



How to tame your PhD

**A collective document
by and for past & present
PhD students**

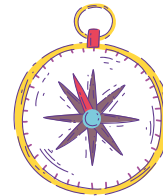
**KRISHNA ANUJAN
TANYA GINWALA**

About

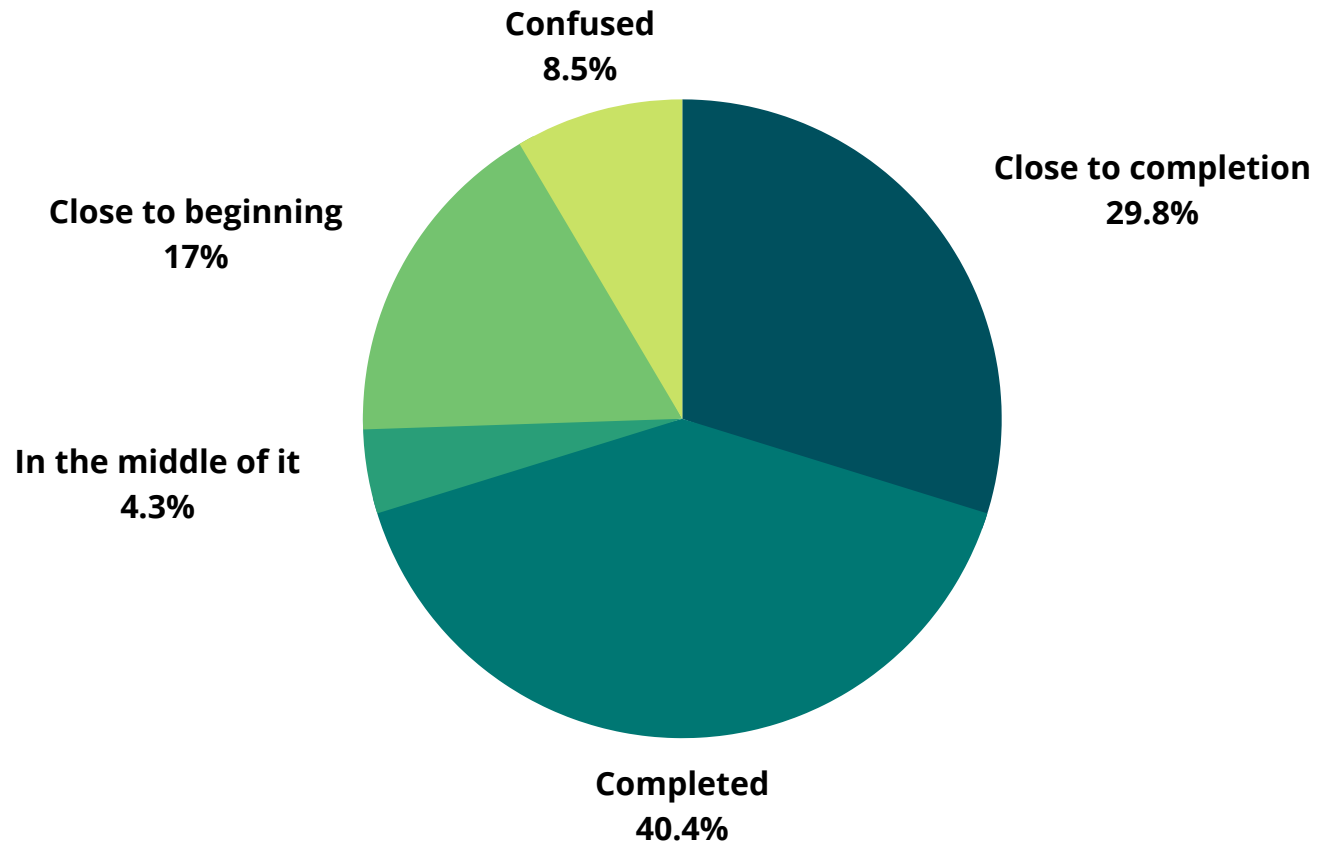
A PhD can be a stressful and isolating period and many students find it hard to inch towards the finishing line. Conversations with peers and colleagues have revealed that what pushes us through are small changes and tested hacks.

We created a questionnaire to collect ideas and know-hows from 46 present and past PhD students on how to stay on track during the process and put them together in this collective document.

We hope you find it supportive on your Phd journey :)



Where are you in your PhD?





Where did you do your PhD?

Universite Libre
de Bruxelles
+
Andaman
Islands

Centre for
Ecological
Sciences,
Indian Institute of
Science

THSTI

IISc

ETH Zurich

Laval University

Centre for Wildlife
Studies

KU Leuven,
Belgium

University of
Cambridge

Goldsmiths
UK

ATREE

Johns Hopkins
+
Janelia Research
Campus

Hannover

IIT Bombay
+
University of
Amhurst

University of New
Mexico

The University of
Iowa

Technische
Universität
Braunschweig

Delhi University

South Africa

University of
Toledo

Columbia

University of
Michigan

Radboud University Nijmegen

University of Essex

IIT Bombay
+
Monash Research
Academy

Manipal University

Syracuse

Stellenbosch University, South Africa

SACON

University of
Chicago

Telecom Paris and
Technicolor



Computer Science



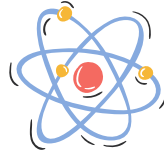
Education



Psychology
Counseling
Clinical psychology



Public Policy
Political
Science



Experimental Physics
Theoretical physics



Biomedical engineering
Biotech



Fabric & apparel
science



Social work
(process in groups in the outdoors)



Forensic Science



Neuroscience
Cognitive
Psychology



Astronomy



Mathematics
Combinatorial Optimization



Archaeology



Health Communication



Interdisciplinary work



Ecology and Evolution

Ecology, conservation and sustainability

Community Ecology

Hydrology

Environment and sustainability

Environmental Humanities



Zoology

Wildlife Ecology and Conservation

Social-ecological
systems
(environmental
governance)





People that support(ed) you during your PhD?

Family

PhD Supervisor, Advisors



Friends who are also doing their PhD

Mentors

My partner

Therapists

Friends

My boss

Facebook support groups

Colleagues, Collaborators, Team mates

Roommates



Places that support(ed) you during your PhD?

College Library

Cafes

My Lab

Finding a quiet corner to write

My field sites and the local people there

Walks in the park

Having a place of my own

My work space set up at home

The Andaman Islands



Things that support(ed) you during your PhD?

Commitment toward an equal society

Hobbies

Vacations and Travel

Cooking

Meditation

Music, my noise-cancelling headphones

Long thorough baths

Football

Regular committee meetings

Food

Cup of Hot Water

Birding

Group Study Sessions

Socialising with people who have no serious interest in research


Dogs

Google Scholar, Libgen, Sci Hub, Academic Twitter

My Vehicle



What is one thing you learned during your PhD that you wish you had known at the beginning?




"Dropping a frustrating problem and picking it up later helps way better than sitting on it forever"

"Things will definitely not go the way you want them to and that's absolutely okay.


There's a very high possibility of a thesis chapter/paper being replaced by something new. Always being accepting and adaptable to unforeseen circumstances is important"

"The PhD is only a part of my life and it doesn't define who I am or will be"




"Picking out hobbies and friends matters a lot, especially when things are not going well. Your own physical and mental health should be prioritised above the degree"

"Feeling unembarrassed and asking stupid questions is hugely important. Even though it feels like you don't know anything and most of your peers have their \$h*t together, most of them feel the same way about themselves. Asking for help is important"



"Exploring as much as possible in the beginning helps. If you narrow yourself too much, you lose out on finding additional information which could potentially help you connect the dots in the future. A Ph.D. does not change your life, but it give you more options to explore"


"It's really all about self motivation and it can be an isolated journey. I wish I had known that it would involve high levels of decision making and almost no team work"



"The academic environment is not inherently supportive and it's very competitive, which may add to your stress and leave you feeling really unhappy.

**I wish someone had told me how common it is for your mental health to suffer during a PhD.
Get mental health support if you need it"**


"You should reserve 2-3 days a week to begin, and then to finish; be on it full time"



**"The best dissertation is a done dissertation.
It's not your life's work, it's a hoop you jump
through to get to your life's work, so pick
something you like because you have to spend a
lot of time on it.**

**But it doesn't have to be epic and it doesn't have
to be perfect**

**A career in research is extremely difficult, and
gaining a PhD isn't the end of something, it's really
the beginning. Think through what you want to do
afterwards"**



**"I wish I had known that I would face and have to overcome publication rejection several times.
It's okay to fail"**

"Critique and criticism isn't personal, it's a part of the growth process.

**You are not expected to know everything in the beginning, so don't let that scare or depress you. But you are expected to learn as much as possible about your subject in these four years.
Cultivate a growth mindset instead of a fixed mindset"**




"Talk to more people.

A PhD is not all about science.

Choose a lab which has a large grad student community which will allow you to have more friends and more opportunities.


**Progress happens in steps, take time to pursue life in general as well. Your research life is not independent of your social life. One affects the other. Success in one will transfer to confidence and thus success/happiness in the other.
So, do NOT neglect your social life"**



"Take what you get with a grain of salt, and take what you need from it, but don't take it all verbatim if it's not what you need.

Also, know how to say no and push back if you disagree or if an opportunity isn't helping you"


"One's research (or parts of it) can get repetitive and sometimes even boring. This either means that you've learnt what needs to be learnt from that part of your research or you have the opportunity to expand/re-evaluate the questions you're asking"



"Too many related ideas that seem more interesting than your own work will be floating around in journals and conferences (many probably aren't). You'll be attracted to them naturally, but be careful, it's an easy trap to derail your project.

Read literature very critically, discuss ideas thoroughly and choose your battles wisely"


"Planning the PhD timeline is very helpful. Time management is very important. PhD is all about learning to be patient



"I picked a topic I was not familiar with. This caused me to be extremely underconfident and stressed throughout my PhD. I wish I had known this before I proposed the topic because I think I would have chosen a different topic"

"Keeping a daily journal documenting your work and thinking is invaluable. It helped me make sense of all the reading that I was doing (which can feel like a maze).

It acted as a sort of accountability system and also helped with my writing and organising my ideas"



"In academia we sometimes uplift individual passions at the peril of our own or our collective wellbeing. It's called the Ivory Tower for a reason, and the environment in academia is not remotely close to reflecting the world beyond its bounds"

"There is a difference between a professional and personal relationship"

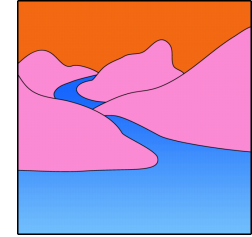


A fire



Fox

Decision-making



A stream that changes back and forth between laminar and turbulent flows multiple times
A river. You can't fight the river, you've just gotta ride it and see where it takes you

Quantum simulator



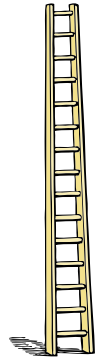
Frogs and urbanisation

Grass

Three bricks

Laser

An object/noun that closely describes or resembles your PhD process



Ladder

Chaos

Ox pulling a cart

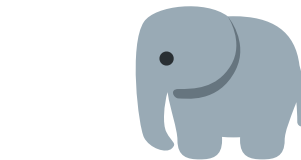


Roller Coaster



Deep dreaming

Learning



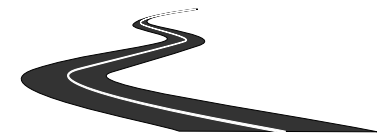
Elephant (slow, big - but impressive amount of work)



Phoenix (looked beautiful at first, then spontaneously combusted to ash, reborn as an ugly bird and then again taking flight in beautiful plumage aka end PhD)



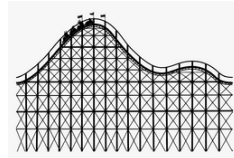
A cat



A steep, uphill, winding road



Frog (because i get these big pushes of motivation and then kinda stagnant and they another big hurdle and then stagnant)



Rollercoaster
(with some 'easy' stretches)



Baby



A circle



Train

patience/steadiness

The hydroxyl radical
(the main sink for methane)



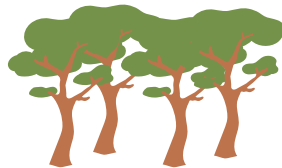
Cow/Bull

An object/noun that closely describes or resembles your PhD process



Lake

Walking and watching



Rainforest



Bats

Biryani

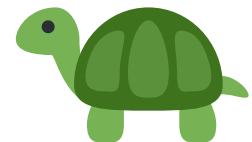


Symphony

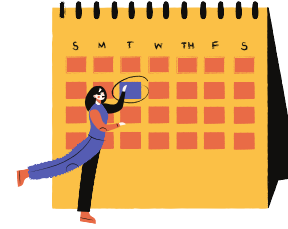
Savannas



Water



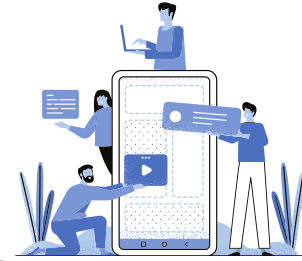
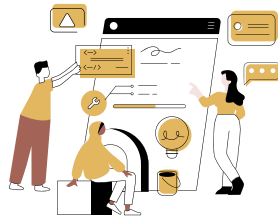
A very stressed-out turtle



What are some of the little things you did to stay on track with PhD goals?

- 1 Frequent meetings with guide/PI/supervisor (free conversation, informal goal setting, formal and informal deadlines)
- 2 Keeping track of work hours and productivity. Having a plan
- 3 Casual conversations with people/vocalising problems and negative emotions, asking for help
- 4 Down time and breaks to 'breathe and inspire' - with friends/family/hobbies/expeditions
- 5 Dancing, cooking, cycling - stuff to look forward to at the end of the day
- 6 Celebrating successes or goals. Giving myself a small incentive eg. Going for a trip or took a break to do something I like

- 7 PhD groups on social media. Developing a group of PhD students who I could share my ideas/work/studying with helped a lot
- 8 Giving up social media, Blocking out entire weeks and telling everyone that I am writing
- 9 Noting all useful information in a 'scratch file' including meeting minutes OR "research diary" to keep track of all research thoughts - Making notes for papers
- 10 Maintaining a personal lab diary to have a better picture/detailed plan of what is going on - where I wrote about what I felt about my PhD life, what I have done so far, how my plans were moving etc.
- 11 Stationary - Colourful post-its, highlighters and paper tags
- 12 Writing papers and submitting them to boost confidence
- 13 Breaking large tasks into smaller achievable tasks - ticking them off at the end of the day/week
- 14 Having faith in myself, my work and motivations



What are some specific technology/tools/software that you recommend to support the PhD process?

Focus/productivity

White Noise app
Stayfocusd Chrome extension
Pomodoro timer
Headspace app
Toggl
Gantt chart/Asana
Forest app

Office space

Ergonomic desk and chair
Student-worker union contract
Healthy academic peer group

Data/research management

Cloud storage – BACK UP DATA!
Endnote/Mendeley
Dictaphone
Excel sheets/Sticky Notes
Calendar with deadlines marked
One Note
Grammarly
Sci-hub
Rationale/Mindomo



Mental health Resources

The Academic Mental Health Collective

www.amhcollective.com

The Mindclan

www.themindclan.com


Mithra Trust

www.mithratrust.com

Mindful and Body

<https://www.mindfulandbody.com>

Thank you!

We would like to thank everyone who took the time to respond to our questionnaire and helped make this collective document possible. We hope it helped you to feel supported and find hope on your PhD journey 

We would love to hear from you!

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