Making the transition from work to PhD study

Background
Quantitative analysis of Imperial’s 2008 postgraduate research experience survey (PRES) results showed statistically significant differences between first year PhD students depending on whether they had been in work or study (either UG or PG) prior to embarking on the PhD. Those who had worked were more likely to wish to pursue an academic career but were less confident of a timely completion of their degree. They were more likely to be self-funded, experienced greater financial strain and less support from family and friends. The differences could not be explained by age or other structural factors alone. The analysis was carried out on a sample of 306 first year students, of whom more than 25% had been working before doing the PhD.

What we did
This led to a qualitative investigation of the work-to-PhD transition. In-depth interviews were carried out with 10 research students, all of whom were fully-funded. This meant that the issue of financial strain was less important and allowed us to focus on the other factors of difference. The findings are summarised below.

Results
1) Difficulties: Students who had previously been in work reported the following difficulties about life as a research student, some of which are directly attributable to having had a break in their academic career:

- Experiencing sustained anxiety about making an apparently “backwards” or “late” career move (relative to their own or others’ expectations)
- Feeling “rusty” or slow, even after a short break in study of only one year
- Needing more guidance about basic elements of the PhD process such as producing the literature review.
- Finding progress to be far slower than expected
- Struggling with the level of independence required
- Having problems adjusting to the more individual nature of research work
- Lacking confidence in their ability to make a contribution to knowledge
- Finding it hard to adopt an academic perspective
- Having difficulty maintaining self motivation
- Losing confidence that they had gained whilst working
- Having serious problems in managing their time and finding an appropriate work life balance
- Missing free time and feeling guilty about taking time off
2) **Advantages**: On the other hand, all students reported some advantages through having work experience. Some of these contradict the items above:

- Having better transferable skills, e.g. team working, time management, presentation skills
- Being more self aware e.g. knowing own strengths and weaknesses
- Feeling more independent
- Having a clearer motivation for doing the PhD
- Being more focussed
- Being more able to see the bigger picture around their research
- Seeing the industrial / commercial applications of research
- Having more confidence dealing with non academics e.g. suppliers
- Exercising greater political awareness
- Having relevant experience (for some)
- Being more able to plan their working day and to separate “work” and “life”.
- Feeling more employable due to having insight into the world of work

**Importance of this research**

More than 25% of Imperial’s PhD students have worked directly before starting their PhD. (This is similar to the UK national figure). The research suggested that the transition from worker to PhD student may be characterised by falling levels of confidence and rising levels of self-criticism and self-doubt. It is hoped that by raising awareness of this issue amongst both students and those who support them, the transition may become easier.

**Advice for students making the work to PhD transition:**

These are the main points:

- Be aware of the many advantages of work experience (such as those listed above)
- Remember that this is a very common transition which should not be seen as anomalous in any way
- Seek support at an early stage with any difficulties from your supervisor, from other colleagues in your group or department/division or from other college support services.

**Further work: Academic preparation for the PhD**

This study raised questions about the best academic preparation for doing a PhD. Analysis of the same PRES dataset showed no significant differences between those who reported entering the PhD with an undergraduate degree compared to those holding a master’s degree. However, since the database fails to distinguish between those on “direct entry” PhD programmes and those on “1 + 3” programmes, it is impossible to draw firm conclusions. Appropriate institutional questions in the next PRES survey will allow a fuller exploration of this issue.

**To comment upon this work**: please send an email to elaine.walsh@imperial.ac.uk