Adaptive Strategies for PhD Candidates to a Changing Academic Environment: Diversification and Time Management

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ABSTRACT

The confluence of an increasing emphasis on ‘deliverables,’ rising numbers of PhD candidates, and waning employment opportunities presents significant challenges for prospective and incumbent PhD candidates. I identify two coping strategies for adapting to this changing environment: 1) diversify the set of theoretical leanings and methods to which you are exposed during your PhD experience to alleviate some of the concerns around employment opportunities by making your knowledge and skill-set marketable beyond the walls of academia; and 2) streamline your teaching, learning, and research duties to minimize the impact of these formal academic duties on your personal life and completion timeline. In this essay, I formulate departmental- and personal-level tactics to achieve these goals based on my personal experiences and observations, and I identify structural impediments to their implementation.

Key Words: PhD, manuscript thesis, adaptation, diversification

INTRODUCTION

Workload policies provide selective incentives that reward teaching large classes but ignore graduate advising … We justify requests for faculty positions on the basis of their potential for external funding [which] increase[s] pressure to divert our diminishing disposable time for scholarship into grant writing … Insidiously, we are measured by how much we produce, to which there is no upper limit, rather than by the length of our workweek … The economics of publishing also shapes the kind of scholarship that maximizes output … It catalyzes certain kinds of “quick” publications that, combined with higher teaching workloads, undermine our collective intellectual capital (Sheppard 2004, 746).
The experiences Dr. Sheppard identifies here depict the academic environment that is shaping PhD programs (see also Park 2005). This environment is increasingly taking the shape of a business approach to scholarship, wherein individual and departmental achievements are reduced to simplified measures of merit such as publication rates or enrolment rates. In this context, there is a practical incentive for departments to increase PhD enrolment to help sustain workloads and to guarantee departmental funding. While this is welcomed news for prospective PhD candidates, the competitiveness fostered in this environment is a source of anxiety among incumbent and outgoing doctoral candidates. This stems from the perception that the demand for PhDs appears to be lagging behind the increasing supply of candidates (Goldie 2001). Additionally, an increased emphasis on deliverables in the context of rising candidacy numbers translates into an increasing pressure to demonstrate a wider array of talents and a higher level of productivity (e.g., publications, teaching and administrative duties, extra-curricular activities) than our predecessors (Austin 2002). This not only exacerbates stress levels, but also increases constraints on our personal lives.

Before suggesting ways in which doctoral candidates might cope with this state of affairs, I want to preface my forthcoming arguments with a few early caveats. Firstly, it is not exclusively external forces that are tilting the work-life balance. In my experience, there are many cases where students are as busy as they want to be, not as busy as they need to be. The trick is to prioritize. For example, I sat on graduate student council to get experience in a politically charged environment, and did this at the expense of other extra-curricular activities. It is possible to say no to a few things and still build a quality CV. Secondly, it is not unique to PhD candidates that there are greater demands on time and increasing emphasis on skills and training even as employment opportunities are waning. Fortunately, and thirdly, for PhD candidates these pressures are accompanied by some non-trivial luxuries. As others are heading down a mine shaft on a sunny day or climbing a thirty-foot ladder in the rain, I sit in a climate controlled office and am paid (albeit poorly) to think about issues that are important to me. Surely it is not always this glamorous, but when it is not I can take solace in knowing that I have more independence and control over the forms my creativity takes than at any other point in my life. Furthermore these luxuries are directly and indirectly supported by tax contributions from my fellow citizens. In this context I can already hear my father saying, “stop whining and deal with the choice you’ve made.”

Nonetheless, the changing environment in which PhD candidates must operate makes it difficult to reconcile the needs and desires to a) become a more competitive and relevant academic; b) maintain the opportunity to develop relationships and skill sets beyond formal academic life; and c) complete your degree in reasonable time. Bridging these goals at least partly requires adaptive strategies at the departmental and individual level, two of which are identified in this paper: diversifying the knowledge base and skill set that you acquire while in graduate school, and streamlining teaching, research, and coursework duties. The following sections discuss these strategies, as well as the tactics I have used to implement them in practice to ensure that they do not conflict with each other, or with maintaining the integrity of a PhD degree.

DEPARTMENTAL AND INDIVIDUAL ADJUSTMENTS

Austin conceptualizes doctoral life as the ‘socialization to the academic career’ (2002). This might be true for some scholars who entered their doctoral studies with the sole intent to achieve professorship. Given the trends discussed above, however, it is for the majority of us an increasingly impoverished, restrictive, and maladaptive notion which can lead to the neglect of fruitful and in many cases crucial opportunities that exist.
in non-academic environments. The anxiety of a PhD candidate over employment opportunities can be diluted if one is confident that they are equipped with a diverse range of skills that are applicable in a variety of arenas beyond academia – for example, civil service agencies, corporations, non-governmental organizations, and entrepreneurial endeavours. In the same way as ecosystems and electricity systems (see Li 2005) are better prepared to absorb changes in their environment if they have a variety of energy reserves, so too is an individual when they have a diverse array of skill sets, theoretical understandings, and vocabularies to draw from.

There are departmental-level changes that could facilitate the development of a broader range of tools in their students than a traditional academically focused program offers. For example, institutions could create more intra-disciplinary research environments such as the one in which I am currently involved – the Queen’s Institute for Energy and Environmental Policy. Institutes of this sort provide a forum for, and implicitly demand, dialogue between social and physical scientists and students of policy. These arrangements are increasingly being formalized as at Carleton University in Canada, for example, where a Master’s program in sustainable energy and policy is designed around the integration of engineering and policy studies (Carleton University, 2011). In addition to increasing the quality of research, these arrangements expose students to a variety of theoretical leanings and research methods than would otherwise be the case. Furthermore, otherwise vague or esoteric language, which often acts as a barrier to more meaningful engagement with other disciplines, is shared. This increases the likelihood of, and preparedness for, meaningful collaboration and inter-disciplinary research. Formalizing these arrangements ensures that this becomes the rule rather than the exception.

While prospective students can weigh such opportunities as they choose their institution of study, they are for all intents and purposes beyond the control of an incumbent student. In their absence, the onus falls on the student to structure their learning experience accordingly. This is a matter of deliberately altering the ways that research questions, research methods, analytical procedures, and thesis compilation are approached. It is with this in mind that I have developed the framework for my thesis. My thesis is an examination of how the geographies of energy availability, distribution, and use are changing with increased emphasis on renewable energy, and identifying the implications of these changes on conventional policy and planning tools (see Calvert and Simandan 2010 for a broad overview). While the thesis in its entirety will represent an integrated piece of academic work, mindful of broader debates about energy, space and landscape and of methodological fissures in Geography, its constituent chapters are designed to engage a different, specific audience. To ensure that my work maintains the integrity of what it means to become a doctor of philosophy in geography, I will produce theoretical chapters that meaningfully engage academic questions revolving around geographical thought and practices. On the other hand, as a means of addressing potential employers in the civil service, I will produce chapters that explicitly outline the implications of my research on future policy programs. And the substantive empirical chapters I produce will demonstrate to potential private-sector employers that I am capable of synthesizing large volumes of data in order to generate a specific business strategy. In effect, I will have produced multiple pieces of work that have allowed me to develop a range of skills.

Showcasing these skills is as important as developing them. My research program therefore includes informal interviews with members of industry and policy stakeholders. I identify agencies and individuals who would genuinely be interested in my research, shown them my work, and use this work as the basis for discussion. In addition to increasing my own exposure beyond the walls of academia and providing circumstances for ‘experiential learning’, this has the added benefit of having
my ‘views from the ivory tower’ vetted by individuals who have more practical experience than most academics. While this is an individual-level tactic, facilitating experiential learning and student engagement with non-academic communities is also possible at the departmental level, for example through the development of internship programs (Golde 2001) and partnerships with hiring agencies (Campbell et al. 2005).

Developing and showcasing the breadth of skills developed while in graduate school will help to alleviate the anxiety of finding employment to the extent that it expands employment opportunities. An unintended consequence may be to increase the time spent on one’s professional life at the expense of time spent on one’s personal life. To minimize this it is important to ensure that thesis research, teaching duties, and coursework – which collectively define ‘formal academic duties’ – are not exclusive, but rather compliment each other. Streamlining these duties is not always possible, as I will discuss in the next section, but it is a strategy that students must consider when pursuing workloads that are not directly related to their thesis. When applying for teaching assistantships or research assistantships, for example, I have selected only those courses or projects that engage the methods or theories being employed in my thesis. The same principal applies for course selection. When chosen carefully, it is possible to use a course as a vehicle to move closer to thesis completion, for example by writing a paper that can serve as the basis for one of your chapters, or by using your own data when completing course projects. Professors are almost always willing to make accommodations to this end.

**POTENTIAL STRUCTURAL IMPEDIMENTS**

The notion that one can develop an integral thesis composed of multiple ‘stand-alone’ pieces of work is at least partly based on the opportunity to carefully craft a manuscript-style thesis. While the development of manuscript-style theses is not a necessary pre-condition to fulfilling the strategies discussed above, it certainly helps. If the student is able to produce and publish multiple papers, there will be something tangible to showcase at job interviews outside of academia. Maintaining the manuscript format through to completion avoids re-organizing the work and thus minimizes the time required for compilation. When relevant, students should lobby their program directors, departments, and/or advisors to offer the manuscript format as an option.

Course selection must also be a point of negotiation. In some cases student control over course selection is limited by arbitrary and counterproductive degree requirements. In most departments, there is a minimum credit requirement for graduation. At some institutions this requirement must be satisfied solely with courses offered in the geography department. This requirement is justified by the fact that conferral of the degree ‘doctor of philosophy in geography’ implies that the recipient has a deep understanding of the methodological and conceptual foundation of the discipline. Often, however, the number of foundational courses (i.e., courses explicitly designed to maintain the integrity of the discipline by teaching core concepts, methods, and methodologies in geography) are fewer than minimal course requirements. As a consequence, and especially given the relatively low number of graduate level courses offered in any given term, students are often forced to take elective courses in which the primary intention is neither to explicitly engage key disciplinary issues nor the student’s specific research topic. An example of such a situation would be if a student studying race relations is required to take “The Geography of Energy” for the sole purpose of fulfilling degree requirements at the expense of taking a more relevant course. The only way to circumvent this limitation is to increase classroom hours by voluntarily taking an additional course outside of the discipline. In practice, then, course requirements can
dramatically increase the workload of a student who is trying to streamline their coursework with their thesis research.\footnote{2}

The minimum course requirement for conferral of the degree should be limited to the number of foundational courses offered by the department. After successful completion of these foundational courses, departments should allow candidates to seek more topically relevant courses outside of the department with the condition that the deliverables of the course are tailored to engage the core concepts of geography. This approach would better serve the needs of the student, maximize returns on investments of time in coursework, and facilitate a great understanding of the research topic(s).

In addition to formal classroom activities, students should be afforded the opportunity to attend external workshops. These workshops provide a venue for networking and for learning research tools (e.g., new software) that are directly applicable to their research project. In effect, attendance at a workshop is a critical element to employing the strategies discussed above. Currently, however, it is common practice for departments to award travel funding to only those students who are presenting a poster or a paper at a conference. This allocation of resources limits the chances to learn relevant research methods faster, and reinforces the business model discussed above by rewarding only the type of productivity that can be reduced to a simple number or which reflects well on the department (e.g., number of conference presentations).

NOTES

1. I recognize that, given the geography of Geography (Simandan 2002; see also Johnston 1997), this is not always perceived to be commensurate with an ‘academic’ product. The qualifier ‘carefully crafted’ should be taken seriously in this case.

2. The alternative would be to wait as long as it takes for a relevant course to be offered by the department. The length of time varies from one year in cases where the course is offered in a cyclic manner, or even two years in cases where the regular lecturer is on sabbatical or leave. It is my belief, however, that courses need to be front-loaded in a program to ensure a solid grounding before proceeding with thesis research, and to avoid scheduling conflicts as the student ramps up research and other thesis duties.

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REFERENCES


