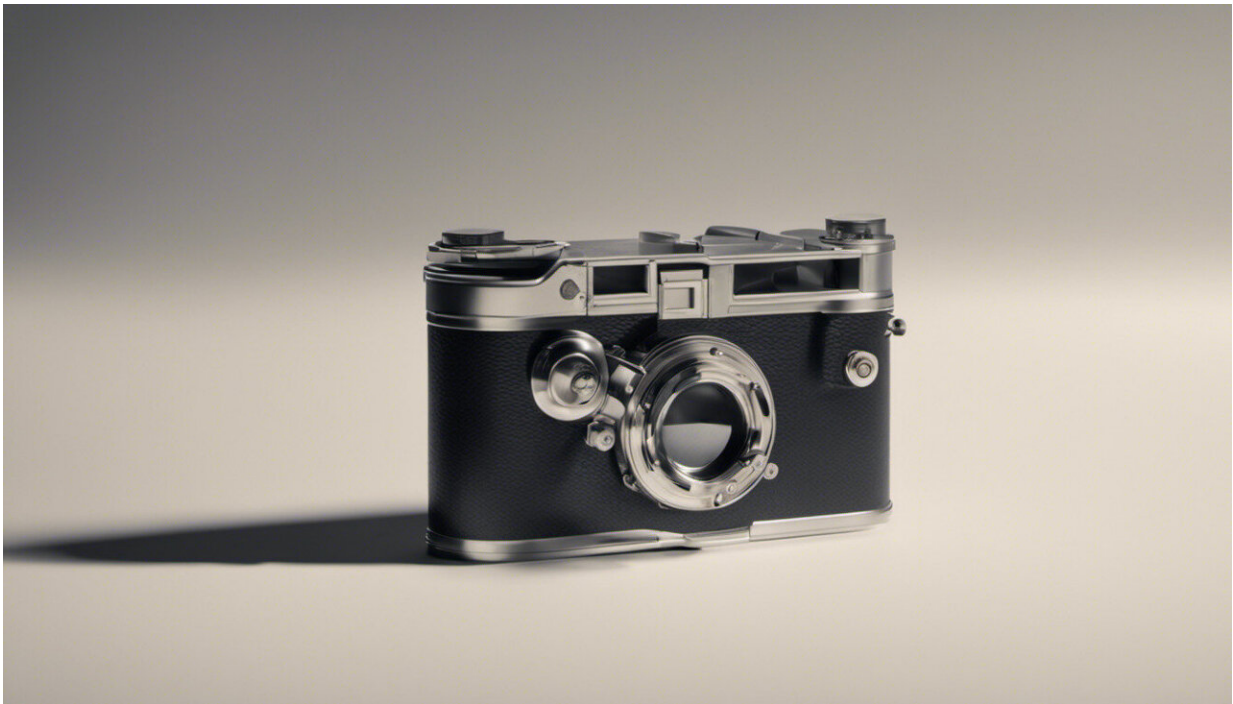


# Why PhDs are good—for individuals, and for a country

November 6 2019, by Brenda Wingfield

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

What is the value of a Ph.D.? Is there a need in a developing world country to undertake a Ph.D. study? It's expensive (around R1 million per graduate) and in many regards a luxury for students from poor families. Even for those who have better access to money there's a very real cost in tuition, costs of the research as well as years lost with regards

to climbing the career ladder. As students in the southern hemisphere consider their study options for next year, it's worth revisiting the pros and cons of doing a Ph.D.

From an individual perspective, there are good and bad reasons to do a Ph.D.

The good reasons include achieving a significant goal in terms of a research output, publications and in many cases solving an important problem. Doing research towards a Ph.D. allows one to be curious, literally every day.

It's also the first step in becoming part of the global network of researchers. Becoming part of a global community can be very gratifying.

The bad reasons would include the assumption that having a Ph.D. will earn you a larger salary. This is not always the case. Another is peer pressure which can lead students to register for a Ph.D. Sometimes the pressure comes from family. Another not so good reason is when people decide to do a Ph.D. because they don't like the job that they are doing.

Undertaking a Ph.D. study should only be considered if you are really passionate about research and understand that it really takes a huge amount of time and energy. It is after all the ultimate degree—there are none higher.

## **The value of a Ph.D.**

The bottom line is that there is no magic about the qualification. It doesn't make you a better or smarter person.

However, people who have Ph.D.s have shown a certain capacity and

tenacity and have the degree to prove it. Many other people might have the equivalent capacity and tenacity but without the degree it is less easy for employers to identify them.

The South African government has identified that producing people with a Ph.D. degree is an important goal. The Department of Science and Innovation has suggested that universities need to increase their output of Ph.D. graduates to 100 graduates per million people. At the moment [South Africa](#) has 46 doctoral graduates per million people, this is one tenth of the figure for Switzerland (465) and United Kingdom (409).

The new target would take the expected output to more than 5800 Ph.D. graduates every year. In 2016 the number of Ph.D. graduates in South Africa was just under [3000](#).

The government's argument is that the Ph.D. degree can be seen as a driver of the academic pipeline. If we focus on getting more Ph.D.s, universities will also increase other graduates in the pipeline. While I support the idea of Ph.D.s being a driver, I think that the current targets cannot be achieved for many years.

One cannot easily change the Ph.D. pipeline quite so rapidly. In 2001 there were 802 Ph.D. graduates, in 2009 this had increased to [1380](#) and in 2017 this had increased to [3057](#), which has been a remarkable achievement. This is especially the case given the current global and local economic climate.

All countries need strong comprehensive universities—institutions that do more than just train students to the bachelor degree level. To have a substantive research output a university must have academics with Ph.D.s. Only people with Ph.D.s can train Ph.D. graduates.

That does indeed mean building a vibrant Ph.D. [graduate](#) training

programme to support strong research output. South Africa is short of people with the appropriate qualifications (Ph.D.s) to do the training. And it cannot expect to import such graduates to support its economy, because without strong comprehensive universities a country cannot train the range of graduates with skills necessary for sustained economic growth and development.

Quite a bit has been written about an [over supply](#) of Ph.D. graduates. But this isn't a problem in a country like South Africa where I have trained 52 Ph.D. graduates, all of whom have found jobs. Not all are in academic positions, not all are still doing research. None of them have ever suggested that doing a Ph.D. was a waste of time.

We need to train more, not less.

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