



Credit: Andrés Gvirtz

Publish, but don't perish to publish

Each route to graduation is an individual journey. Friedrich M. Götz, a PhD student in Psychology, argues that there are no ready-made recipes or silver bullets for success. While publications are important, the stress of producing them should not overshadow the joys of the journey.

Leo Tolstoy once wrote that there are as many kinds of love as there are hearts, and to me it seems that the same might be true for PhDs. We might research criminology or climate change, study at the University of Oslo, Cape Town or British Columbia, be well-funded or broke—there are many different stories that end with the same title: *philosophiae doctor*. Mine started in a slightly run-down red-brick building, the department of Psychology in the University of Cambridge, and for all I know it will also end there.

But it didn't stay there: my studies have taken me from fieldwork in Brisbane and Tokyo to conferences in the United States and a summer school at the Croatian Adria—I have been very fortunate. By far the greatest privilege and my only somewhat legitimate justification for all that traveling are the encounters that come with it. Sure, many first-year PhD students go to conferences to see the big names in action—I did too. However, at least in my experience, the big names are usually not the ones standing next to you at drinks receptions or taking a closer look at your poster. Instead, the people that you are probably going to spend most of your time with are your peers—and that can be wonderful. In these constellations, talking about what you have already published is normally a short-lived conversation (but it gets longer every year!), so you talk about where you want or need to publish. Granted, sometimes you may also talk about politics, sports or fashion, but eventually you come back to research and where to publish it. After many fine hours spent in such discussions, I am more convinced than ever that there are as many PhD stories out there as there are PhD candidates. Yet at the same time there also seems to be a common set of experiences that most of us somehow share.

First, publish-or-perish is the name of the game. Before I wrote this, I asked 127

PhD students around the world about their experiences. Their answers struck me. While only 58 had a formal requirement to publish, 111 said they felt under pressure to publish. But where does this pressure come from? On the one hand, there is a very real reason for this: academia is a pyramidal system, and there are too many hard-working, talented PhD students out there for too few professorships. The equation is simple: if you want to make it past the bottleneck you need to outperform your competitors. On the other hand, the publish-or-perish philosophy may have another, rather unlikely ally: us. This is not to say we just make the pressure up. Quite the opposite. But have you ever met another PhD student who makes you feel pressured to work even harder because they seem to achieve everything so fast? I have, as have more than 85% of the PhD students I asked. It's not the best feeling. Yet ironically enough, for someone else this anxiety-provoking person might be you. To be clear, I am not suggesting there are easy solutions here. But maybe one reason why overachievement stays normative is that we keep chasing after each other in a race that nobody ever really wins.

Second, there is no silver bullet. Different countries favour different approaches. For instance, Germany places greater emphasis on teaching experience than other countries. What is customary in one academic culture may not necessarily apply elsewhere (e.g. weighting quality versus quantity of publications; weighting first authorships). Likewise, different people give very different advice. Shaped by their own experiences, supervisors know no route to success better than their own. This is not to say that they are myopic or oblivious to other approaches but it seems that, simply because nobody can guarantee that a certain strategy will be successful, people tend to tell you what worked for them. The trouble is, their way might be very unique, the system might have changed or other things might have become

important. In other words, there is no simple formula to success.

Now, is this where we surrender? Surely not. Yes, it makes competition tough, but it is also incredibly enriching that there are so many of us giving it our all. So, don't stop! See your peers as collaborators, not as threats! Considering how much time you spend together some of them might even become close friends. At least that's what happened to me—and to 77% of all PhD students I asked. Round up a few people you like and run with them. Listen to your supervisors and be grateful that they have your best interest at heart. Listen to your peers. They can be an incredible source of comfort and inspiration. However, don't always listen to your peers—including me. After all, they have just as little experience, so how would they know what works best for you? Think independently. Seize opportunities. Be courageous. Take some risks. Be as productive as you can, because at the end of the day publications will matter. But also: meet the right people, socialise, attend conferences and have fun. While success without sacrifices is unlikely, that doesn't mean that sacrifices can guarantee success. So if—for whatever reason—you don't end up becoming a professor, make sure that you can look back on your PhD with fond memories, rather than the regret of having paid a price that was too high. Yes, a PhD will always be a lot of work, but it can also be one of the best times of your life. Let it. In other words: publish, but don't perish to publish! □

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