

## **Arana's experience of a PhD in the UK**

### **I. My first year in the UK**

I started school a bit earlier than usual in Georgia (formerly part of the USSR) 6 years old. It was a specialised English-language school, where I spent ten years.

I did my first degree in International Relations at the State University having one year abroad in Taiwan – learning Mandarin Chinese.

The idea of coming to the UK for a postgraduate study was born long before I graduated. I went to a presentation organised by a representative of Wessex University who gave an insight on the postgraduate opportunities in England. I received a scholarship from the Department covering tuition fees, and my family supported my living in Wessex.

The MA course at Wessex University was my first encounter with British educational system. The first half a year was extremely difficult, because I had to deal not only with a new unfamiliar system of education, but with living in a new environment. Undergraduate studies in all the countries of the former Soviet Union represent a completely different approach in education. In a way, lecturers are given a much more authoritative position – they might present different schools of thoughts on a certain subject, but at the same time, they would indicate which school has more credibility. Therefore, the relationship between the professors and students is more hierarchical – the knowledge and position of the professor is not usually challenged by the students.

One might argue that Western (British) education provides a more liberal approach by giving the students the freedom to formulate their own views. However, there might be a degree of deficiency in such a way of providing education. Leaving everything to students themselves who are only beginning to comprehend basic aspects of their subjects might make them lose focus in the ocean of varying opinions.

On a more practical level, I was quite surprised with the way the students behaved during the lectures. One would never imagine a professor back home giving a lecture to students busy texting their friends or finishing eating their lunches.

After getting over the first essays and first presentations I started enjoying the course and in the end graduated with “distinction”, which was a reward big enough for all the sleepless nights writing essays and preparing for exams. The year of my MA flew fast and so far it has been the best year out of the four years spent in England – I made a lot of great friends from all over the world, worked and partied hard...

My family couldn't come for my graduation, because my Mum visited me in England just a couple of months before that. And my sister lives in Japan and was finishing her own MA course. My closest friends were my “family” for that day.

**Q 1 Discuss Arana's experience at Wessex**

**Q 2 Should she consider applying to do a PhD in the UK?**

## **2. My decision do a PhD**

The idea of doing a PhD came from my external supervisor who was a lecturer in Barchester University. He mentioned the opportunity of applying for several scholarships at the University, gave an idea of what I can explore for my research and in such way inspired me tremendously to look forward to continuing my studies. After doing my MA I realised that if I want to start off my career with something really serious I need further qualifications and more expert knowledge than I possessed. My MA gave me a feel of the field I wanted to be in, but didn't satisfy the yearning for something deeper.

First, I had to be accepted for the PhD course at Barchester. As far as I can understand to be accepted the most important thing was to have a provisional supervisor who was working in the same area (whom I had) and a certain grade for the previous course (in my case, MA).

Having a letter of acceptance I could apply for an Overseas Research Scholarship (ORS), which unfortunately I didn't get but there was another option of a departmental studentship which the Head of the Department decided to nominate me for.

The news of me getting a University studentship at Barchester came quite late – at the end of July - when I almost gave up any hope and started making other plans. I was thinking it might be a good idea to spend some time at home and then going to the States to continue my education there.

By the time I knew I would be going to Barchester it was time to fly home for a short break and I had no time to see Barchester in August - a home for the next three years.

**Q 1 What information does Arana need before she starts her PhD?**

**Q 2 What should be covered in a good induction programme for PhD students coming from another country?**

### **3. The first year of my PhD**

I knew I would enjoy living in Barchester because it was a bigger city and people seemed more relaxed than in the busy South.

My first months of term made me realise that my life was to change dramatically, and that doing PhD was definitely something completely different to what I have experienced during my MA year. Although my Department had several academic and social activities throughout the year, I was shocked with the isolation PhD was imposing on my life.

I preferred to work in my room because I was more productive after the daylight was long gone. I was supposed to have an office allocated by my department but there were some problems with the building and the offer to get a room came by mere chance in my third (!) year. This seemed a bit ironic and I was happy with my “home” arrangements anyway. By the third, there was so much material accumulated I couldn’t see myself moving it all to the desk I was promised to get.

I realised that some fellow PhD students were constantly in a sort of “cocoon”, so deep into their research, that it was hard to make any kind of “normal” interaction with them. Another thing which surprised me was the absolute male dominance in my Department of Politics. Out of 12 new students starting their degree with me, there was only one lady (apart from me). The tutors were predominantly male apart from a couple of female lecturers in my Research Methods class.

In my year we had a few foreign students, most of whom had had some experience of studying in the UK before taking a Phd course.

My first year was quite busy. Twice a week we had seminars and tutorials helping us to understand Research Methods and we had our own Department weekly workshop where everyone had a chance to present their work. It was attended by all new PhD students in my Department and a postgraduate tutor. It was a good

experience for everyone. We each got a chance to make a half-an-hour presentation. I felt my own presentation went more or less well, but I learnt an important lesson of not trying to deliver complicated theoretical and abstract ideas. Instead in the future I opted for more practical easy to comprehend material.

I made some friends in my Department and got to know what other students were interested in.

**Q 1 What are the most important aspects of a good first year training programme for international students?**

**Q 2 Have you any advice for Arana at this stage?**

#### **4. My upgrade**

The whole year was spent reading relevant literature, and nearer to Spring I started preparing for my upgrading, which I had in early June.

The upgrade was so far the most important evaluation event in my PhD work. I wrote the first chapter and prepared a literature review, along with the timetable and chapter outline. The upgrading itself was less stressful and hostile than I thought it would be. Both external examiners were extremely helpful and friendly, they gave some valuable comments and even brought me some additional materials. I must admit though, during first two minutes of my presentation at the upgrading meeting, I could feel my voice trembling!

After my presentation and a question-answer panel, I was asked to leave the room and was called in 15 minutes later to be told I passed my upgrading and can now consider myself a real PhD student (not just “provisional” as we all are until we pass the upgrade).

The most gratifying moment was a few seconds near the stairway when I was leaving my upgrade meeting and my supervisor came out of the room to let me know how well everything went. By that time I got to accept that my supervisor was a man “of few words” and was hardly complimentary along the way. So to hear those few encouraging words from him was truly remarkable. He said he could see already that I was going to have a good thesis.

Upgrading was a turning point for me: I felt as though all the preparations are finished (literature read through, research methods chosen) and that the 2<sup>nd</sup> year will be the year of the real work and great importance.

**Q     What are the important functions of a good transfer/upgrade procedure?**

## 5. My second year

And I wasn't mistaken.

After having a wonderful summer at home I came back to Barchester for my second year. I moved out of university accommodation into a new nice flat and felt ready to have a new beginning.

The second year was very different from the first one. Now that I had a clear plan of what I wanted to do, all I had to do is to **work**.

I got a part-time job as an admin assistant in a very busy commercial company in the city centre. I was working mornings leaving the rest of the day for my thesis. Having that job helped me a lot to organise my time and structure my days. I realised that the more things I had to do, the more productive I was. I was enjoying more my life in Barchester and was overall happy with how my thesis was coming along.

There were, of course, moments of "creativity" crisis (which are a natural component of any PhD experience), days of homesickness, and moments of "I-am-ready-to-pack-it-all". Second year was hard in a way because the excitement of the first year was gone, but the end was still out of reach. From my experience, those who do decide to get out often do so by the end of the second year.

My opinion of my supervisor has changed during that year as well. He had some personal problems and was unavailable for some time. He was also on a sabbatical but with a promise to look after his PhD students.

Apart from that, he seemed less concerned with what I was doing. My supervision sessions were happening on a very rare basis, I hardly saw him that year.

I was getting a feeling he was not exactly aware of where I was. I was trying to find explanations for that blaming his bad luck during the year. I was getting an impression he felt I would finish my degree anyway, with or without his help. It was very different from the first year when he was closely supervising me. During the first year I was getting practical suggestions on the written work I was submitting for his attention. He would see me 2-3 times a month in the first year. May be he thought he had put me on a right track and I was supposed to move along myself now.

He never refused my requests to see him, but I was getting less and less from our meetings. He still had great ideas and was extremely supportive and encouraging, but was less helpful in terms of practical advices on how to improve my work. After each meeting with him, I felt reassured that the topic of my research is definitely of interest. However, our discussions were more of a general nature – it was still on the subject but more diluted to general comments.

For matter or worse, I wrote drafts for some of the main chapters of my thesis. After finishing each chapter I was sending it to my supervisor and he would usually seem me some time after. He would give some comments on them and praise the good work, although I was not always sure how carefully my work was read.

By end of July I went home to soak some sun and TLC from my family and friends.

**Q 1 Discuss the essential characteristics of a good supervisor**

**Q 2 Have you any advice for Arana at this stage?**



## **6. My third year**

By the time I was about to start my final (and current) year, I was determined to make most of it and work as hard as I could. I was also aware that I should start thinking about employment and future plans.

Due to the nature of my thesis, the field work was planned for the final stage of my research. According to plan, I am writing an initial draft of my thesis using the data available from the existing literature, printed materials, and specialised reports. By the time, my analysis of the problem researched is complete and I have a full understanding of the subject, I will conduct a field trip which will involve face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the experts.

After the interviews are completed, the drafts will be finalised profiting from some finishing touches based on insider knowledge. I am positive about the possibility to do this amount of work in one year. With having major material of my work prepared and written I feel confident I would be able to use the time after the field work effectively to improve the drafts I already have.

Although, third (hopefully, final) year bears a lot of responsibility, I enjoy it much more than the previous two. First of all, I feel more confident in the area of my study; I gained a deeper knowledge of my topic, and generally feel optimistic about finishing my degree on time.

I must confess my supervisor has less and less involvement in what I am doing in terms of my thesis. I probably saw him 2 times since before summer (we are in November now).

Recently I had to e-mail him all the chapters written and shown to him before as well as the chapter outline in order to show him where I was with my thesis because he didn't have an idea. I am happy he was impressed with the amount done, but I am sad to say, I haven't had a proper feed back from him yet. It's been more than a month since I did it.

However, I always think of my supervisor of someone who would always support me with my “big” plans (like, applying for research grants or going for a post-doc). It seems it’s just the routine thesis supervision is not his strong point.

At the moment I am planning to go back home just before Christmas to finish writing up and travel for my field work from there. I want to go partly because I don’t see how I can benefit from staying at the University for longer.

My friend who started with me decided to put her PhD on hold after realising it was putting pressure on her emotional state and personal life. She also feels disappointed with her supervisor from whom she was getting less and less support. My other friend who is doing her PhD degree in Canterbury is also feeling quite frustrated with the supervision received and is thinking of quitting the whole thing unable to cope with it on her own.

**Q 1 Discuss the main features of a good supervisory meeting**

**Q 2 Have you any suggestions for either Arana or her supervisor at this stage?**

## **7 My final thoughts on my experience of doing a PhD in the UK**

I think one of the major problems is the pressure imposed on the academia staff to produce publications in order for the Universities to keep high research rates. Unfortunately, it dangerously shifts the priority from teaching the students to writing their endless books and articles. May be there should be those who only teach, and those who only publish. That way everyone would be happy.

It's a bit sad that I feel slightly frustrated with the system after I got to know it better, but I am feeling positive about the overall PhD experience. Being in the University among people having similar interests is a fulfilling environment. Now that I am approaching the end of a long and difficult PhD journey I start to realise how valuable it will be for my future.

I am happy I chose to do a PhD and I still think England was a good choice. Although, in my opinion there are some deficiencies with how the system operates.

PhD is an emotionally difficult time for most of the students, especially for those coming from abroad. It's also hard because most of us are coming from very different education systems and expect a closer supervised method of studies. I don't think PhD research should stop being an independent research as it is now, but I wish supervisors would be more attentive to students' needs. We often need some guidance with our work, some encouragement, and may be some pressure occasionally, and most of all, we need to feel that someone *is* interested in what we are doing. Next time I am in Barchester I will be submitting my thesis.

### **Team task**

**On the acetates provided list your suggestions for**

- 1. departments/schools/faculties recruiting international PhD students**
- 2. their supervisors, and**
- 3. international postgraduate students**