academics/other postgrads)
- Opportunity to meet people with similar research interests and top researchers in the field; network
- Meet other postgrads, share experience, support each other

The cons/difficulties:

- Length of time: The PhD will take at least 3 years (usually more than 3 years) to finish, and you are focusing only on one topic. So, it can be difficult to stay focused/motivated/interested for the entire duration of your PhD.
- Your research won't always turn out as planned - you might need to change your topic/research question(s); need to be flexible and be prepared to compromise on or change your initial ideas/expectations
- Career options outside academia not clear. Some people/employers outside the university may not understand/appreciate the value of a PhD (e.g., the research skills/experience that come with it). A research-only PhD may be too specialised and may not give you the industry/applied experience that is valued more by some employers outside the university.

- Can be challenging to establish a good/comfortable working relationship with your supervisors: e.g., differences in views/working styles, expectations not always clear, can feel intimidated.
- Can feel lost and overwhelmed at times
- Can feel that there is always more to do. Also, because the work is flexible, it means you can do it anywhere and at anytime (so, sometimes, you can feel that your PhD is always with you, and you can always work on your PhD)
- Lack of identifiable outcomes/achievements until thesis submitted - therefore, may not feel a sense of achievement until the end (which can sometimes seem like a long way away)
- confined to a special type of work environment/setting - can be very different from work environments outside the university

Pitfalls - supervisors taking your ideas for your Phd and publishing them as their own in book chapters before you've even written your confirmation document. Being bullied by 'mate' of said supervisor (who was second author of the published chapter) to try and make student withdraw and go away, supported by School of Psychology head honchos having to go to the Dean of Postgraduate Studies to make sure student gets some sort of protection continually receiving bullying emails from 'mate' of said supervisor even after he has been told on no account to contact the student again.

on the plus side - you get a few free trips to conferences which are fun because you get to be friends with students from other universities