



PhD Candidate reflections on initial expectations of the PhD: Mismatch and student satisfaction

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*15th Biennial EARLI Conference for Research on Learning
and Instruction
Munich, Germany
27-31 August*

SORTI

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Little or no idea

'I had little understanding of what a PhD meant' (ID0549)

'I suspect I didn't have an understanding of what research was' (ID1133)

'I don't really think I understood what I expected' (...)

'I didn't have an expectation. I had this bright idea of what the world needed to know' (ID0941)

'I had no idea of what was going to happen...' (ID1019)

Table 1: Focus of expectations and distribution by orientation or alignment

Expectations Focus/orientation	Same as Expected	Just different	Different negative	Different positive	Unclear/ or none
What is involved in the project/research/thesis	X	X	X	X	X
Time needed (T)		X	X		
Scope/difficulty(T)	X	X	X	X	X
Being a candidate(T)		X	X		
Supervision(I)	X	X	X		X
Environment(I)		X	X	X	
Administration(I)			X		
Emotions(P)	X	X	X	X	X
Trajectory/ development(P)	X	X	X	X	X
Life balance(P)	X		X	X	
External disruption(P)			X		

Exploring expectations

Facilitator: *So at the moment it's pretty much the way you thought it would be?*

Interviewee: *Yeah pretty much.*

Facilitator: *Has anything been different to how you thought it would be?*

Interviewee: *No, not really.*

Facilitator: *So those sorts of feelings have been more associated with things outside the PhD do you mean?*

Interviewee: *Yeah. Yeah, so it's nothing to do with what's happening in the PhD, that feels fine but I just mean I've had a lot of distractions and haven't had the time to devote to the PhD as much as what I would have liked, as much as what I had intended.*

Focus/alignment of expectation

FOCUS OF EXPECTATION	TASK	INSTITUTION	PERSONAL
Same	<p>I had a decent idea of the mechanics of it. I teach at another university (0940)</p> <p>I felt like after the honours I had a pretty good idea of what the PhD would be like (0947)</p>	<p>I had been warned about supervisors so I was ready for that (1149)</p>	<p>I was aware occasionally there would be feelings of doubts or insecurity about progress and about validity, well I've been experiencing those kinds of ups and downs (0081)</p>



FOCUS OF EXPECTATION	TASK	INSTITUTION	PERSONAL
Unaligned - just different	<p>At the outset I made a map of where I thought I would be...the questions I thought would be explorable. Its completely different (0143)</p> <p>I knew it would be a ton of work and there are times when I am overwhelmed (0143)</p>	<p>You've got to be clear about everybody's expectations...other wise very much as I expected...the relationships you build with supervisors was most unexpected (1357)</p> <p>I thought the political aspect of it wasn't going to challenge me, but it did (0291)</p>	<p>You kind of expect this undulating roller coaster, as opposed to the loop the loop style of how you can be so up at one point and then come crashing down within a couple of hours...the turbulence of that emotion I didn't expect (0146)</p>

FOCUS OF EXPECTATION	TASK	INSTITUTION	PERSONAL
<p>Unaligned negative (different negatively so)</p>	<p>The writing is really difficult ... I think I expected more of myself ... I'm not really sure if I knew what to expect (1024)</p> <p>I certainly didn't expect the rewrites ... I thought I would do better ... I expected it to flow, to go smooth, I didn't expect it to be as rocky (0107)</p>	<p>Handling the supervision has been really difficult for me and that's something that I didn't expect (1259)</p> <p>I assumed to come in, to be in a really interesting scientific community, but I feel this does not exist, to me, at this time, here. (0111)</p>	<p>Had enrolled in a PhD before ... unprepared for personal journey... lonely ... the process of it doesn't live up to my expectations and makes me wonder if they are realistic (?)</p> <p>I was prepared for it to be hard intellectually ... but no one said to me that it is really isolating and that depression is really a big factor in PhD student's lives... (0155)</p>



FOCUS OF EXPECTATION	TASK	INSTITUTION	PERSONAL
Unaligned positive (different positively so)	I thought it was going to be harder than what it has actually turned out to be (1350)	On the good side you get a lot of support which is great I didn't expect that (0098)	...because I've got time at work to work on it I'm relaxed about it, less stressed which I wasn't quite expecting

The surprise

I've worked in a university system as an RA, no huge surprises ... things like ethics, recruiting people, how slow and painful ... I knew I could deal with that kind of stuff (0877)

It took a year to get into it I think how it is now is how I imagined it...I guess I anticipated it would be tricky starting out ... it was talking to students ahead of me that I knew first year was bad (0144)

Based on my Honours work I was expecting it – you run a study, you get the results, you interpret that, but what I found from a PhD it's a learning process, you do a study, the results aren't what you expected, you have to re-think ... I wasn't really prepared for the challenges. I also had this idealised notion of research ... it's much, much, more difficult (0563)

The writing is really difficult ... I think I expected more of myself ... I'm not really sure if I knew what to expect (1024)



Time

Quite a bit more than expected ... oh my goodness this is going to go on forever (0644)

I didn't think that I would waste as much time as I have, although they don't call it waste ... doing experiments that just aren't going to be included in the final product (0225)

I expected to just go in, do a couple of studies, write them up and that'd be it, but it was much, much more than that ... I guess the biggest challenge was realising that research isn't the way they teach you it's done in undergraduate ... messier(0563)

I did well in all the previous levels so I just expected this to continue...I expected it to be much more straightforward ... much easier ... expected more specific guidance to reduce levels of uncertainty ... (stage by stage) rather than the constant questioning, criticism, rethinking everything, going off on tangents ... grinding process (0750)

Autonomous and adrift

I don't think I had expectations of what it was going to be like. My best friend who has done her PhD said to me, don't do it [own name] it will ruin your life ... I guess I perhaps was not quite aware of just how unstructured and independent it would be. I suppose I had nothing to kind of attach it to. So I had nothing to compare it to.

I expected a bit more guidance. I didn't realise I'd be on my own as much ..everything would be a little more clear cut ... more planned ... and the supervisor would walk you through what you were doing a bit more ... six months you'll have this, this date you'll have that ... [not] a free run...[and] I [supervisors] want to see the finished piece in 3 years(1068)

I expected the supervisors would be quite directive in helping and supporting me ... its never been there or it has been in a fairly off-handed manner (0146)

I expected a lot more contact with my supervisors ... I didn't expect to be abandoned (0143)

Things like support and assistance and academic advice falls under leadership. It's a thing I would have expected to be more prevalent and readily available. (0345)

A complicated existence

I was expecting to feel a sense of progress ... understanding of deeper philosophical issues ... I feel like I'm only writing about them to satisfy a certain element of a chapter (0842)

My targets didn't hold up to the experiments in the way we'd anticipated... I was expecting it to be challenging ... rewarding ... I hadn't anticipated how I'd be shaped by the PhD (0117)

Kind of what I expected, but different as well ... I knew it would be a lot of work. I guess I didn't realise how much of an effect it has on your whole life. It kind of just takes over in some respects (0644)

The amount of networking involved – I didn't expect that ... there isn't as much freedom as you'd think ... pressure [to do more] ... all the stuff in-between ... a lot of the feelings I've had I've expected but not as intensely ... magnifies your imperfections ... you're on your own even if you are not ... I went in with an idealistic impression ... [culture and attitudes] I found it difficult to adjust ... certain expectations that don't mesh well with me. (0674)

Emotional sink

I'm not at the point where I want to chuck it in, and I'm not at a point where I'm absolutely ecstatic, and that's how I probably felt I would be midway through...so its living up to my expectations (0114)

I felt stressed but I knew that's the way it would work (0886)

Had enrolled in a PhD before...unprepared for personal journey ...lonely...the process of it doesn't live up to my expectations and makes me wonder if they are realistic...whether I'm working at the appropriate level...capacity (0778)

Now I feel naïve. I was expecting to feel excited, interested supported (0778)

...I thought I'd feel more integrated in the Department...feel much worse that I was expecting...I was expecting I would feel really competent...the PhD is a big, big project (0718)

Emotions... I expected mine to be different but clearly not...like completing confirmation you expect to be happy ...you just feel kind of down...post-confirmation blues (0722)

I was prepared for it to be hard intellectually...but no one said to me that it is really isolating and that depression is really a big factor in PhD student's lives...I would have really liked someone in the faculty who could have given me more emotional support (0155)

I was a stable kind of girl...since doing the PhD everything knocks me...didn't expect it at all (1024)

Satisfaction and expectations


Candidate satisfaction: All three measures were related to an expectations/experience mismatch

- **Satisfaction with supervision** was most consistently negatively related to all measures of expectation/experience
- **Satisfaction with university/department provision** was negatively related to the overall 'worse' measure
- **Satisfaction with own preparation** was negatively related to personal expectations not being met



Other variables related to candidate expectations

- Although **Doctoral Efficacy** was generally high, candidates who spoke about their doctoral experience being worse than expected had also responded they had lower Doctoral efficacy
- **Female candidates** provided more positive comment about their expectations/ experience
- Candidates who responded that '**Employer expectation**' was one of their reasons for PhD enrolment had more favourable expectations/experience



Four types of **incidents that may occur during candidature** were related to negative expectations/experience:

- ‘inadequate resources’
- ‘pressure of employment’
- ‘family bereavement’
- ‘breakdown in supervisory relationship’



Not related to expectations

- Cluster group membership
- Candidate age, discipline area, nature of enrolment & stage of candidature
- The metacognitive, contingency and affective candidate measures, with the exception of Doctoral Efficacy