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Academic study, wallpapering chicken pens and a 'roach in your knicker draw: life as a PhD student

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ABSTRACT: This article is about the personal experiences of the author as they embarked upon a PhD. The PhD was in the area of a major chicken welfare issue (the hunger of broiler breeders) and represented a challenging but exciting time in the author's career as she tried to work out how the chickens felt and what they wanted. Careful selection of the PhD topic is important and there are many topics suitable for veterinary nurses. Funded PhDs are preferable for financial reasons and the stipend available is reasonably competitive with a veterinary nurse salary so should not be a barrier to applying.

Introduction

This article is about my experiences as a veterinary nurse who decided to undertake a Doctor of Philosophy (a doctorate, or PhD) in chicken welfare. I hope that it might inspire some of the VNJ readers to also consider undertaking a PhD and it has been written in response to a steady stream of emails I have had over the years from veterinary nurses who are considering doing "something different".

What is a PhD?

A PhD is basically a research degree, in which the student undertakes an extensive and original piece of research that will contribute to the evidence base in their chosen discipline, produces a thesis (of around 80,000–100,000 words) based on this research and then is examined via a viva voce (oral examination). It is considered to be the highest level of academic attainment that a student can achieve. I tend to think of it more like a vocational qualification in research, in which you develop your research skills under supervision (usually at a university).

But why chickens?

For me, I knew that I wanted to work on a project in which I could make a difference to a lot of animals because animal welfare is a big passion of mine. Broiler breeder hunger fitted the bill, as it is a huge chicken welfare issue as there are billions of broiler breeders worldwide producing the chicks that we will eat. Meat birds have been selectively bred for massive appetites (eat lots = grow rapidly = slaughter more quickly = cheap chicken meat), but the parent stock has to be severely feed-restricted (as little as 25% of *ad libitum* intake) to prevent obesity. They are very hungry for most of their lives. We wanted to see if diets that included fibre and appetite suppressants could make them feel more satiated (a good outcome) or hungry but not eating an unpalatable diet (a bad outcome). The aim of my PhD was to ask the birds directly how the diets made them feel by using a series of choice test scenarios to measure preference. I was completely hooked and knew this was the topic for me!



Figure 1. Louise celebrating being awarded her doctorate

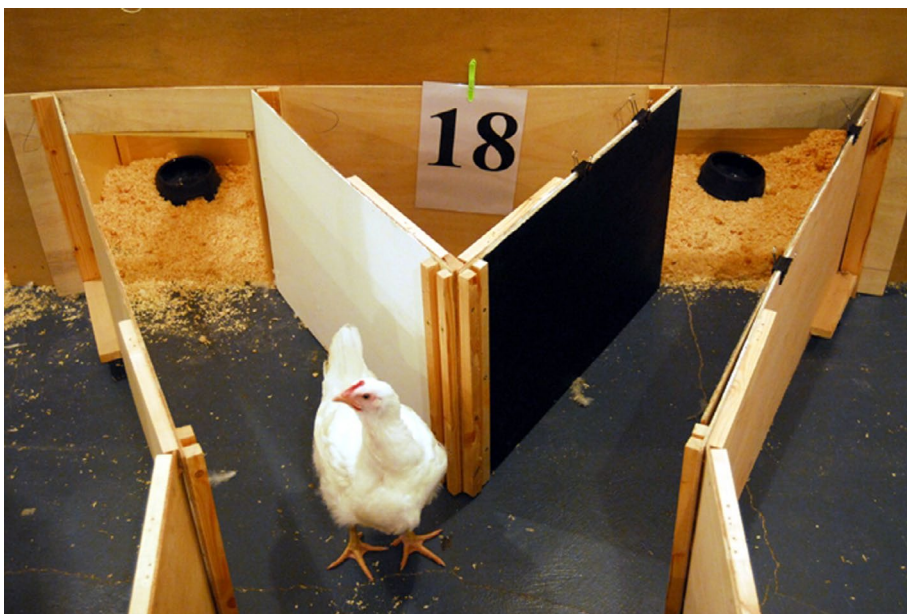


Figure 2. Preference testing can be a powerful way to assess animals feelings ... but this chicken was too hungry to show a preference

But research is expensive ...

We needed funding for this topic and this involved my supervisors (to be) and me putting together a research proposal and applying for a grant. These are competitive and we were asking for about £93,000 so I did not expect to succeed. Finally, 8 months later, the funders called me for an interview to see whether I was the kind of person that they would like to support. I was asked lots of questions about my profession and I came away feeling that the funders were impressed by the veterinary nursing background (this is unusual among PhD students undertaking animal welfare PhDs). Less than two hours later,

I got the amazing news that I was the newest Universities Federation for Animal Welfare Research Training Scholar. Over the next few years, I would spend hours in Louise's "Chicken Cognition Lab" (an old chicken shed) wallpapering chicken pens in black and white stripes, sending chickens down different coloured runways and staining their food red and green, all in an attempt to explore how my birds were feeling about the diets.

The PhD experience

Pick a topic that YOU will be enthusiastic about. Remember this: after all, you will

spend the next 3–4 years full-time working on this project and you will be responsible for motivating yourself to complete your studies in good time. Over that time, you will have lots of lows. There will be points throughout your studies in which you feel lonely, unvalued, useless, and just want to run away and hide. However, you will also experience some incredible highs, like presenting at your first international conference and finding people that really want to hear about YOUR research (your family and friends will zone out long before). Over the four years, I got to travel to Dublin, Belfast, Austria, Sweden and Indianapolis as well as various UK venues to present my research – and it was almost all paid for by my PhD sponsors. There is no point undertaking research if the findings are not shared widely and so presentation skills are essential and expected. I started my PhD with a severe phobia of speaking in public. I ended up practicing my conference presentations many times in our empty board room delivering my talks to empty chairs (and this terrified me to the point of tears). I now lecture undergraduates for a living.

So what can veterinary nurses research?

My topic is probably on the periphery of interest for veterinary nurses, but there are plenty of nursing-related opportunities available. However, you won't find them if you look specifically for a veterinary nursing topic. Instead, look for a topic in an area of interest to you. For example, the Royal Veterinary College recently offered a PhD researching risk factors for separation anxiety in UK dogs and developing an evidence-based preventative program. A veterinary nurse would have been an ideal candidate for this role. Over the years, I have seen projects investigating phantom limb pain in feline amputees, canine bite prevention (The One Health concept?), improving client compliance with nursing interventions (human nursing-based but transferable), the use of electric shock collars in dogs and electric containment devices in cats, parasitology and lots more besides. Many PhD opportunities get advertised on www.findaphd.com (e.g. at the time of writing, Bristol University is looking for someone to research the effects of treadmill training on the recovery of acute spinal patients). Alternatively, try approaching a university or research team directly and see what they say! The skills you learn undertaking a PhD are transferable, so don't worry about being constrained to a particular area. Evidence-based veterinary nursing needs nurses with a passion for research



▲ **Figure 3.** Hissing cockroaches work well as teaching aids

and you will be welcomed back (if you leave) with open arms.

Where should I study?

Try to pick an institute that offers a supervisor that you feel you could work well with (supervision quality varies massively) and look for an institute that will provide you with lots of quality training and experiences. Not all institutes are equal: research-focussed institutes will provide you with exposure to cutting-edge researchers, the camaraderie of lots of other PhD students and a wide range of extracurricular opportunities. I was fortunate enough to train at the Scottish Agricultural College (which had the biggest animal welfare and behaviour team in the UK at the time) and the Roslin Institute (where they cloned Dolly the sheep) and I was like a kid in a sweet shop. Almost every week, one of my welfare scientist heroes would visit to collaborate with the scientists there and would give a guest lecture or seminar. I was also given opportunities to facilitate vet student

communication skills sessions at the Dick Vet, became a member of the Edinburgh University Science Communication Team, and travelled around teaching school kids welfare science concepts using live giant cockroaches. These lived in a tank in my bedroom (my housemate's rules!) and I remember reaching into my knicker draw and being hissed at loudly by a 2-inch cockroach that had escaped! However, while a stimulating environment, it could also be very intimidating because everyone around me seemed to be an academic high-flier! I felt like a total imposter at so many points. This feeling seems pretty normal for most PhD students at many institutes at various points in their studies.

But what about money?

The good news is that, unlike undergraduate and most masters-level degrees, you can undertake a funded PhD. The format varies, but most fully funded PhDs pay for your tuition fees (ca. £4000 per year), your bench fees (research costs) and provide you with a tax-free stipend to live

on. The amount varies but, as a guide, the Research Councils UK (a key funder) has set the minimum stipend level for 2016/2017 at £14,296 per annum. This might not seem like a lot, but it is tax-free so equivalent to a salary of about £16,000. If you have a stipend, you will also be considered a full-time student so are council tax-exempt (and water tax-exempt too if you study in Scotland). Also, it does not affect your personal tax allowance if you locom at the weekends or in the holidays, so you probably won't pay any tax or national insurance. A PhD is now looking pretty competitive next to the average VN wage! The downside is, if you take a funded PhD you will almost certainly have strong restrictions placed on what you can research. If an institute is paying you to undertake research, they want you to research a topic of their choice. A self-funded PhD provides the greatest research flexibility. However, proceed with great caution: most self-funded science-based PhD students find it a severe financial struggle.

Conclusion

I hope that this article has given you a small insight into what a PhD is like and will maybe inspire some readers to consider undertaking one. I found undertaking a PhD to be a rewarding and life-changing experience for me and I am thinking about undertaking a second one. I am happy to chat to anyone considering one (email: lbuckley@harper-adams.ac.uk) and I would urge anyone interested to check out www.findaphd.com for lots more information. Or, visit www.phdcomics.com for a wry look at the life of a PhD student. Oh, and my chickens? The birds were too stressed by hunger to express a meaningful preference so the mantle of helping these birds has passed to future PhD students with a passion for chicken welfare.

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