

Pursuing PhD is cool

When my media friend asked me whether PhD degree has lost its significance, I made it clear that I dare to differ! Hence this column

First some facts

- PhD is the highest degree that one can earn
- To supervise a PhD student the supervisor in most cases must have a PhD degree
- For some jobs like the Governor of a Central Bank (RBI in India) it is an unwritten rule that one must be a PhD degree holder, in most countries
- While most PhD degree holders end up taking University faculty jobs, there are examples of successful CEO's of Fortune 500 companies (Jack Welch of GE for example) and Heads of State (India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for example); Google Founders and Yahoo founders were PhD students at Stanford University when they took up their start-up journey!

While pursuing a PhD degree, one takes up a problem or an issue that had not been fully solved and attempts to solve it in the most comprehensive manner using methods that are novel and unique. The emphasis is not "somehow solving the problem", but finding the best solution to the problem, that too for the most general case! Often in industry there is enormous pressure to find a "quick and dirty" solution, while in academia the emphasis on the "beauty of the method"!

Often, one takes up some unsolved problem or a puzzle or a conjecture that has remained unsolved for years, generations or even centuries. The intellectual delight of solving (even the attempt to solve) such difficult problems is so gratifying that billions of dollars can scarcely match; that is one reason pursuing PhD will always be cool!

In most research universities, PhD degree is the minimum qualification for faculty positions. It need not be the case for other universities and colleges. Unfortunately regulators in India arbitrarily impose PhD degree requirement on university faculty members; with the rapid and unplanned growth of colleges in India – that too by promoters who have very questionable intentions – there has been a large-scale production of poor quality of PhD degree holders in the past 2,3 decades. That perhaps explains the thinking in the minds of the media persons that doctorate degrees lost their significance over time; such thinking is akin throwing the baby with the bath water!

PhD will always remain a cool degree for those who want to study hard and interesting problems with unmatched rigour and originality. If you are young and completing your Undergraduate or Master's Degree, nothing can be more cool than pursuing a PhD degree!

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