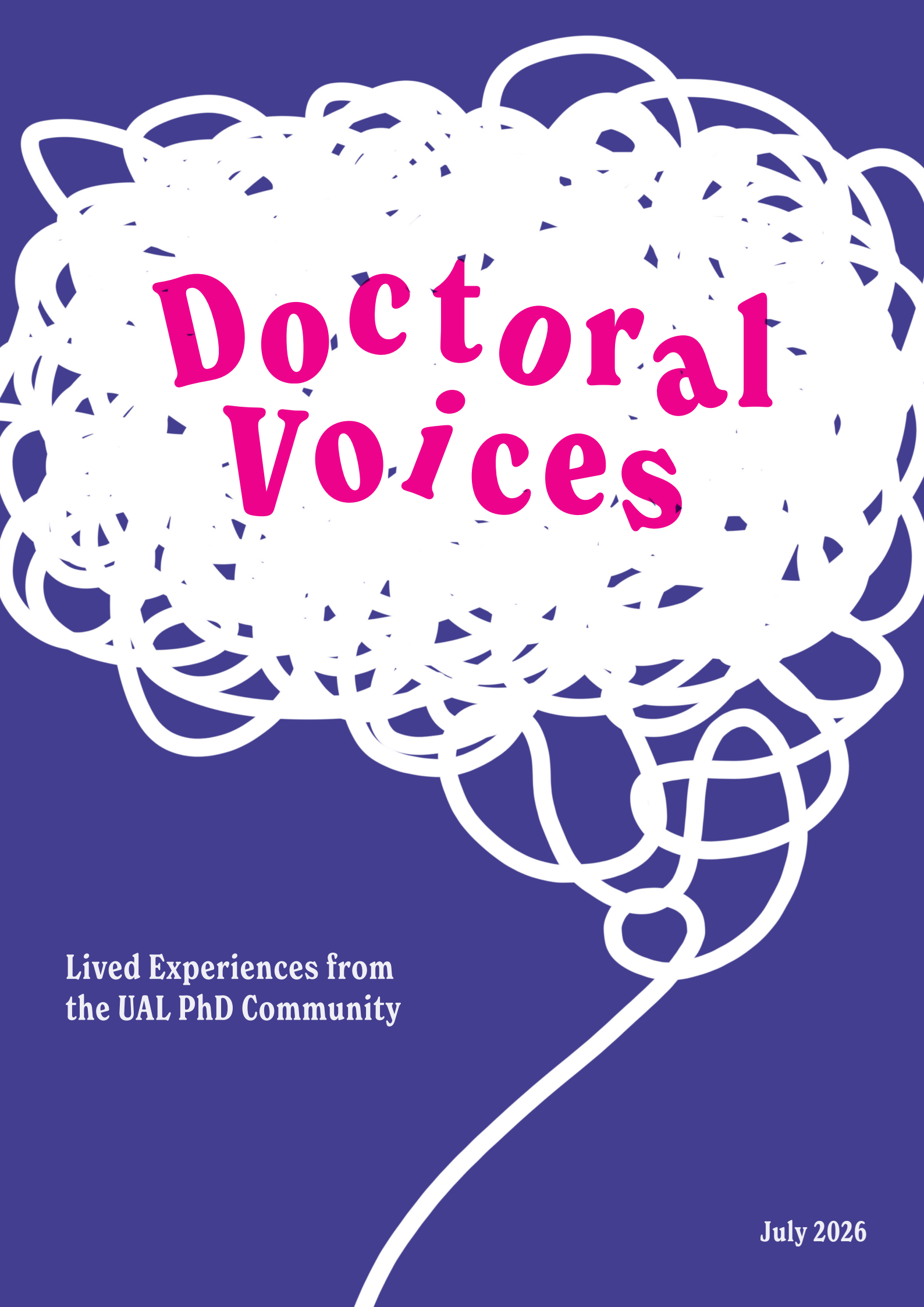




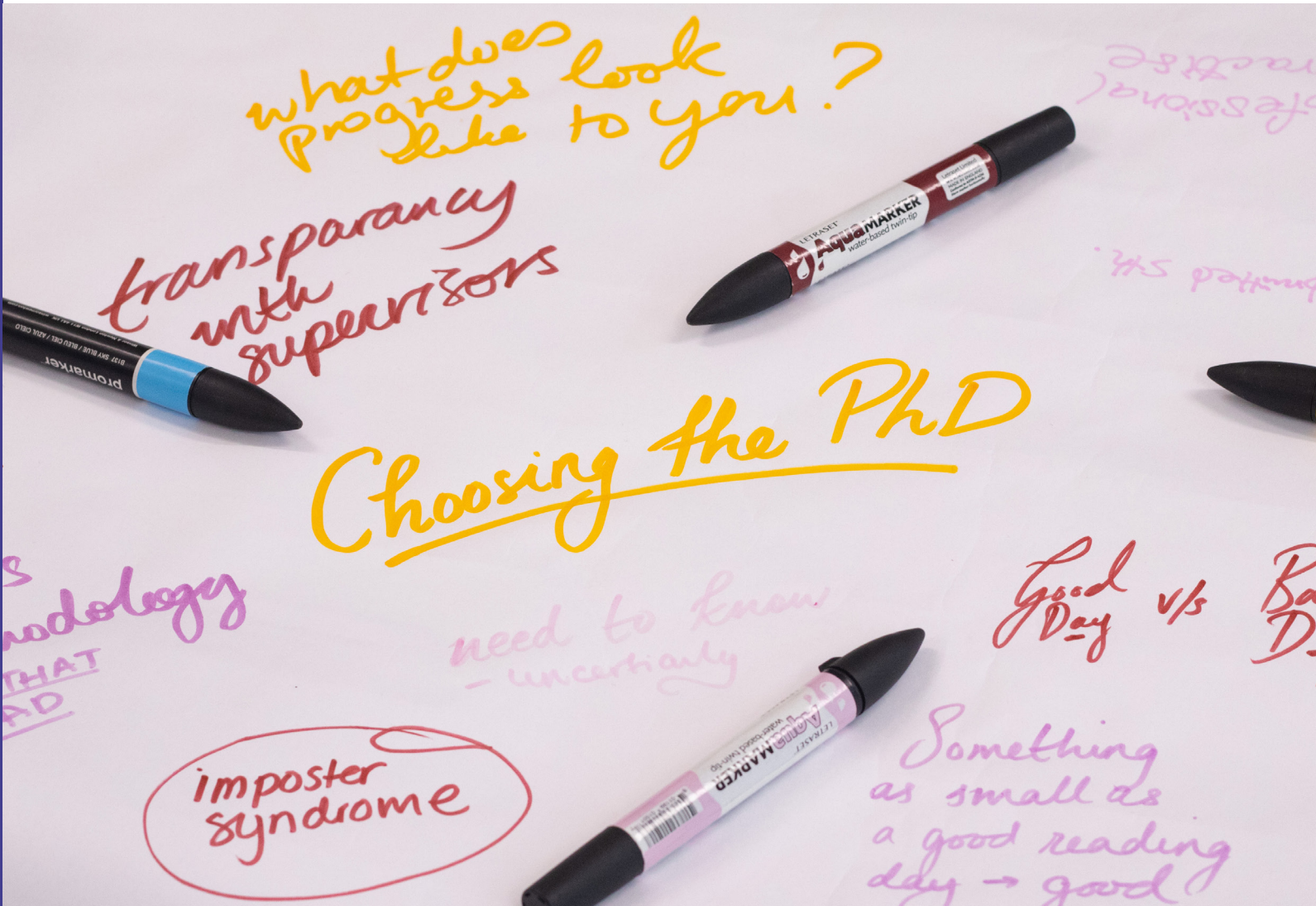
Doctoral Voices

Lived Experiences from
the UAL PhD Community

July 2026

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Doctoral Voices: Lived Experiences from the UAL PhD Community is a peer-led magazine created to share the experiences, reflections, lessons, and what it can look like to carry out doctoral study at the University of the Arts London. This project brings together contributions from current UAL Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs) and PhD alumni across different disciplines and stages of study. Through conversations, workshops, interviews and shared reflections, we invited doctoral researchers to speak openly about the realities of the PhD journey, including the challenges, uncertainties, achievements, and moments of growth that are often left out of formal academic writing.

The initial idea for this project emerged from 'PhD Tea and Chat', a peer-led PGR community that we co-created and have co-led together for the past few years. Through years of conversations with fellow doctoral researchers, we recognised a shared need for spaces where experiences, questions and practical wisdom could be exchanged openly and informally.

Whether you are just thinking of doing a PhD, about to begin your PhD journey, navigating the middle years, preparing for submission, or reflecting on your doctoral journey after graduation, we hope this magazine can act as a source of clarity, support or reassurance, and remind you that many of your questions, concerns and experiences are shared by others. You are not in it alone. No matter the stage, there is a large community out here to support you.

We hope that this magazine helps you feel a little more connected, supported and less alone.

Enjoy!

With love,

Meher Shiblee & Lezhi (Crystal) Zhang

Project Co-Leads, *Doctoral Voices: Lived Experiences*
Co-Founders, PhD Tea and Chat

Notes from the Doctoral School

*Two plus two equals five. **

The title *Notes from the Doctoral School* is deliberate. Notes are often unfinished. They record observations before conclusions have been reached. They preserve traces of thinking in motion. They are reminders, prompts, sketches, fragments, and beginnings. In that spirit, this publication is less concerned with certainty than with sharing experiences that might resonate with, challenge, or accompany others. Doctoral research is often lived through such notes: fragments of reading, observations from practice, questions from supervision, conversations with peers, and ideas that return repeatedly before their significance becomes clear.

In *Ordinary Notes*, Christina Sharpe writes that 'a dictionary suggests itself' (2023: 38), and this marks a moment when accumulated observations, encounters, memories, and reflections begin to generate their own vocabulary. The notes become concepts. Sharpe's insight reminds us that research is not simply the application of existing language to new problems; it is also the gradual emergence of words, questions, and ways of knowing that make new forms of thought possible. Doctoral study often involves a similar process. Through reading, making, writing, conversation, and experimentation, researchers develop a language for concerns that initially seem difficult to name. Ideas gain definition, but they also remain open, provisional, and in motion.

Doctoral research also flourishes through connection. UAL's Researcher Development Programme brings together researchers across disciplines, practices, and perspectives, creating opportunities for ideas to meet and evolve. These encounters are not supplementary to research; they are central to it. They remind us that our work exists within a wider community of thought and practice.

* The phrase, borrowed from Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864), stands as a reminder that human life cannot always be reduced to systems, calculations, or predictable outcomes. Research, too, often advances through uncertainty, contradiction, intuition, and encounters that exceed what can be planned.

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney describe the *undercommons* as a space of just such collective intellectual life that emerges alongside formal institutional structures (2013). It is found in conversations, acts of mutual support, shared curiosity, and the informal exchanges through which ideas are tested and transformed. Doctoral communities often thrive in precisely these spaces: in seminar discussions that continue afterwards, in peer networks, in collaborative thinking, and in the small acts of generosity that sustain research over time. Much of what matters in doctoral study happens here.

We are particularly grateful to Meher Shiblee and Crystal Zhang, whose commitment to creating conversational spaces with and for doctoral researchers brings this publication into being. Their work reflects the values that sustain doctoral communities: generosity, participation, and the belief that knowledge is shaped through exchange.

Whether you are beginning your doctorate, somewhere in the middle, approaching completion, or looking back from beyond it, we hope *Doctoral Voices* offers companionship: an invitation to participate in the ecology they cultivated. It is an invitation and a reminder that your work matters, not only as an individual achievement, but as a contribution to a collective intellectual and creative community.

And we are so glad you are here.

Dr Bob Whalley and Dr Alison Green

Directors of Doctoral Training and Development
Doctoral School, University of the Arts London

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Our sincere thanks go to the UAL PGRs and PhD alumni who generously contributed their time, experiences and reflections to this edition. By sharing both the rewarding and challenging aspects of doctoral study, they have helped create a resource that we hope will support and inspire future researchers.

Special thanks to:

Elisenda Torras
Ginette Chittick
Hanjun Shi
Jia Ying Chew
Jin Duan
Nathalie Hankir
Nina O'Reilly
Pearl Sun
William Crosby
Yongrao Du

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We would also like to thank the wider PhD Tea and Chat community. Many of the conversations, questions, and shared experiences that shaped this publication emerged through years of peer support, informal discussion and collective reflection. This magazine is a celebration of that PhD community spirit.

With gratitude,

Meher and Crystal

Co-Leads & Co-Founders, PhD Tea and Chat

Introductions



I'm **Elisenda Torras**, and I'm doing my PhD at LCF. I'm currently nearing the confirmation stage. My research examines how human aesthetic judgement and tacit styling knowledge get translated, and often transformed, when fashion retailers integrate AI into their styling and recommendation systems. I'm also a practitioner-researcher, which means I come from inside the fashion industry. This dual positioning is both valuable for the project and something that I must be careful about.



My name is **Ginette Chittick**, a part-time LCC PhD candidate moving towards the Writing-up stage in September, and I'm approaching the end of my fourth year. My research areas are Subculture, Visual and Material Culture. My thesis, titled 'Into the Mosh Pit: Singaporean Punk and Safe Defiance from 1992 to 2007', has a practice component, which is a digital archive of punk artefacts from Singapore in the period of study.



I am **Hanjun Shi**, a second-year (pre-confirmation), full-time, PhD student at LCC. My research is theory-based, specialising in the study of classical and medieval receptions in digital games, especially in the game Genshin Impact. Currently, I am also working for a game company.



I'm **Jia Ying**. I've completed my Viva and have just submitted my corrections. I currently teach at the Division of Industrial Design at the National University of Singapore. I did a practice-led PhD at LCC, and my research topic was: The Role of Design in Transdisciplinary Higher Education.



I am **Jin Duan**, a third-year, full-time PhD student at CSM. My research is practice-based, specialising in speculative design in everyday contexts. My research employs participatory methods and design probes to investigate the multifaceted nature of speculative narrative.



I'm **Lezhi Zhang**, and I go by Crystal Zhang. I'm a full-time PhD candidate at LCC, currently in my write-up year and aiming to submit in September 2026. My practice-based research explores design education for eco-social justice, with a particular focus on object-based learning within higher education classrooms. I also teach part-time at LCC and CSM.



I am **Meher Shiblee**, a post-viva, PhD candidate at LCC. My research is theory-based, focusing on the issues of representation of Muslim superheroines in contemporary comics. It examines how the diversification of the superhero genre has created space for Muslim representation to be challenged and for more diverse, complex and nuanced narratives.



My name is **Nathalie Carly Hankir**, and I am a full-time PhD candidate at CSM. Currently, I am entering the write-up stage, for which I have written a first full draft of my PhD, which is theory-based. My doctoral research investigates how rural Swedish hunters interpret value, excess, and the moral aspects of 'luxury'. Taking an interdisciplinary approach, I draw from anthropology, philosophy, and sociology to examine how these hunters understand value through their specific cultural perspectives.



I am **Nina O'Reilly**, a third-year, part-time PhD student at CSM. My research is theory-based, specialising in the changing fortunes of youth/sub/club/queer cultures in the King's Cross area over a period of time.



I am **Pearl Sun**, a part-time lecturer at LCC and part-time PhD student at CSM. My practice-based PhD focuses on regenerative branding. It reimagines education and academic practice in a regenerative paradigm.



I am **William Crosby**, a British/Cypriot artist, researcher, educator, and agitator. I am just over halfway through my PhD, having passed my confirmation two months ago. My practice-based PhD research exists at the intersection of sound art, radical pedagogy, and grassroots organising. I aim to develop the field and methodology of 'sonic pedagogy', to propose the plural modes of knowledge production needed to respond to our epoch of multiple overlapping crises: climate breakdown, technofascism, genocide, and imperialism.



I am **Yongrao Du**, a fourth-year, full-time PhD student at LCC. My research is theory-based, which focuses on building a framework for design researchers to engage scientists in reflective speculation through critical and speculative design.

What was the motivation behind opting for a PhD, and would you give the same answer today?

William Honestly, I am conflicted about having to obtain a PhD itself, and the qualification or professional adulation that comes with it. I understand that, as someone who works in academia, having a PhD is an expected endeavour, and it will be advantageous for me to have done one. However, really, I think the mode of a PhD is quite problematic and outdated; it upholds the myth of the lone genius, promotes isolated quests for knowledge, and creates hierarchies between those with and those without. The collective and communal forms of practice my research engages with do not readily conform to the institutional mould of the PhD. However, within an

art school, I can challenge the traditional PhD format through the space and agency provided by the university. So, why did I do a PhD? Well, I had work I wanted to do, and I had found a community at CRiSAP at LCC that felt like home, following studying an MA there a few years earlier. A PhD was a means by which I could undertake the research and projects I felt were necessary and important within the broader scope of my practice and career. Despite my critical ambivalence, I enjoy doing my PhD. I enjoy the community I am a part of. I think I would give the same answer today as I gave when I first began.

Hanjun I wanted to combine my background in historical studies with my interest in game design and game narrative studies. Additionally, I am also an alumnus of LCC with a master's in game design. Therefore, I wanted to take a step ahead. But I struggled quite a bit, as not too many scholars have theoretically studied my research area.

Elisenda I chose to do a PhD 4 years ago because I was working inside the fashion industry and watching AI being introduced into creative and styling roles in ways that nobody was seriously interrogating. Would I give the same answer today? Broadly, yes, but I'd be more honest about the emotional dimension of it. I think I framed it to myself as a fairly rational decision. What I underestimated was how much the PhD would require me to sit with uncertainty, to tolerate not knowing, and to trust that the discomfort of being in-between industry and academia, practitioner and researcher, was actually the point, not a problem to solve.

Pearl So I have been working in the industry as a graphic designer and an experiential narrative designer for about 18 years. During my career, I made critical observations on the way we design. I flagged major issues in terms of sustainability. But when I started teaching branding and graphic design, I knew that the major problem was yet unsolved. Therefore, this prompted me to research and understand further solutions to solve this issue. I thought that's a perfect topic for a PhD to have a look at. And yes, I would still answer it the same way today.

Ginette I've been lecturing at a university for the past 20 years. So, it felt like a natural progression to move on to the next stage of my career. I also wanted to expand the index to explore what cultural contributions looked like in Singapore, while telling stories of the Singaporean punk scene and offering a counterpoint to the dominant notion of Singaporeanness and national identity. If I had to answer this question today, my answer would remain the same.

Yongrao At the end of my master's, I figured that the topics of interest for me are speculative design and bio-design. I wanted to take these further and explore a field that would be interesting and new for me. As of today, I have realised that theory is more important than practice for my research at the moment; therefore, the change of practice to theory makes sense to me. Now, I sometimes ask myself, "What would I make of my career now?" In my opinion, speculative designers are underfunded and receive limited opportunities; therefore, despite my liking, I doubt if I can consider this research as my primary career.

Nathalie I decided to pursue a PhD in my 20s because I was grappling with major existential questions amid a fast-changing world. In my view, the traditional way the world was organised was fading away, and I never felt inclined toward a typical 9-to-5 job, as I have always been a creative individual. Growing up, I was drawn to theatre, dance, art, and writing. Since my pursuit of a PhD was tied to my personal journey, my answer remains unchanged—it still holds deep significance for me.

Crystal My motivation came from my background in industrial design, where I always enjoyed learning through physical objects and making. I was also interested in education for sustainability, so, through my higher education teaching experience, I became motivated to explore how tangible objects can support learning about eco-social justice in classroom settings. This led me to pursue a PhD, which brings together my design practice, teaching experience, and research interests.

Meher I was always interested in the issues around how women were represented in popular culture, and it was a thread I have been following since my undergraduate years. After my Masters, I took a little break from academia to figure out exactly what I was interested in doing next, and after a lot of thinking, and talking to different people, the PhD felt like a natural stepping stone, and UAL ended up being the perfect fit in terms of where I wanted to do it.

Jia Ying I was deeply curious about my research topic, and if it weren't for my PhD, then I wouldn't be able to justify the time, space, guidance and resources needed to fully explore. I had graduated from a transdisciplinary (TD) graduate programme and was already interested in understanding what makes TD teaching so challenging. And yes, I would still give the same answer today. The PhD gave me the time, the agency to shape the research direction, and most importantly, the space to surface and contribute to conversations that feel increasingly important in today's educational landscape.

What is one thing you wish someone had told you earlier about doing a PhD?



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Elisenda That the theoretical framework isn't something you arrive at once and then defend forever, it's something you keep returning to, adjusting, and understanding more deeply as the project develops. I spent a lot of energy early on trying to 'lock in' my three pillars and get everything settled, when actually the work of the PhD is precisely learning to hold your framework lightly enough to let the empirical material talk back to it. Someone could have told me: the structure is a scaffold, not a cage.

William I wish someone had told me that there's no need to rush. I began as a full-time student, despite working full-time, being self-funded and a disabled student, I thought I needed to get it done quickly, to graduate at the same time as those I began with, and follow a strict timeline. It was too much work, and it negatively impacted my health, so I decided to switch to a part-time PhD. Research is procedural in nature, and it needs to unfold at a pace that suits both the research and you as the researcher. Life exists around and within this. I would also recommend joining a local branch of UCU at the beginning of the PhD journey. It is essential to be aware of the rights of research students. As PhD students, we are entitled to the same workers' rights as our supervisors/lecturers, and we can join the University and College Union (UCU) for free for the duration of our studies.

Pearl Research is a completely different way of thinking than design. So I think I didn't really realise, I think as a designer, we're used to problem solving. But as a researcher, you actually need to present all of the data, the good and the bad, the things that are working, the things that aren't working. And I think it took me until around confirmation time to realise that that's actually how you approach it, that you can't just go in, swoop in and come up with these amazing solutions, what you think are solutions, without kind of presenting the whole picture. So I think that was a shift in mindset that was foundational to the PhD.

Hanjun I would say that networking is an essential part of the process, especially among students, doctors, and research communities. Furthermore, extending the networking process to other universities and countries could help evaluate my research with respect to current academia and other industries. Personally, visiting conferences has helped me connect with other scholars on social media, where I can take the conversation further about collaboration or other work opportunities. I came here as an international student, but I would like to leave with a network that I have built over the course of this PhD. If I had a chance again, I would use my first year to network rather than just focus on my academics.

Jin I could have focused on building connections beyond the university's boundaries. Besides master's/bachelor's courses, which have a more structured course outline, a PhD provides complete freedom of time. It is important to make use of that time wisely. A part-time PhD would have been a helpful choice, as it would have allowed me to connect better with my industry, understand the landscape and how my research could contribute to the industry. I believe from the beginning of the PhD journey, one should always ask this question: How is my research useful for their system? This question tends to make your research outward-focused, keeping the ever-evolving industry in consideration.

Nina Going into the arts and humanities research sector, I always knew my future would be uncertain. There is a certain career anxiety about upgrading yourself with professional development skills, while doing a PhD, to bag a job at the end. However, if I knew of the hardships and uncertainties I would face, I would still go down the same road.

Ginette I would recommend starting to read the key texts before the PhD commences. Since I am a slow reader, it would have been helpful to have a head start. Secondly, stick to a note-taking system that best suits your working style.

Nathalie Choosing the right supervisor and team is crucial; it can make a bigger difference than you might expect. Look for someone who values both your academic progress and your emotional well-being. The key factors for succeeding in a PhD are encouragement, optimism, and composure, so having a supervisor who supports you in these ways is indispensable, especially during challenging periods.

Crystal One thing I wish someone had told me earlier is that a PhD takes time, patience, and a lot of trust in the process. It is not a straight or an easy path, and progress does not always look visible. There are moments when the work feels slow, or when you question whether you are moving forward, but I have learned that these moments are also part of the process. Doubt, waiting, rewriting, and rethinking can feel difficult, but they are often where the research becomes deeper.

Meher I heard a lot of opinions about the level of difficulty and commitment required for a PhD. However, I think people cannot really scare you away if you really want to do something. So I was quite dismissive of others' opinions at the start; however, by my fourth year, I faced struggles I hadn't anticipated. I wish I had fully understood that the PhD doesn't entirely take place in a bubble, life still happens, and you will have to learn how to navigate a lot of problems you may not have even thought of.

What does a 'good PhD day' look like for you, and what does a difficult PhD day look like?



© William Crosby

Ginette A good day is when I have a full day lined up with nothing but reading papers and writing, achieving at least 500 words. Alongside, doing some photography of the artefacts for my archive and working on processing the images. A difficult day would be when I am simply distracted by my full-time work demands, household chores and other responsibilities.

Yongrao I enjoy moments when I find something super interesting and relevant to my research, and I hyper-focus on that. It sometimes leads to an imbalance between my work and personal life. So I do not think I have experienced a literature-perfect day so far. I am trying to find a better way to handle these two aspects of my life without one overlapping the other. After a certain point in my PhD, I found things getting complicated. I tend to put a lot of pressure on myself, trying to juggle multiple responsibilities. One example would be resolving a conflict between my supervisor and me due to differing perspectives. I also feel that I must answer certain impromptu questions; however, I sometimes find it difficult to articulate my thoughts instantly.

Nathalie A good PhD day for me is when I feel excited and present in my work. Whether that be reading, taking notes, writing drafts or editing. It feels like I am flowing with my research. A difficult day would be when I don't feel inspired, motivated or energised, and I feel like it is a chore that has to be done rather than enjoying the process.

Crystal For me, a good PhD day is a slow-down day: sleeping well, waking up peacefully without an alarm, enjoying nice weather, and getting into a writing flow, while also making time for a workout, good food, and quiet moments like knitting. A difficult PhD day is when I know what I want to write but can't get into the right mode, or when distractions, personal issues, or hormonal shifts affect my mood.

Meher My perfect day would be waking up after a good night's sleep. I start my day without a headache or feeling exhausted. I have a productive writing day, where I write more than 100 words. Currently, I am in the post-viva stage; therefore, a good day would also involve reading through my PhD and addressing any corrections.

Hanjun I would classify my good days into two types. One would be achieving self-improvement when I finish a reading with detailed notes or develop a productive outcome from reading a research paper. The second would be collaboration with different stakeholders. This could be like going to a conference and making helpful connections, gaining insight from other scholars or shaking hands on a collaboration.

Elisenda A good PhD day is when I sit down to write and realise that what I'm putting on the page is actually thinking, not just summarising, not just reporting what other people have said, but genuinely making an argument that is mine. It's also when a conversation with a supervisor or a colleague makes something clicks into place that I'd been circling for weeks. A difficult day is when I feel the gap between where the project is and where I want it to be, and it feels unbridgeable. Or when I read something that I feel I should have found months ago, and worry about what else I am missing. The worst days are when the practitioner in me and the researcher in me are fighting, when the industry part of my brain wants to jump to solutions and the academic part keeps asking, "But what does this actually mean?"

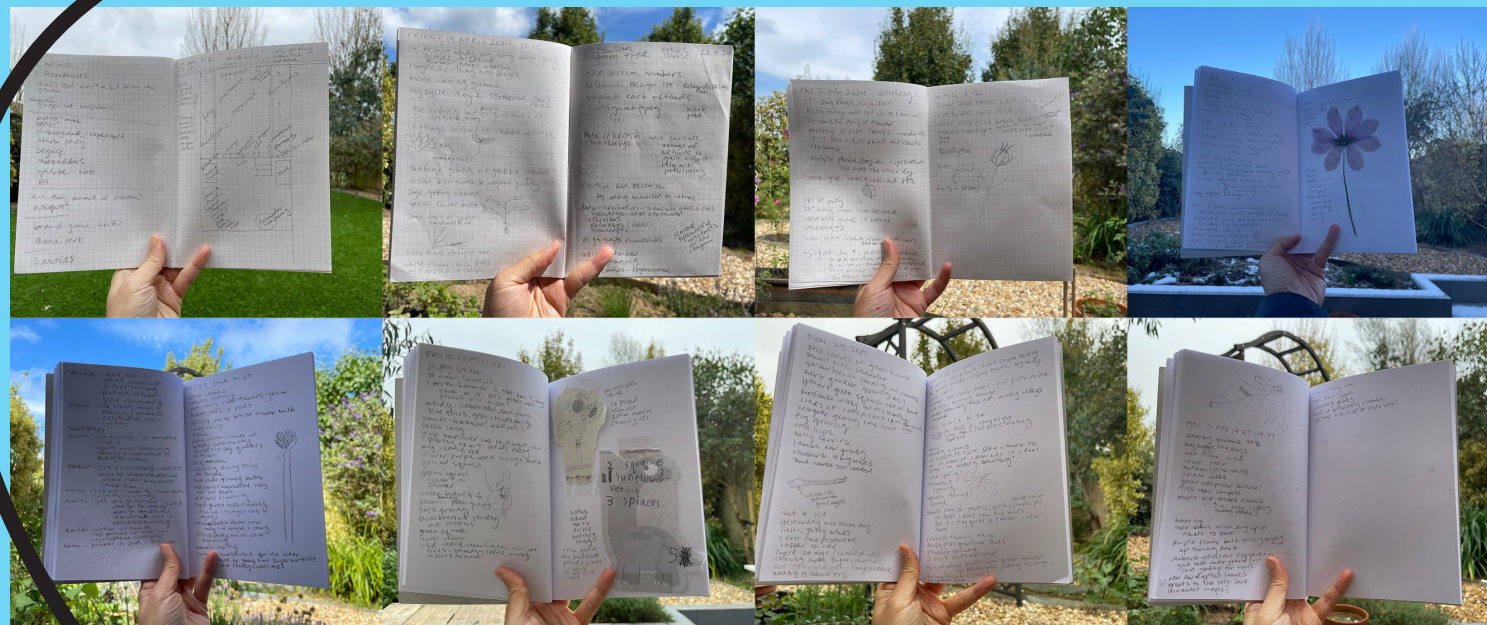
William Sometimes a 'good PhD day' is just checking my student emails and replying to a couple of things. Sometimes it is about spending 5 hours online searching for a single article and then reading two paragraphs. Sometimes it is writing 3,000 words sitting in the library. But we all work differently. Nevertheless, we have responsibilities outside of the PhD, which means that there may be days or weeks I go without meaningfully touching my PhD. Eventually, a good day ends with a feeling of fulfilment knowing that I have gotten somewhere I did not plan to at the start of the day. But I could also classify a good day as one where I am simply excited about my research and practice without bothering about the output. A difficult day would be when I spend £35 on the train fare to get to college, over three hours commuting, £15 on coffee and food from the canteen for the day, and get none of the things done that I had initially planned.

Jin A classic example of my 'good day' would be showcasing at a poster sharing event at CSM, where people are interested in each other's work. I can make connections, understand their work and bounce ideas off each other during a conversation. I feel that when people express genuine curiosity, like 'Why are you thinking like that?' or 'How can I use your ideas to inspire my research?', it is a good day for me.

Nina Because I work full-time, a good day for me is when I can fit things around my schedule, even just doing some reading that unlocks a new idea or insight - it can be that simple! Another good day would be presenting at a conference and making connections with someone working closely in my research area.

What part of your PhD do you enjoy more than you expected?

What part do you avoid, even when you know you shouldn't?



© Pearl Sun

Elisenda I enjoy the literature more than I expected. I came in thinking it would be a necessary chore, reading everything before I could get to the ‘real’ research, and instead, I find it genuinely intellectually exciting. What I avoid, that I know shouldn’t, is engaging directly with my own positionality on the page. I’ve written a lot of notes about being a practitioner-researcher, but actually writing it into the thesis, saying “here is how my insider position shapes what I can and cannot see”, feels exposing in a way that I keep deferring. I suspect it will be some of the most important writing I do.

William The answer to both is writing.

Pearl I developed a method called eco phenomenology. It involves me sitting in my garden once a week to observe and develop my kinship with the natural world around us. It helped me calm down and de-stress from the pressure of the PhD. I tend to avoid working with data, and writing was the difficult aspect, so writing academically felt like relearning how to ride a bike.

Jin Something that I enjoy and avoid at the same time is networking. At times, it is exciting to make new connections and find new personalities who are beneficial to work with for my project. The rest of the time, I feel lost during the process. I often wonder if I’m ready for the event or if attending is even useful. I am usually hesitant to attend because I need to channel a lot of my energy. But I understand its importance; therefore, I prepare notes beforehand to avoid feeling anxious on the day of the event. Sometimes it’s all about asking an awkward question to break the ice. Even if the conversation doesn’t end up becoming productive, at least I know I tried.

Nina I initially found the methods and methodology writing process a bit challenging. It took me a while to understand how methodology sits within the theoretical framework. It eventually made sense to me, so it was rewarding figuring that out.

Ginette Surprisingly, I have really enjoyed writing more than I thought I would. Reason being, I am a maker, and I work better with my hands when I work with materials. That’s when I am thinking, exploring and resolving problems. I never imagined myself to be a writer. Additionally, I felt on top of the world whenever my supervisors provided positive feedback on my writing. Something that I avoid, even though I shouldn’t, is transcribing. I have a deep disdain for it. The conversations mainly take place in Singlish, which is an English-based creole spoken locally in Singapore. Additionally, the underground music scene contains community-specific vocabulary. Therefore, when you layer the accent, intonation, rhythm, humour and scene-specific references together, the transcription tools do not identify the language accurately. A lot of the nuance gets flattened, and I end up restarting the entire transcribing process manually.

Yongrao Looking back, I realise that I generate a wide range of ideas and insights that can contribute to different outcomes and knowledge through my work. This is one of the aspects of research that I enjoy the most. I have diverse findings, which, in a way, is a good heap of knowledge to possess. Nevertheless, I should avoid diversification and start converging my findings to answer the main question of my research. One thing I do not find enjoyable is that, if one wishes to slightly change the direction of their studies, the process is bureaucratic and time-consuming. Another thing that I can avoid is any communication lapses with my supervisors.

Nathalie Surprisingly, I found the literature review far more enjoyable than expected. Initially, I assumed it would be the most challenging part for me. Yet, I experienced genuine excitement as I linked various theories and explored ideas across different fields, which deepened my understanding and helped me make new connections. Because of my perfectionism, I often avoided writing, feeling I hadn’t read enough or didn’t know enough to start sharing my own ideas. Overcoming this wasn’t easy, but with the right support and an encouraging environment, I learned to write even if my early drafts weren’t perfect. This shift helped me focus on enjoying the writing process rather than aiming only for a flawless final product.

Crystal What I enjoyed more than I expected was the regular meetings with my supervision team. Their feedback keeps me motivated, and I often leave those meetings feeling inspired, especially when I have been feeling lost about my direction. The part I tend to avoid, even though I know I should not, is organising my literature, references, PDFs, and writing drafts. I am aware that I need a better system for documenting literature on my laptop, but I often put it off.

Meher Something that I constantly avoided in the beginning of my journey was going up to my supervisors with any issues or problems that I was facing. I had to break through the mindset of “I need to impress my supervisors” and see them as a part of my team.

Jia Ying Cleaning the house! I’m sure many PhD candidates would resonate with this. When I hit a roadblock, it can be easier to do almost anything else rather than face it head-on, especially writing. I had an apprehension towards writing because I constantly felt what I was producing wasn’t good enough. I would obsess over paragraphs, phrasing, punctuation, and even font type. In hindsight, it only made things worse and left me increasingly anxious, especially toward the later stages. It was only when my DoS, helped me reframe things that it started to shift. She said, “Think of writing as prototyping” Early prototyping is what allows ideas to take shape.

Have you applied for or presented at a conference?

What was that experience like?



© Nina O'Reilly

Nina I have always found them to be really positive. It is a good way to learn how to frame your ideas. A bonus point here is that it adds to your CV. Meeting peers and senior academics in the field is daunting at first, but it gets easier. If you can get funding, conferences are a great opportunity to visit new universities, cities, and countries and addressing a curious audience can really support the development of your work.

Nathalie I have applied to present and speak at my first conference this autumn. As I have never presented or been to an academic conference before, it is slightly nerve-wracking, as I don't know what to expect. On the other hand, I am also excited to meet with other experts, network and share ideas, which is an important thing to do during the PhD journey.

Crystal I have presented at conferences in different countries, and I see it as an important part of learning how to be a researcher. It's not only about presenting the work, but also about learning how to write a paper, deal with rejection, respond to feedback, and talk to people outside my usual research environment. The more conferences I attend, the more I understand which ones are useful for me and which ones may not be worth the same amount of time and energy.

Meher Personally, I love conferences. I believe conferences are an ideal space to build connections, especially if you keep attending the same ones. It helps you draw a mental map of your growth over the years. Apart from that, a PhD can be very isolating. I can worry about whether people are genuinely interested in my research, or "Who even cares about this work?" But when I give a presentation at a conference, it opens up conversations about my research. I am excited to return to the IGNCC (International Graphic Novels and Comics Conference), which I first attended as a first-year presenter, and now as a post-viva researcher. So, it is a full circle moment for me.

Hanjun I used my master's thesis as a foundation for writing my first full paper for a conference. It helped me translate my ideas into a framework with a structured methodology. The first few conferences were a bit challenging because I wasn't sure about how to hold a conversation, but eventually it got better.

William I'm grateful to have applied to and spoken at several conferences. On average, I am doing between 5 and 10 a year at the moment. So far, these have been positive experiences, as I have been able to test parts of writing and ideation, display practical work, and network with like-minded folks. I come from a performance background, and have been lecturing at universities for over a decade, so the act of speaking to a group of people is something I am used to. But I still get nervous. I have been in conferences where someone wants to give a speaker a really hard time. Thankfully, that has not happened to me (yet!), and I'm grateful that the circles I seem to mix in are full of generous and supportive people.

Jin I submitted my first paper at the beginning of my third year. But my experience has mainly centred around rejections. I follow a report format or a reflection-based outcome/article, which does not align with the conventional method of presentation. Certain feedback was helpful enough for me to make the necessary amendments, improve the quality of my work, and ultimately, produce a successful conference paper. But the rest were one-liners or unhelpful suggestions, cruel enough to make me upset.

Yongrao Speaking about my project with other scholars was a really positive experience. They also allow you to take a varied approach, for example, you can do a workshop, an exhibition or post your poster. It's a great way to build your confidence during this kind of process. I have received positive feedback that motivates me to continue carrying out such presentations. However, the conferences do not always run parallel with my PhD timelines, and it can be difficult to meet their proposal deadlines.

How do you manage the relationship between your PhD and other work or life commitments?



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Elisenda Not always well, and I think honesty about that is important. A PhD is the kind of project that doesn't have clear boundaries. It doesn't stop when I close the laptop. I find that the best periods are when I can create a rhythm rather than trying to carve out big, uninterrupted blocks of time that never materialise. An hour of focused writing most mornings does more for me than waiting for a free day to accomplish everything. The practitioner-researcher dimension also complicates this in specific ways. My industry connections are both my gateway to accessing research participants and a set of relationships that require careful management. There are days when I have to be deliberate about which hat I'm wearing. What helps is keeping the research questions close; when I remember what I'm actually trying to understand and why it matters, the other commitments feel less like distractions and more like part of the same ecosystem.

William It can be tricky, and sometimes really hard. Though I am doing a part-time PhD, I work full-time, am self-funded, live nearly two hours from my place of study, and am a disabled student. I would say that the way I manage these things changes all the time, and it is not perfect. I work full-time as a university lecturer, which is a wonderful job, but it is still demanding. I am also a union rep at two institutions and have a freelance artistic practice. I have to prioritise earning money, paying rent, and having enough money to pay my tuition fees, so other things often fall by the wayside. But that is true for most people in the UK. When I began, I was told, "Don't worry, you'll soon get over the stigma of being unfunded", by a fellow (funded) PhD student. And yes, you can feel disillusioned when you see fellow, funded friends being able to afford to go to various conferences and events, or get financial support for their projects. But this PhD business is not a competition, and I have found the UAL PhD community around me to be the most supportive group I could wish for, and mutual aid is a big part of the culture we have established here. I am fortunate that my paid work, while time-consuming, is within the same field and sector as my PhD. However, I would like to highlight how little support or representation there is for underprivileged or disabled students in this field. My supervisors and my friends in the UAL PhD community are the ones who supported me throughout this journey.

Pearl I'm regimented in my working process. So I have two days dedicated to the PhD, and I also have kids. After I pick up my kids, I basically can't get much done. So, on the days when I'm not working on my PhD, I have a notes app on my phone where I write my to-do list. So if there's anything that pops into my head that I need to do, I add it to that list. And then on a Wednesday or a Friday, I strictly adhere to checking things off my list as quickly as I can. So far, it seems to be working, at least enough for confirmation. But it's kind of separated. So on my PhD days, I only do PhD stuff, and I try not to let anything else, like admin or teaching things, spill into my day.

Ginette I have my plate full with responsibilities as a programme leader at a university in Singapore, a musician, a DJ and above all, with a child. In the first three and a half years, I worked late quite regularly up till the early hours of the morning. I had minimal sleep, as little as 4-5 hours every night. My health started suffering, but I had to keep my hustle going. It helped me get through the stages of Registration, Ethics and Confirmation. However, I had decided to get more sleep over the past few months.

Jia Ying I would say by being present. I advise taking time off, enjoying yourself properly and then coming back to the thesis; it'll still be waiting for you. Trust me, I know it's difficult because I've been there. Even when you're in a beautiful new city, you're constantly thinking about the manuscript, the analysis, the diagrams. But the reality is that the PhD is finite, and no matter how it feels at the moment, you will cross the finish line somehow. You just don't know it yet. Above all, I am deeply thankful for a very understanding partner, family, and friends who are low-maintenance yet always check in on me. These are the people who understand that I reply to texts in my head, who send care packages when I'm in the thick of writing, and who make sure I'm fed and have slept. And if you manage to find a partner who can skillfully juggle your emotional rollercoaster, your lack of time and sleep, and still prioritise your PhD alongside you, please hold onto them tightly. They're gems!!

Is there any advice that you would like to give to people who are considering PhDs or who are just starting their PhD journey?



Hanjun You are on your own. You are your project manager, your brand strategist, and your marketer. But there is little that can be done entirely on your own. You need a network of friends and colleagues to produce research in the end. My other advice would be to learn how to communicate effectively with different stakeholders in both industry and academia. Sometimes, you will find it's easier to communicate in the industry rather than academia due to its bureaucratic nature.

Pearl So, as opposed to any other academic program with a BA or an MA, where you go to classes, and you have more meetings and guidance with staff and your tutors, and there are deliverables at the end of it, a PhD is relatively unstructured, at least in the UK. My advice would be to be aware of this structure. Because, as a part-time student, you only meet with your tutors five times in the year. And that's it. The rest of it is really up to you, the learning, your progress, your timelines, everything is kind of up to you. I think I'm quite structured in the way that I plan and am quite disciplined anyway. So, I think it does help if you can manage things on your own. And then the other part of it is just how lonely it is because you're the only one looking at this topic, and other people don't understand what you're going on about. So I also think it is really important to have a community of other PhD students with whom you can talk about the process. But, I think it is difficult because nobody knows what's going on with you. Even when you explain it to them, they look at you with a blank look on their face.

Jin Build connections and collaborate early. It makes a bigger difference than you'd think. If you're self-funded and working independently, the lack of structure can quietly work against you. A funded PhD under a supervisor has a more employment-like rhythm to it, with deadlines and expectations that keep you accountable. Self-funded doesn't mean relaxed; if anything, it demands more self-discipline.

Nina My advice would be to try not to get overwhelmed during the process. You cannot do everything, and that's okay. You will always have a lot going on, including your research, professional development, and conference preparation. But prioritise what best suits you at that point in life.

Yongrao It's important to have a plan, but things do not always unfold the way you've planned them. In the early stages, you spend the majority of your time understanding how a PhD works. Utilise that time to explore different pathways; eventually, one of them will be the missing piece to your puzzle.

Crystal For people considering a PhD, I would say, take time to think about what you really want to research and what will keep you motivated over a longer period of time. For people just starting their PhD journey, I would say trust the process. I am still learning this myself. Things will slowly come together, the writing will eventually be finished, and the PhD will be there one day.

Meher I would ask you to be shameless and relentless. Seize the opportunity that comes your way. Do not shy away from asking for help. Asking for help does not demean your authority as a researcher, nor does chasing for opportunities.

When are you approaching your confirmation/upgrade, and what does that process feel like for you?



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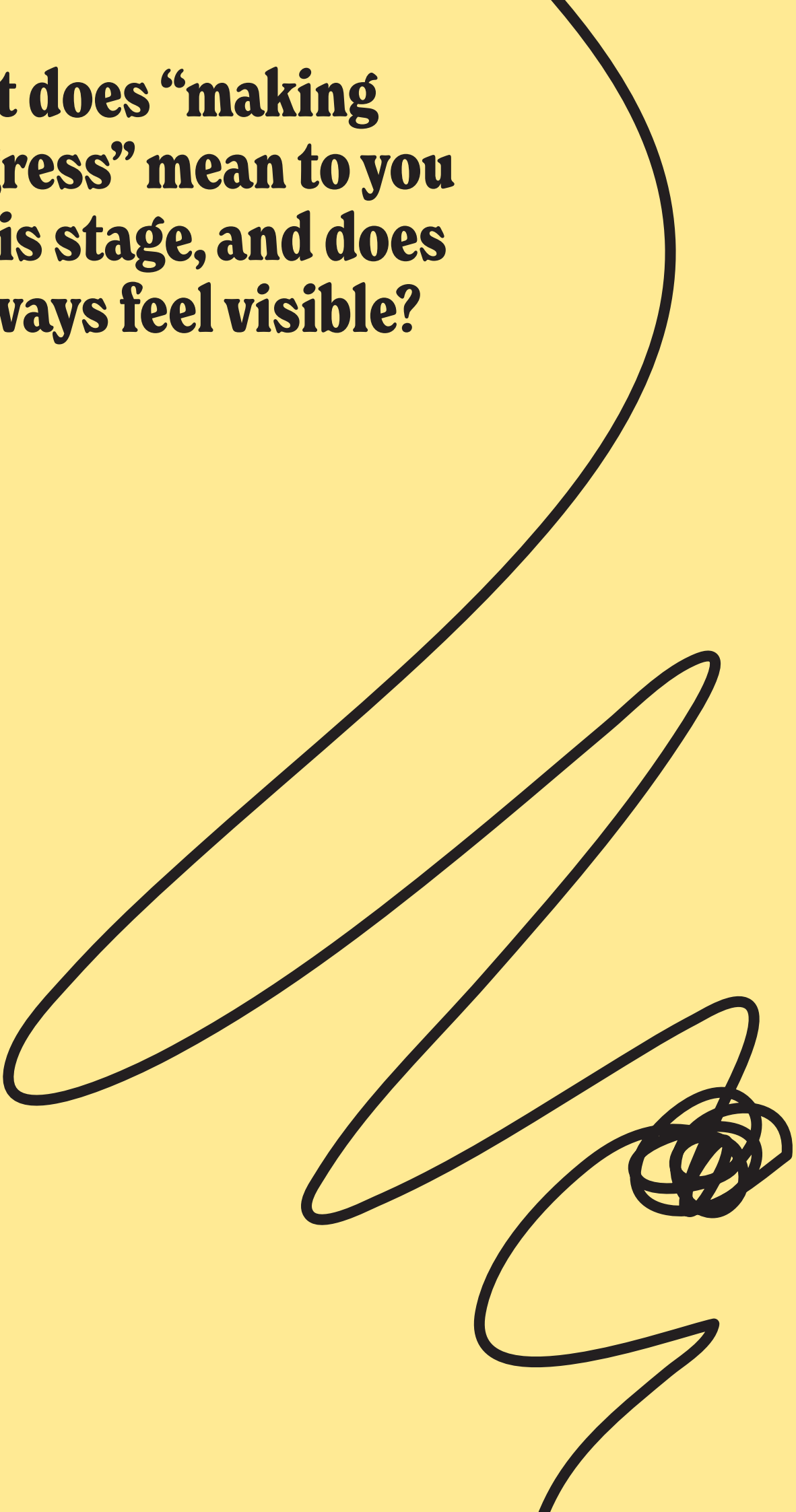
William Approaching my confirmation was a mixed experience. Due to the way timings worked out, I had just come back from an extended period of sick leave, and then had 2 months until my confirmation. When it came to writing my confirmation document, I surprised myself with how much I knew. My supervisors were incredibly supportive and really encouraged me to take ownership of my work and have faith in my knowledge. As I planned out the document and began fitting together all the pieces of research and practice I had done thus far, I had several major moments of clarity about the project as a whole. There were many big (positive) shifts in this time, which completely reoriented the scope and direction of my work. When writing the document, I met up with my friend at the British Library a few times a week, and we would sit together and write for a few hours, have a coffee break, update each other, and repeat. When it came to the Confirmation viva itself, it felt liberating to finally be able to articulate my work to that point in its entirety, and I was grateful for the opportunity to have someone (my examiner) engage so generously with my work in return.

Nina I think it's been difficult, especially with a lot of drafts and email replies on my work. But, in retrospect, I am proud of the work that I have produced with the support of my supervisors. I started with a broad topic and streamlined it in the final draft, affirming to myself that I have something to take forward. I believe that is the whole point of confirmation. It provides clarity and a pathway to new things. There definitely will be setbacks, but I feel good about where I stand as of now.

Jin I went through my confirmation towards the end of my second year, although I had already started preparing for it at the end of my first year. In some ways, the process was helpful because I always knew what the main task of that year was. While waiting, revising, and preparing, I was still able to take part in various activities, exhibitions, and other projects. At the same time, having such a clearly defined long-term goal also affected my attitude towards other work. I was engaged in what I was doing, but often in a relatively passive way. I participated, contributed, and experimented with different opportunities, yet I rarely approached them with the same sense of determination or ownership. Looking back, I feel that it may be important not to let long preparation periods or distant deadlines dominate one's mindset. While they provide structure, I think it is equally important to maintain a sense of agency and commitment towards other things, not only in terms of actions, but also in terms of attitude and intention.

Nathalie Transitioning from confirmation to now has been a very disorienting experience for me. After you pass confirmation, it feels like you have no more checkpoints. You are now working toward finishing a full first draft, which was overwhelming for me. I didn't know how to start or what to work on. As I said before, it helps to not envision the whole PhD in front of you, but rather just get your ideas down, however rough they may be.

What does “making progress” mean to you at this stage, and does it always feel visible?



Nina The process feels like a ‘slow and steady’ approach. It has both big and small wins. Sometimes it is as affirming as passing the confirmation or as little as making a coherent plan. Maybe it could also be drafting something and getting good feedback, or just doing an essential reading. It’s all about the everyday efforts that eventually help reach the finish line.

Crystal At this stage, as I am in my writing-up year, making progress does not always feel visible. Sometimes progress means writing a few clearer sentences, restructuring a section, or finally understanding how one part of the thesis connects to another. It can feel very slow sometimes because the work is no longer about producing something completely new every day, but about refining, clarifying, and making the argument stronger.

Elisenda At this stage, making progress means moving from ideas that are interesting to ideas that are argued, developing a claim that I can defend, not just describe. It means the literature review becomes a critical conversation rather than a catalogue. It means my methodology is something I can explain clearly enough that a sceptical examiner would find it rigorous. Does it always feel visible? Honestly, no. A lot of PhD progress happens beneath the surface; it’s the slow accumulation of reading and thinking that suddenly makes a paragraph possible that would have been impossible three months ago. The days when I produce very little on paper are often the days when the most is actually happening. I’ve learned (slowly) to trust that.

Nathalie Reflecting on my PhD, which explores how we assign value, I’ve aimed to prioritise feeling present and connected in my work above all else. For me, progress means experiencing presence, connection, and gratitude—whether I’m reading, jotting down scattered notes, or editing. I’ve shifted away from measuring progress by word counts or satisfying my supervisor, finding this approach to be spiritually fulfilling and healing. I now apply this perspective to every part of my life. Progress shouldn’t just focus on ‘finishing’, since nothing is ever finished; research is always ongoing.

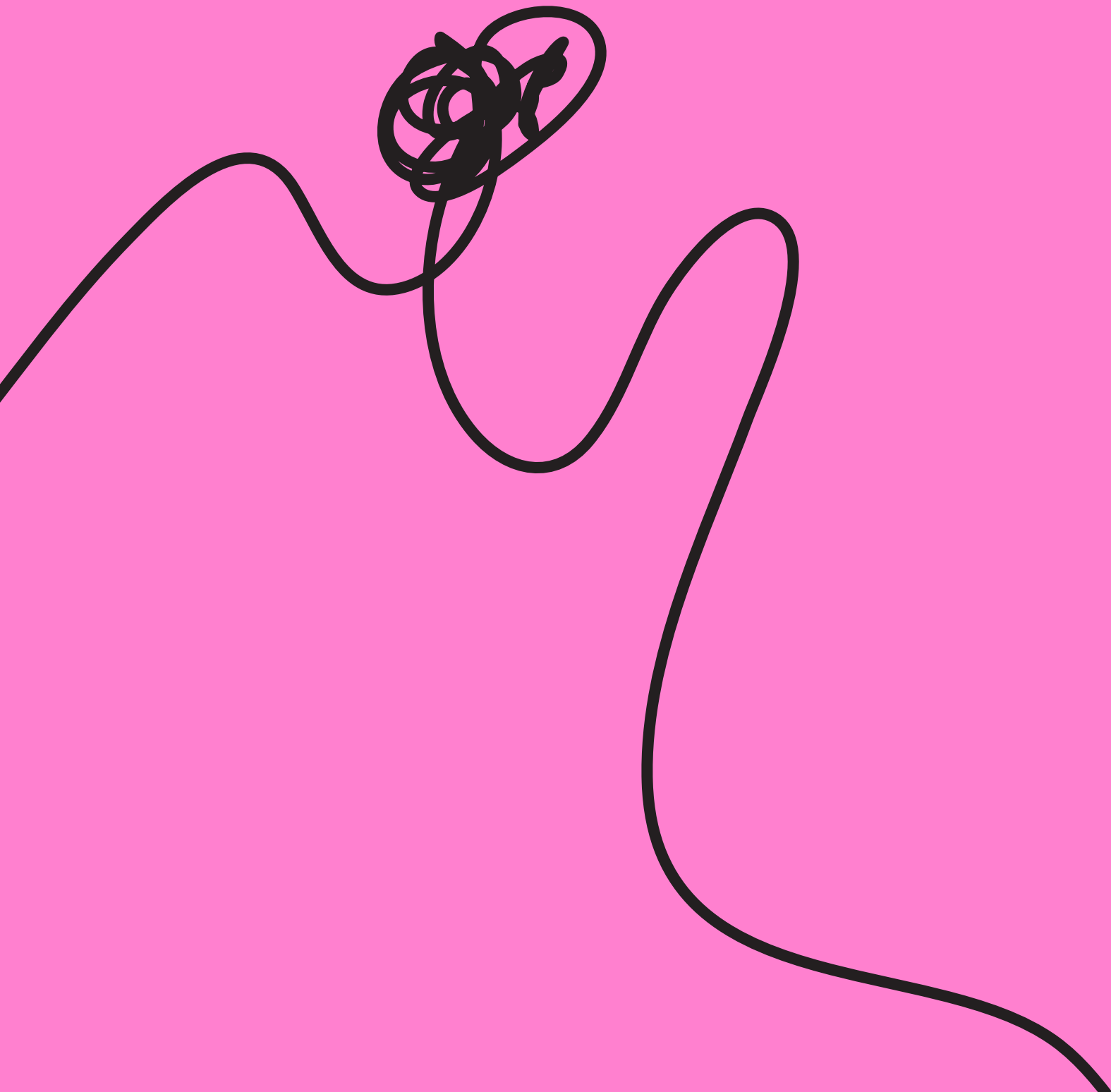
Yongrao Every journey is personal. So, as long as you are doing something that contributes to your research, it is some kind of progress. I would read a lot of material and still end up not generating an outcome; however, I let it rest, and someday it comes back to me like an epiphany.

William I am not sure because I have various to-do lists, and things either get ticked off, crossed out, or deferred. So, ‘progress’ is not a linear thing. It comes in waves and ebbs back. At the start, this made me anxious, but I have learned to accept that this is how I work and how my PhD works. Maybe that last point is something that has felt like ‘progress’, understanding that it is my PhD, and I get to form it and embrace it in whatever way it presents itself and develops.

Pearl I try to set a little task for myself for each day, so that I know what I’m trying to achieve. So I think even if it means that I’ve made a little plan or I have sent off a few emails or done a little chunk of thematic analysis, then that to me is making progress because I think it’s the micro progress in a PhD that ends up being a big difference at the end. So sometimes it might feel like not a lot is happening, especially with new interruptions, emails and a new admin that comes in. But I think knowing that you’ve at least moved forward, even if it’s only a few steps.

Jin I think making progress, at least at my current stage, means preparing something seriously to a certain extent, then sharing it and engaging with others in a timely manner. Through external feedback, I can gain new perspectives and new directions for thinking. The balance between being serious and being timely is probably the most important part. Based on my past experience, progress has often felt relatively invisible to me, partly because I find it difficult to build a stable internal system for evaluating my own work, and partly because I usually enter external systems for evaluation quite late. In many cases, I want to create something that feels genuinely good and exciting to me before presenting it to others, but when this process becomes too long, it can become draining and lead to a decline in my initial enthusiasm.

What has been the most unexpected challenge, shift, or turning point in your PhD journey so far?



Hanjun It is important to factor in health during your journey. There are endless opportunities to visit foreign universities and international conferences to gain a different perspective on your research. However, life continues, and timely addressing health issues is important to avoid postponing your research. A good university must provide the required support to deal with any mental health struggles, and the most important task is for you to seek that support when needed.

Jin Time management would be the most challenging aspect for me. During my bachelor's and master's degrees, tutors provided a structured timeline for each module and submission by setting deadlines. However, in my PhD, I am my own manager, and I have to create a detailed plan to keep myself organised and on track.

Nina My first challenge was streamlining and choosing a direction during my confirmation journey. My supervisor once said, 'Whatever you choose, you must have joy with it.' That stuck with me, and I chose the path that I loved. Another turning point would be when I felt that I had imposter syndrome. At times, I struggled to articulate my ideas or felt unsure while speaking, wondering whether I made any sense. But I realised eventually that everyone struggles a bit; it's part of the process.

Ginette I have found it incredibly hard to focus. I take a long time to read and digest the texts, without getting distracted. Since 2023, our social media feeds have been set ablaze with images of genocide. It has been an uphill battle to re-centre my focus on my research and writing. It takes double the effort and time, but with sheer will, I am right on schedule for the Writing-Up stage of my PhD.

Yongrao My first turning point was when I wished to change my trajectory of approach for the research. It was a hard decision to make, as the process was bureaucratic, and the entire procedure also depended on the supervisor's communication style. At some point, there was a communication gap within the supervision team, and I found it difficult to align my working style with the different supervisors, each coming from very different backgrounds and having different styles. This made me feel stuck in the progression of the research. However, what helped me navigate the entire process was something as simple as being transparent with my supervisor. Another turning point came post-confirmation, when I worked with a collaborator. It helped me understand that when you're working with someone from a different field, not everything is under your control. It led to a shift in my working style, and this realisation is also embedded as part of my research findings.

Elisenda The most unexpected shift has been learning to see my practitioner background as epistemologically significant rather than just professionally convenient. I came in thinking, "I know the industry, which will help me get access." What I've realised is that what I know from inside the industry, the things that made me uncomfortable, the conversations that felt wrong, the moments when I saw tacit expertise being misrepresented in a technology pitch, those aren't just anecdotes. They're a form of prior knowledge that needs to be theorised, managed, and made explicit rather than hidden. The reflexivity journal I keep isn't an administrative exercise; it's part of the research itself.

Nathalie Unexpected challenges during my PhD have mainly been how private life impacts your motivation and discipline to keep going. Especially when facing financial difficulties or family matters. Your PhD becomes a second priority, which can make you doubt whether this is the best path. So a lot of the troubles in a PhD for me have been internal emotional struggles.

Meher Confirmation is a huge turning point, it's when you really see your research take shape, and things start to make sense. As someone who has recently passed her viva, I would say that I have had a very positive PhD experience overall, even with the unexpected and unanticipated parts of the journey. I have found and been able to build an amazing community here, and I hope that it's one I can carry with me to the "real" world as well.

Jia Ying I aged. Perhaps not unexpected, but I don't think I fully anticipated how much my body would retaliate. I have some very unhealthy working habits (which my supervisors have called out more than once), and I'm still working on changing them. But I think a health scare became a real turning point in my PhD journey. On one of my later research trips during my fourth year, I suddenly experienced muscle spasms, and my eye wouldn't stop twitching for about three months. It wasn't life-threatening, but it made it very difficult for me to use digital devices. It also made me quite anxious because I still had a manuscript to write. Ironically, that also forced me to step away from the screen. I printed out my entire thesis draft and went through it with highlighters and a pencil. While part of me kept thinking, "This is wasting so much time," I also realised that I needed to recover first before I could do meaningful work again. In that process, I ended up reconciling some of the most difficult parts of my writing by physically moving sections around, cutting and rearranging strips of paper. And when I eventually returned to writing on my computer, I essentially started again from scratch, because I realised the original structure simply wasn't working anymore.

How did you prepare for the viva, both practically and mentally?

What possibilities (Post-PhD, Academia or Industry) are you considering beyond the PhD, and how certain or open do they feel?

Meher Before my viva, I had a couple of mock vivas, one with my supervisors, and one with my peers, who I reached out to through the Tea and Chat group. It was a very useful exercise, mostly because it helped me get used to the Q & A format, and also made me realize that I actually can answer the questions that people had! It gave me a bit of a confidence boost that I needed for the real viva. The actual viva was still a bit intimidating, because my chair and my examiners were all people I really looked up to, but that also made it an easier experience because I knew their feedback and insight would be constructive and useful.

Jin My original plan was that after completing my PhD, I would naturally transition into teaching and academic work. I used to think that this was a relatively smooth process. Although I knew there would be obstacles, I saw the PhD itself as a way of gradually overcoming them. I still think this can be true under ideal circumstances. However, reality is often less predictable. Opportunities such as teaching experience or professional development do not always appear automatically, which means personal initiative becomes much more important. For me, the key is to stay flexible and pay attention to the people who are currently entering similar roles and institutions. What strengths helped them succeed, and how do those strengths compare to my assumptions? More broadly, it is important to learn from a wide range of people, including those who have taken different paths or even left the field altogether.

Nathalie I am considering post-docs or further education. I am also open to the industry or being self-employed. It all depends on networking, as the more people I meet, the more chances I have to find something. Nonetheless, there is no use in pretending that the world feels stable, secure or promising in careers for all, not just PhD holders. So, I believe that I have to embrace uncertainty and try to creatively search for a solution, even if it might be slightly unorthodox.

An abstract graphic featuring two dark blue, hand-drawn loops on a light blue background. The loops are irregular and fluid, with one loop positioned higher and to the left, and the other lower and to the right. They overlap slightly in the center.

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