

Arana's experience of a PhD in the UK

1. My first year in the UK

I started school a bit earlier than usual in Georgia (formerly part of the USSR) 6 years old. It was a specialised English-language school, where I spent ten years.

I did my first degree in International Relations at the State University having one year abroad in Taiwan – learning Mandarin Chinese.

The idea of coming to the UK for a postgraduate study was born long before I graduated. I went to a presentation organised by a representative of Wessex University who gave an insight on the postgraduate opportunities in England. I received a scholarship from the Department covering tuition fees, and my family supported my living in Wessex.

The MA course at Wessex University was my first encounter with British educational system. The first half a year was extremely difficult, because I had to deal not only with a new unfamiliar system of education, but with living in a new environment. Undergraduate studies in all the countries of the former Soviet Union represent a completely different approach in education. In a way, lecturers are given a much more authoritative position – they might present different schools of thoughts on a certain subject, but at the same time, they would indicate which school has more credibility. Therefore, the relationship between the professors and students is more hierarchical – the knowledge and position of the professor is not usually challenged by the students.

One might argue that Western (British) education provides a more liberal approach by giving the students the freedom to formulate their own views. However, there might be a degree of deficiency in such a way of providing education. Leaving everything to students themselves who are only beginning to comprehend basic aspects of their subjects might make them lose focus in the ocean of varying opinions.

2. My decision do a PhD

The idea of doing a PhD came from my external supervisor who was a lecturer in Barchester University. He mentioned the opportunity of applying for several scholarships at the University, gave an idea of what I can explore for my research and in such way inspired me tremendously to look forward to continuing my studies. After doing my MA I realised that if I want to start off my career with something really serious I need further qualifications and more expert knowledge than I possessed. My MA gave me a feel of the field I wanted to be in, but didn't satisfy the yearning for something deeper.

First, I had to be accepted for the PhD course at Barchester. As far as I can understand to be accepted the most important thing was to have a provisional supervisor who was working in the same area (whom I had) and a certain grade for the previous course (in my case, MA).

Having a letter of acceptance I could apply for an Overseas Research Syceptee for

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experience for everyone. We each got a chance to make a half-an-hour presentation. I felt my own presentation went more or less well, but I learnt an important lesson of not trying to deliver complicated theoretical and abstract ideas. Instead in the future I opted for more practical easy to comprehend material.

5. My second year

And I wasn't mistaken.

After having a wonderful summer at home I came back to Barchester for my second year. I moved out of university accommodation into a new nice flat and felt ready to have a new beginning.

The second year was very different from the first one. Now that I had a clear plan of what I wanted to do, all I had to do is to **work**.

I got a part-time job as an admin assistant in a very busy commercial company in the city centre. I was working mornings leaving the rest of the day for my thesis. Having that job helped me a lot to organise my time and structure my days. I realised that the more things I had to do, the more productive I was. I was enjoying more my life in Barchester and was overall happy with how my thesis was coming along.

There were, of course, moments of "creativity" crisis (which are a natural component of any PhD experience), days of homesickness, and moments of "I-am-ready-to-pack-it-all". Second year was hard in a way because the excitement of the first year was gone, but the end was still out of reach. From my experience, those who do decide to get out often do so by the end of the second year.

My opinion of my supervisor has changed during that year as well. He had some personal problems and was unavailable for some time. He was also on a sabbatical but with a promise to look after his PhD students.

Apart from that, he seemed less concerned with what I was doing. My supervision sessions were happening on a very rare basis, I hardly saw him that year.

I was getting a feeling he was not exactly aware of where I was. I was trying to find explanations for that blaming his bad luck during the year. I was getting an impression he felt I would finish my degree anyway, with or without his help. It was very different from the first year when he was closely supervising me. During the first year I was getting practical suggestions on the written work I was submitting for his attention. He would see me 2-3 times a month in the first year. May be he thought he had put me on a right track and I was supposed to move along myself now.

He never refused my requests to see him, but I was getting less and less from our meetings. He still had great ideas and was extremely supportive and encouraging, but was less helpful in terms of practical advices on how to improve my work. After each meeting with him, I felt reassured that the topic of my research is definitely of interest. However, our discussions were more of a general nature – it was still on the subject but more diluted to general comments.

For matter or worse, I wrote drafts for some of the main chapters of my thesis. After finishing each chapter I was sending it to my supervisor and he would usually seem me some time after. He would give some comments on them and praise the good work, although I was not always sure how carefully my work was read.

By end of July I went home to soak some sun and TLC from my family and friends.

Q 1 Discuss the essential characteristics of a good supervisor

Q 2 Have you any advice for Arana at this stage?

6. My third year

By the time I was about to start my final (and current) year, I was determined to make most of it and work as hard as I could. I was also aware that I should start thinking about employment and future plans.

Due to the nature of my thesis, the field work was planned for the final stage of my research. According to plan, I am writing an initial draft of my thesis using the data available from the existing lit

However, I always think of my supervisor of someone who would always support me with my "big" plans (like, applying for research grants or going for a post-doc). It seems it's just the routine thesis supervision is not his strong point.

At the moment I am planning to go back home just before Christmas to finish writing up and travel for my field work from there. I want to go partly because I don't see how I can benefit from staying at the University for longer.

My friend who started with me decided to put her PhD on hold after realising it was putting pressure on her emotional state and personal life. She also feels disappointed with her supervisor from whom she was getting less and less support. My other friend who is doing her PhD degree in Cant

7 My final thoughts on my experience of doing a PhD in the UK

I think one of the major problems is the pressure imposed on the academia staff to produce publications in order for the Universities to keep high research rates. Unfortunately, it dangerously shifts the priority from teaching the students to writing their endless books and articles. May be there should be those who only teach, and those who only publish. That way everyone would be happy.

It's a bit sad that I feel slightly frustrated with the system after I got to know it better, but I am feeling positive about the overall PhD experience. Being in the University among people having similar interests is a fulfilling environment. Now that