

Turning the world upside down: A single mother's PhD journey

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Bio: Following 10 years as a high school teacher in country South Australia, Melissa spent three years working as a Research Associate at the University of Oldenburg (Germany), whilst undertaking her PhD with a focus on educational technology and student engagement. She is now working as a Lecturer in Digital Technology Education in the Education Futures unit at the University of South Australia, as well as continuing to offer professional development for the evidence synthesis software EPPI-Reviewer at UCL's EPPI-Centre in the Institute of Education. Her current research interests include synthesising primary research undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic, the experiences of students undertaking doctoral studies whilst juggling caring responsibilities, applications of artificial intelligence in education, and international research collaboration.

Abstract:

Having been told from a relatively young age by family and friends that education and academia was not a place for me, I rebelled and followed my passion into teaching. Despite struggling with chronic illness since my teenage years, I thoroughly enjoyed sharing my love of German, History and a range of other subjects with students at the same rural high school I had attended. Still, after ten years of teaching in the same small country town I had grown up in, I made the life changing decision to move my then 4-year-old daughter and myself in January 2017, halfway around the world to a town in Germany that I had only visited once, in order to follow my dream of completing a PhD. Despite the complete sea change, we somehow managed to survive three turbulent years of multiple childcare centres, not owning a car, learning how to ride bikes and catch endless buses, adapting to snow, learning how to be a 'real researcher' and write journal articles, and coping with the multiple simultaneous demands of a PhD by publication, culminating in an online PhD defence in 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Who am I and why did I choose to embark on this journey?

My name is Melissa Bond and, despite the many winding roads that I have travelled in my journey so far, I still feel like the same kid who grew up in wine country in South Australia; able to swim before I could walk. I was the youngest of three children, to two extraordinarily hard-working parents; my Mum, who worked in the fruit and veg shop, before she became a cook at the local hospital, and my Dad, who was an electrician and sound technician. Whilst neither of them attended university themselves, they both had an incredible work ethic and strove hard to try to give us what they never had, and to ensure that we knew we were able to attend university if we wanted to.

I had always admired my Aunts and Uncles on Dad's side; all four of them were Doctors, of one kind or another (three academic and one medical), and I was determined to be the fifth Dr Bond in the family. After all, being paid to swan around the world and attend conferences looked like a lot of fun! It became clear to me in Year 11 that teaching was a passion of mine, and this fitted perfectly with my vision of an international academic career, but the feeling amongst my extended family was one of caution; education was 'underpaid and overworked' and surely, I wanted to 'do more' with my life? I initially heeded my family's warning and started a double degree in International Studies/Law, and a Diploma in Languages (German) at the University of Adelaide.

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In my second year of university, and only my second semester of Law, I came down with what I thought was a nasty case of the Flu. Unfortunately, as the semester wore on, instead of going away, it proceeded to get worse. Soon I found myself falling asleep in my 9am lecture after swimming training, and often in agonising pain. I had to take more and more time off from my studies and was diagnosed with both Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Endometriosis. My illness became so bad in my third year of university at the age of 20, that I had to take leave from studies, quit my casual jobs, and move back home to the country to live with my parents. Whilst this was a bitter pill to swallow for a proud, independent young woman, this would prove to be a pivotal moment.

During my ill health at university, and the approximately nine months that I spent trying to piece my health back together again afterwards, three of my lecturers had shown true empathy for my situation. Even before I realised there were support services available for students with chronic health conditions, they were making accommodations for me, and made it clear that they knew I was more than my health was allowing me to be. They also encouraged me to seek distance education units from other universities, which could then be credited against my unfinished degree, as I lived two hours from Adelaide, and was too unwell to travel. Although reading a full page of a book took so much effort, that I often fell asleep before reaching the end of it, I got through it and was able to return to Adelaide and my studies after 10 months, with recognition of my ongoing health issues. Thanks to the care of those forward-thinking educators, I was able to successfully complete my International Studies degree and my German diploma, and it gave me the extra confidence to pursue a Graduate Diploma in Education to become a high school teacher.

During my ten years as a high school teacher and coordinator at the same high school I had attended - teaching predominantly German, but also a whole range of other subjects including Humanities and Digital Learning - I decided to complete a Graduate Certificate in eLearning and my Master of Education. Once again, I came across educators who tried their absolute best to accommodate me as a country student with a chronic medical condition (having now been diagnosed with Fibromyalgia); I was allowed to attend in-person tutorials via Zoom, well before it became a way of life during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bond et al., 2021), as well as bring my then 3-year-old daughter to hands-on workshops, as I couldn't find childcare. It was this modelling of empathy and genuine interest in seeing me achieve my best, despite my circumstances, as well as a deepening love of evidence-based practice, that led me to seek out PhD opportunities.

How did my doctoral journey start?

I had always wanted to live in Germany and towards the end of my master's degree, found myself on ResearchGate, searching for research opportunities in Europe. I happened to come across a Post-Doc position at the University of Oldenburg that I was completely unqualified for, but it sounded so much like me and matched my interests and strengths so perfectly, that I felt compelled to contact the academic advertising the position, Prof. Dr. Olaf Zawacki-Richter. I gathered my courage and sent him an email, explaining my background and situation, and attached a copy of my resume. To my absolute delight, he sent me a reply the next day, inviting me to have a Skype meeting with him; you could have knocked me over with a feather!

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After a couple of video chats, Olaf invited me to visit Germany and attend the EDEN Research Workshop being held there in Oldenburg in October 2016, to talk more about collaborative opportunities and to see if I could imagine myself living there. My daughter, Hannah, had only just turned four, so it was a big decision to leave her with my parents for a few weeks in order to visit Europe. After much dithering and some amazing support from family, friends and colleagues, I decided to go, and thus another pivotal moment in my life appeared.

Having only ever been to secondary teacher conferences, this new world of academia and mixing with some of the best minds in my field was intoxicating. I was suddenly surrounded by people whose work I had read and admired for years and making connections with a whole range of scholars who I had never dreamed would become my future collaborators and colleagues (see Mason et al., 2022). It was a heady mix of workshops, paper presentations, discussions and social activities, and, following a great chat with Olaf about my future aspirations and research interests, I left Oldenburg with not only a job offer and a willing PhD supervisor, but also having met my future fiancé (Gerald Evans) for the first time.

I returned to Australia at the start of Term 4 with a renewed sense of purpose and set about selling practically all my possessions, in order to fund moving the two of us to Germany. We held garage sales, and advertised online, and I was very proud when Hannah helped sell her toys and books at a car boot sale. The search for a place to live was made easy through the university's visiting researcher accommodation scheme; a database of local properties available fully furnished to international academics. We found a cute little apartment in a town just outside the city limits, which had its own kindergarten (kindy) and primary school within walking or cycling distance.

When it was time to leave in January 2017, we only took two suitcases, a backpack each and my laptop, and posted two boxes of (mostly) toys. After spending a week in England to catch up with friends and Gerald again, we were mercifully met at the airport by Olaf and, after turning up at the wrong house initially, successfully found our new home as snow fell. As we had arrived before I could begin my part-time 50% position as a Research Associate, I had a few weeks to spend with Hannah before I had to start work. This turned out to be extremely lucky, as the position we thought we had secured for Hannah at the kindy wasn't as secure as we had imagined.

Changing family dynamics

When we left Australia, Hannah had already completed a year of kindy, and I had reasoned it would be the perfect time to move, as she was too young to start reception in Australia anyway. I had also thought, 'surely play is an international language?' and that she didn't need to speak German yet, in order to make friends and play with other children; this turned out to be only somewhat true. Hannah did play with other children at kindy but she found her lack of German language incredibly frustrating. She already had issues with managing her emotions, but this first six months really tested both her - and my - limits.

As Hannah only had a spot at kindy from 7:30am until 11am each day initially, this meant that I had to drop her off in the morning (by bike or walking, as I foolishly decided not to buy a car), ride or bus to uni, work until 10:30am and then go back to kindy to pick her up. I would then take her home and get her some lunch, where I would need to continue working again, at least for an hour or two. Hannah had been used to me grading student work, or doing my own

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university assignments, since she was a toddler, but she certainly did need to get used to me having to work at unusual times again, especially after I started my PhD in earnest. After a few months of trying to work from home in the afternoons, I found out that the university had its own childcare centre, where students and staff could take their children for discounted casual afternoon sessions. This then meant that my day involved:

- 7:30am – drop Hannah at kindy in Ofen, ride/bus to work
- 10:30am – ride/bus back to kindy to pick up Hannah
- 11am-1pm – lunch/work at home
- 1pm – ride/bus back to uni and drop Hannah off, then go to work
- 5pm – pick up Hannah from the uni childcare centre and ride/bus home
- 6pm-7pm – have tea and put Hannah to bed
- 7:30pm – 9:30pm(ish) – continue to work

Having not ridden a bike for almost a decade prior to all of this, I soon found my Fibromyalgia kicking up a fuss, and I had to search for a different solution. I started searching for a babysitter in the area, who could speak English, and found a nice guy from Canada who ended up doing some of the legwork to get Hannah to and from her various childcare centres. It was another cost, though, and it wasn't long before I could no longer afford it.

With very little money, and no family or friends in the area, we struggled to integrate into our new community. Both Hannah and I were initially reluctant to reach out and find new friends, and not having a car prevented us from doing anything in places without adequate public transport access. We also started making many short trips to England, as the relationship with my partner had become serious quickly, which impacted on the amount of time that I could spend on my PhD and involved some serious family time negotiation.

Challenges: What were they and how were they overcome?

As a single parent, I had to take every opportunity to work, which included nights after Hannah had gone to bed, and then on weekends. On the weekends when my partner was around, however, I felt so guilty about working that I often didn't do any work at all, which then meant more pressure on me to get as much work done as possible on the days when he wasn't around. To help deal with this, I sometimes brought Hannah into the office with me, and I also found two fantastic local indoor play centres that charged reasonable prices to play all day and that had power points for me to charge my laptop when needed; I worked and Hannah played, which lessened the mum guilt, as she was at least being active. I also found an amazing local babysitter (Giulia) by advertising on our university-wide online discussion board – she could speak fluent English and loved science and nature, which suited Hannah perfectly. I also wasn't shy in describing Hannah on the forum and supervised their first one-hour long meeting at the playground, before feeling confident to leave them to it.

Thankfully, it only took Hannah around six months to become fluent enough in German to communicate with other children and her educators effectively. However, it was certainly a challenge to begin with. In order to help speed the process up, having a bilingual babysitter was extremely helpful, as Giulia could gently bring in German words and phrases during play, without Hannah feeling overwhelmed. Hannah also attended a German-speaking only kindy and primary school, she watched German kids TV, and I arranged play dates, as soon as it looked like she had started making friends with someone.

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Feb 2017 - crunching snow, whilst waiting for the bus.



June 2017 - having a laugh, whilst waiting for yet another bus.



2019 - Hannah 'working' in my office.

There were also several challenges related to undertaking my PhD. Navigating national – let alone international – conferences was a challenge. The first conference I had to attend for work was a three-day workshop in London when Hannah was four. At that point, I hadn't found Giulia yet, so I had to take Hannah with me. Thankfully, my colleague's husband had also travelled with us with their very young baby, and he had kindly offered to look after her during the day. This worked for much of the time, but it was still difficult and having to take her with me was an added expense that I initially had to cover. Solutions on other occasions included one of my colleagues taking Hannah camping with them for a week whilst I attended a conference in Amsterdam, I hired a university student in Sweden, and I paid Giulia quite a substantial amount of money to look after Hannah in Germany for a few days at a time towards the end of my PhD. One best practice institutional example, though, was a conference I attended in Cologne that offered childcare at the university during conference hours. Whilst it was 'on site', the office was still a couple of tube rides away from the conference venue, which had to be considered with time management, but it was fantastic to know that Hannah was with educators at a qualified centre and that I wasn't far away if needed.

Another issue was my lack of experience in academic writing; aside from one book chapter, which was an assignment for a Masters level course I had taken, I had never published before. Suddenly, I was expected to innately know how to write effective journal articles for publication and I didn't have the foggiest idea how! This presented a particularly large problem for me, as I had chosen to complete my PhD via publication, after advice from my supervisor (Mason, Merga, & Morris, 2020). This method of completing a doctoral qualification typically brings together three, four, or five articles that have been published in peer-reviewed journals throughout a doctoral student's candidature (Mason & Merga, 2018), which are then woven together within an overarching summary, synthesising the results.

One of the best ways I found of learning how to write a journal article, was to read as widely as possible within my topic area; I undertook two content analyses of respected journals in my field (the Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, see Bond, 2018; the British Journal of Educational Technology, see Bond, Zawacki-Richter, & Nichols, 2019), and worked on a

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large systematic review (see Bond et al., 2020). Through these projects, I was exposed to a range of different writing styles, as well as journal formatting requirements, which helped me to find my own writing style, in the absence of attending any formal courses on academic writing. I found articles that I particularly admired or enjoyed, looked at their structure and tone, and tried to emulate them as best as possible.

Aside from the challenge of writing and waiting to have the five articles included in my PhD published¹, especially the peer review process for the two systematic review articles (Bond, 2021), my final hurdle was passing my PhD defence (or viva), which unfortunately fell during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in July 2020. This meant that, not only did I have just 30 minutes to present and defend three years of work, but I had to do it online via video conferencing platform Big Blue Button. What made this worse was that, whilst I was using the presentation mode, I wasn't going to be able to see any of the assessors and feed off their body language. In order to prepare for this, I prepared my slides and wrote down several dot points for each slide, which I used to guide my rehearsals. I then wrote down minute increments on sheets of paper (e.g., 15 minutes to go, 5 minutes to go), and had my partner hold them up during my rehearsals, so that I could gauge my time management; something he also did during the defence itself. I also organised a practice run-through of my defence a week before via Zoom, and invited interested family, friends and colleagues to attend and provide feedback. It was really helpful, as they picked up on elements of my presentation to fine-tune, that I hadn't realised. Then, somehow, the hour and a half sped by and I found myself awarded that elusive title, Dr Bond.



Cheers to the newly minted Dr Bond



Celebrating passing my PhD viva

Expectations: How did they change or differ?

I didn't want to be pitied for being a PhD student with a chronic medical condition (Fibromyalgia), or seen as different, and much like other academics with the condition (Brown, 2020) I am somewhat of a perfectionist, so my own expectations of myself were always very high, sometimes impossibly so. However, it soon became clear that juggling my multiple identities as PhD candidate, Mum and partner required a more practical and balanced approach; I needed to ensure that time was carved out for myself, for my family, and for my

¹ For further information about my PhD by publication, please see <http://drmelissabond.weebly.com/phd-facilitating-student-engagement-with-ed-tech.html>

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studies, and it became increasingly important to me to recognise that it is ok to want to strive for more, and to take time for myself to recharge my batteries if needed. It also became important that I be open and honest about my illness with my colleagues; I didn't want them to think I was just lazy and to understand that, with careful management, I could still meet important deadlines.

I had always anticipated finishing my PhD within three years, but to do so required a lot of time and commitment. I often had to temper the expectations of my family, who were okay with me spending the time that I 'should have been' spending with them working, as long as I graduated when I said I would. This expectation placed extra pressure on me, as I was cognizant of not burdening my family with overworking (or working during what should be 'family time') longer than I needed to.

Development of new skills

Undertaking a PhD taught me a lot of new skills. Aside from learning how to write journal articles, I also further developed my speaking skills, having to present my work at various conferences. Through conducting multiple systematic reviews (e.g., Bond et al., 2020), I improved my information management skills, including locating studies and data management, alongside critical appraisal skills, and perhaps one of the key developmental areas for me, was learning how to collaborate effectively in teams with varying epistemologies.

What has this meant to my family and myself?

Receiving my PhD meant a lot to me; it was the recognition of a long and arduous journey, that had really begun when I was a teenager. It also meant a lot that Hannah got to see me work hard for something that I wanted, and to start receiving greater recognition from my peers and the academy at large (Mason et al., 2022). It has also meant that I was able to secure a job in the professional services (academic adjacent) at UCL in England and live with my partner for two years, before winning my dream job as a Lecturer (teaching/research) at the University of South Australia, enabling my family to return home in December 2021.

How has the journey changed me and my views on life, academia and family?

There are now multiple paths open to me all around the world, and not just within academia. I'm no longer afraid to admit that I want to seek the best opportunities for myself and my family, no matter where in the world they're located, and I have developed some valuable tools to help me achieve that. However, I also recognise that I need to continue to maintain a healthy work/life balance, and that I need to lead by example; I can't expect my daughter to grow up with a strong work ethic or a healthy lifestyle, if I don't have one myself. Taking the time to go for a run or a swim isn't selfish; it's necessary.

My recommendations and suggestions for others

- Get in touch with prospective PhD supervisors and prioritise the supervisor over the university; the student/supervisor relationship is so important, so don't be afraid to reach out and ask questions.
- Introduce your children to any new language needed to communicate before you move there, if possible.

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- Seek out opportunities to meet other new PhD students/international students (if you're studying in a foreign context) as soon as you can, especially any that might also be (single) parents.
- Don't be afraid to ask the university family office about childcare solutions or events they might be organising.
- Ask at the student centre for any campus and/or city tours that the university might be offering.
- Use the university online noticeboard to search for appropriate babysitters.
- Take kids to indoor play centres and take your laptop. Hook up to the free wifi and learn to drown out the noise. At least they'll be active whilst you get some work done!
- Find a local sporting club for your kids and for yourself, if you're so inclined, or find some form of exercise that you enjoy. You will need the release!
- Undertaking a PhD by publication is an excellent introduction into the world of academia (see Merga, Mason, & Morris, 2019), and should be considered by those wishing to go into an academic career following their PhD.

My wish list for the academy

It's important that the academy recognises the multiple roles that mothers inhabit simultaneously and making provisions for childcare at conferences being held face-to-face is an excellent start. It is important that family friendly services are embedded into PhD programs from the beginning, including ensuring that new starters are provided with ample information about the university and its services for students, no matter the student's family composition or background. To that end, supporting Early Career Researchers by paying upfront conference and accommodation fees, rather than reimbursing after the fact, or having conferences provide some kind of incremental payment system, alongside reduced entry rates, would be particularly beneficial.

Concluding thoughts

The past five years have been an incredible tapestry of new cultures, languages, and ideas, with a learning curve as steep and challenging as it was fantastic. Although it was a big ask of my then four-year-old to cope with such monumental change, I firmly believe that it was the right thing to do for myself and for her future. My hope now is that I can be as empathetic and inspiring an educator to my future students, as I had the privilege of experiencing during my own formative years.

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