



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



Beyond one doctorate: evaluating the benefits, costs, and motivations of pursuing a second PhD

Maksudul Shadat Akash ^{1,2,*} and Shahanaz Chowdhury ³

¹ Department of Public Health and Informatics, Bangladesh University of Professionals, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

² Program and Research Department, VAALO avant-garde Limited, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

³ Department of Community Medicine, Bangladesh University of Health Sciences, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2024, 24(03), 2685-2691

Publication history: Received on 10 November 2024; revised on 26 December 2024; accepted on 28 December 2024

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2024.24.3.4008>

Abstract

The pursuit of a second PhD is an emerging yet controversial phenomenon within higher education. This paper explores the motivations, benefits, costs, and challenges associated with acquiring a second doctoral degree. Individuals are primarily driven by intellectual curiosity, career transitions, and the need for interdisciplinary expertise to address complex global challenges. The study highlights significant benefits, such as enhanced interdisciplinary research opportunities, broader skill acquisition, and improved professional prospects in specialized fields. However, these advantages come with substantial costs, including financial strain, time commitments, and the risk of diminishing returns in terms of employability and societal perceptions of over qualification. Institutional constraints, such as limited funding opportunities and policy gaps, further complicate the decision to pursue a second PhD. While the literature highlights the potential value of dual expertise in addressing interdisciplinary problems, alternative pathways, such as postdoctoral research, professional certifications, and executive education, are suggested as viable options to achieve similar objectives. The paper concludes that while a second PhD may offer meaningful benefits in specific contexts, individuals must carefully evaluate its practical utility against personal aspirations and career objectives. Future research should examine the long-term impacts of multiple doctorates on career trajectories and global research innovation.

Keywords: Second PhD; Motivations; Interdisciplinary research; Financial challenges; Career transitions; Higher education; Lifelong learning; Over qualification; Institutional policies; Postdoctoral alternatives

1. Introduction

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) represents the highest level of academic achievement, signifying a scholar's ability to conduct independent and original research. Traditionally, earning a PhD is considered a singular milestone, denoting expertise in a specialized field. However, in recent years, a growing number of individuals have pursued a second PhD. This decision often stems from a desire for interdisciplinary knowledge, career transitions, or personal intellectual fulfillment. While a single doctoral degree is viewed as sufficient for most, the motivations and implications of acquiring multiple doctorates raise significant questions regarding its personal, societal, and practical value [1].

Pursuing a second PhD entails undertaking another rigorous doctoral program, often in a discipline distinct from the first. This trend highlights evolving academic and professional needs, as well as individual aspirations for lifelong learning. While motivations for a second PhD can include career reorientation, intellectual growth, or expanding expertise, the endeavor also brings practical challenges. These include financial burdens, time commitments, and societal perceptions of diminishing returns. Furthermore, questions arise as to whether pursuing a second PhD is an

* Corresponding author: Maksudul Shadat Akash, Email: shadatmaksudul@gmail.com

effective use of time and resources, or whether alternative pathways—such as postdoctoral research, interdisciplinary collaborations, or professional certifications—can achieve similar outcomes [2].

The pursuit of a second PhD is a complex phenomenon that merits deeper analysis. While some individuals experience personal and professional benefits, others face significant challenges, such as financial strain, mental exhaustion, and societal skepticism. Understanding the motivations, costs, and outcomes associated with this choice is essential for students, universities, and policymakers to evaluate its relevance in modern academia. Moreover, the discussion reflects broader trends in lifelong learning, interdisciplinary, and the changing nature of academic achievement in the 21st century [1].

The pursuit of a second PhD is an emerging trend in higher education, driven by the growing need for interdisciplinary expertise and career transitions in a rapidly evolving academic and professional landscape. Despite its increasing prevalence, limited research exists on the motivations, benefits, and challenges associated with acquiring multiple doctoral degrees. Understanding these factors is crucial for evaluating the practical value of second PhDs and their role in addressing complex global challenges that require cross-disciplinary knowledge. This study provides a critical exploration of the phenomenon, offering insights to inform individuals, academic institutions, and policymakers about its implications and alternatives.

2. Motivations for Pursuing a Second PhD

For many individuals, the pursuit of a second PhD is driven by a desire for lifelong learning and intellectual curiosity. Knowledge acquisition is often viewed as a continuous process rather than a finite goal. A second doctorate allows scholars to explore new academic areas and satisfy their intellectual ambitions. This intrinsic motivation reflects a deep commitment to education and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, particularly when their initial discipline no longer aligns with their evolving interests [3].

A second PhD can serve as a pathway for individuals seeking significant career transitions or addressing emerging academic interests. For example, professionals trained in highly specialized fields may find it necessary to pursue a second doctorate to transition into interdisciplinary areas, such as the interface between artificial intelligence and healthcare, or between economics and climate science [2]. This shift enables them to remain competitive in dynamic job markets and contribute meaningfully to emerging fields.

Personal fulfillment and self-actualization are key drivers for some individuals to undertake a second PhD. Completing a doctorate is an achievement that instills a profound sense of accomplishment and identity. Pursuing a second PhD allows individuals to push intellectual boundaries, refine their abilities, and derive satisfaction from producing original research in multiple domains. This sense of purpose and achievement reflects an intrinsic drive to explore new horizons and contribute to human knowledge beyond their first specialization [1].

The philosophical motivation for pursuing a second PhD often stems from the belief that knowledge itself is a virtue. For such individuals, one doctorate may not be sufficient to fulfill their intellectual aspirations, particularly if they feel limited by the boundaries of a single discipline. The pursuit of a second PhD embodies a commitment to the ideals of scholarship, where learning is valued as an ongoing journey rather than a terminal achievement [3].

There is, however, a philosophical tension between academic exploration and the risk of over-qualification. On one hand, a second PhD enables individuals to explore new frontiers and challenge themselves intellectually. On the other hand, critics argue that pursuing additional doctoral degrees may lead to diminishing returns, particularly when alternative pathways such as postdoctoral research or professional certifications might achieve similar outcomes more efficiently [2]. This debate reflects broader concerns about the balance between intellectual exploration and the practical utility of multiple doctoral qualifications.

Professionals seeking career advancement or responding to the increasing demand for interdisciplinary expertise often pursue a second PhD. As modern challenges become more complex, employers value individuals capable of integrating knowledge from multiple disciplines. For instance, fields such as sustainability science, bioinformatics, and artificial intelligence require scholars who can bridge gaps between traditional disciplines. A second PhD provides the formal training and credentials necessary to establish expertise across domains, thus enhancing employability and career progression [1].

Pursuing a second PhD can also address gaps in specialized knowledge. Individuals may find that their first PhD, while valuable, does not fully equip them to address new professional challenges or opportunities. A second doctorate allows

for targeted specialization in emerging areas of research or practice, providing a competitive edge in both academic and non-academic settings. This motivation is particularly relevant in industries undergoing rapid technological or methodological advancements [2].

3. Benefits of a Second PhD

Pursuing a second PhD allows individuals to develop deeper expertise across multiple disciplines. While the first doctorate often focuses on achieving mastery in a single field, a second PhD broadens the academic scope, enabling scholars to combine insights from different areas. This is particularly beneficial for addressing complex, real-world problems that require knowledge across diverse fields, such as climate science, artificial intelligence, and global health. The academic rigor of a second PhD equips individuals to become thought leaders who can integrate and advance knowledge at the intersection of disciplines [1].

A second PhD often facilitates opportunities for interdisciplinary research, which is increasingly valued in both academia and industry. Many contemporary challenges, such as sustainability, technological innovation, and healthcare solutions, require the integration of multiple perspectives and fields of expertise. A scholar with two PhDs is uniquely positioned to bridge gaps between disciplines and foster collaboration across fields, ultimately leading to more innovative and impactful research [2]. This advantage underscores the growing importance of interdisciplinary approaches in addressing global challenges.

The attainment of a second PhD opens up diverse career pathways, including opportunities in academia, industry, consulting, and research leadership. Scholars with multiple doctorates are often highly sought after for their versatility, broad expertise, and ability to address interdisciplinary problems. For instance, professionals with dual expertise in computer science and healthcare can take on leadership roles in digital health or AI-driven medical research. Similarly, a second PhD can enhance credibility and competitiveness for positions requiring specialized or cross-disciplinary knowledge.

In emerging or niche disciplines, a second PhD enhances credibility and demonstrates a strong commitment to expertise. Fields such as bioinformatics, data science, and renewable energy often require deep knowledge across multiple domains. A second doctorate in a complementary field positions individuals as experts capable of navigating these rapidly evolving areas. This can improve professional recognition and open doors to leadership roles in specialized research, policymaking, and industry innovation [1].

A second PhD provides an opportunity to further refine critical skills such as analytical thinking, research methodology, and problem-solving. The process of undertaking rigorous research across two fields strengthens an individual's ability to approach problems from multiple perspectives and apply advanced methodologies. These enhanced skills not only contribute to professional success but also empower individuals to adapt to changing academic and professional landscapes [3].

For many individuals, the pursuit of a second PhD is a deeply personal journey motivated by the desire for intellectual growth and personal satisfaction. Completing a second doctorate represents the culmination of immense dedication, resilience, and academic curiosity, leading to a sense of fulfillment and accomplishment. Additionally, scholars with multiple PhDs contribute meaningfully to the global body of knowledge, advancing research that bridges disciplines and addresses critical societal needs [2]. This contribution reinforces the intrinsic value of scholarship and lifelong learning.

4. Costs and Challenges of Pursuing a Second PhD

Pursuing a second PhD imposes significant financial burdens, including tuition fees, research-related expenses, and living costs. Unlike the first doctorate, where funding opportunities are often more accessible, financing a second PhD can be particularly challenging, as many institutions prioritize first-time doctoral candidates for scholarships and grants. Additionally, the opportunity costs of undertaking a second PhD are substantial. By investing several additional years in academia, individuals often forgo potential earnings from stable employment or other professional opportunities, which can have long-term financial consequences.

Funding for second doctoral degrees is limited, as most research grants, fellowships, and assistantships target first-time PhD candidates. Many scholarship programs explicitly exclude candidates already holding a PhD. Consequently, individuals pursuing a second doctorate often rely on personal savings, loans, or part-time work, increasing their

financial strain. The lack of institutional financial support highlights a systemic challenge that deters many from considering a second PhD [2].

Time management is one of the most significant challenges faced by individuals pursuing a second PhD. Balancing the demands of full-time research with professional responsibilities, personal goals, and family commitments requires meticulous planning and sacrifice. For mid-career professionals or individuals with family obligations, the challenge intensifies, as a second PhD often involves trade-offs between academic pursuits and personal well-being. The added complexity of managing these competing priorities can lead to prolonged completion times and increased stress [3].

The pursuit of a second PhD can exacerbate psychological stress and lead to burnout. Doctoral programs are inherently demanding, requiring extended periods of intellectual effort, persistence, and resilience. When undertaking a second PhD, individuals may face additional pressures to perform at a high level while managing financial and time constraints. This can contribute to increased anxiety, mental exhaustion, and other mental health concerns, especially if support systems are lacking.

A second PhD often invites scrutiny and societal skepticism. Questions such as "Why is one doctorate not enough?" or perceptions of over-qualification may lead individuals to experience self-doubt and a reduced sense of confidence. The societal pressure to justify the need for a second PhD can be emotionally taxing, especially if tangible career or personal benefits are not immediately evident. Such challenges can hinder an individual's motivation and overall well-being throughout the doctoral process [2].

One of the key risks associated with pursuing a second PhD is the possibility of diminishing returns in terms of employability. While a second doctorate may offer deeper expertise, it does not always translate into better career prospects or higher earnings. Employers may question the practicality of holding two PhDs, particularly if the additional qualifications do not align with specific job requirements. This raises concerns about the return on investment (ROI) of a second doctoral degree, both in academic and non-academic contexts [3].

The risk of over qualification is a legitimate concern for individuals holding multiple doctoral degrees. In highly competitive job markets, possessing two PhDs may be perceived as excessive or unnecessary, potentially deterring employers. Additionally, the academic job market, which is already oversaturated, offers limited positions for PhD holders. Individuals with a second PhD may find themselves competing for the same opportunities as those with a single doctorate, leading to frustration and underemployment [2].

5. Societal and Institutional Perspectives

The decision to pursue a second PhD is often debated within the context of societal priorities and practical utility. For many, a second doctoral degree is perceived as a luxury rather than a necessity, especially when significant time, financial resources, and institutional support are required. Critics argue that the effort spent on a second PhD could be better allocated to other pursuits, such as professional training, leadership development, or societal contributions in non-academic forms. However, in a world facing increasingly complex challenges, interdisciplinary knowledge gained through a second PhD can be seen as a necessity, particularly for those addressing global issues such as climate change, public health, and artificial intelligence.

Society often views individuals with multiple doctoral degrees with mixed perceptions. On one hand, they are admired for their dedication, intellectual rigor, and commitment to knowledge. These individuals may be regarded as polymaths capable of making significant interdisciplinary contributions. On the other hand, pursuing multiple PhDs can provoke skepticism, with critics questioning whether such efforts represent over qualification or diminishing returns. Some may perceive a second PhD as excessive or impractical, particularly when alternative pathways for interdisciplinary engagement and career development are readily available [2]. These conflicting perceptions reflect societal ambiguity regarding the value and necessity of second doctorates.

Institutional policies regarding second PhDs vary widely across universities and regions. Most funding mechanisms, such as fellowships, assistantships, and research grants, prioritize first-time doctoral candidates. Consequently, individuals pursuing a second doctorate often face challenges in securing financial support, as many institutions lack clear policies for accommodating candidates with prior PhDs. Universities may view second PhDs as redundant, particularly when alternative opportunities, such as postdoctoral research or interdisciplinary programs, could fulfill similar objectives [3].

However, some institutions recognize the value of second PhDs, particularly in fostering interdisciplinary research. For instance, collaborative programs and joint degrees are emerging to encourage candidates with diverse academic backgrounds to pursue research across fields. This reflects an evolving institutional approach to accommodating scholars who seek a second doctorate for professional or academic purposes.

Universities face significant challenges in integrating candidates pursuing second PhDs. Admission policies, funding constraints, and concerns about program redundancy often discourage such candidates. Faculty and administrators may also question the motivations and necessity behind pursuing a second doctorate, especially when existing programs such as postdoctoral fellowships or executive education could serve similar goals. Moreover, institutional priorities often emphasize expanding access to first-time doctoral candidates, creating further barriers for those seeking multiple PhDs [2].

Attitudes toward second PhDs differ significantly across countries and academic systems. In regions such as North America and Western Europe, the pursuit of a second PhD is relatively uncommon and often viewed as an unconventional academic path. Universities in these regions typically encourage interdisciplinary research within a single doctoral program or through postdoctoral training, rather than pursuing multiple doctorates [1].

In contrast, some countries in Asia and Eastern Europe exhibit more acceptances of second PhDs, particularly in specialized fields where interdisciplinary expertise is highly valued. For example, scholars seeking to bridge emerging fields such as artificial intelligence and biotechnology may pursue a second doctorate to gain formal credentials and expertise. Similarly, in regions where higher education systems are expanding rapidly, second PhDs may be viewed as a mark of academic distinction and intellectual versatility. This variation reflects diverse cultural, educational, and economic priorities regarding advanced academic qualifications.

6. Financial and Practical Management for a Second PhD

Funding a second PhD can be challenging, but various opportunities exist, including scholarships, research grants, and assistantships. Universities often offer merit-based scholarships or research funding to highly competitive applicants, even for non-traditional candidates [4]. Assistantships, such as teaching or research assistant roles, provide tuition remission and stipends while enabling doctoral candidates to gain practical experience. Additionally, employer sponsorship is an option for professionals whose research aligns with organizational goals, with strategic financial planning ensuring sustainability [5].

Balancing the requirements of a second PhD with personal and professional commitments requires effective time management. Creating structured timelines with clear milestones helps maintain focus and ensures steady progress [6]. Strategies such as integrating research tasks into professional roles and prioritizing daily responsibilities can improve productivity. Support systems from family, mentors, and employers—like study leave or flexible work arrangements—also play a significant role in maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

The decision to pursue a second PhD necessitates a thorough evaluation of the costs and long-term benefits. Immediate costs include tuition, living expenses, and potential income loss during the study period. However, the long-term return on investment (ROI) may include improved career opportunities, increased earning potential, and greater recognition in niche fields [5]. Moreover, the pursuit of intellectual fulfillment and the expansion of interdisciplinary skills often outweigh monetary considerations, particularly in rapidly evolving academic and professional landscapes.

7. Critical Analysis: Is a Second PhD Worth It?

A second PhD provides opportunities for interdisciplinary research, career advancement, and personal intellectual satisfaction. For instance, candidates often pursue dual doctorates to gain expertise in emerging fields, enhance their research credibility, or facilitate a career shift [5]. Benefits include broader skill acquisition, increased research impact, and access to leadership roles, particularly in academia and research-intensive industries.

However, costs can outweigh these benefits. Financial burdens, opportunity costs of lost income, and prolonged timelines often create challenges. Burnout and work-life imbalances are also frequent among candidates pursuing dual doctorates, particularly without strong institutional or professional support [6].

A second PhD can be advantageous under specific circumstances, particularly for professionals engaged in interdisciplinary research. In fields such as bioinformatics, where biology and computer science intersect, pursuing dual

doctorates can bridge critical knowledge gaps and drive innovation by combining expertise from distinct disciplines [4]. Similarly, a second PhD may be necessary for individuals seeking to transition into a new career field where advanced and specialized knowledge is required. For example, professionals shifting from engineering to economics may pursue a second doctorate to develop the necessary skills and gain credibility in the new domain. In globally competitive academic environments, candidates may also find a second PhD advantageous to secure specialized roles or prestigious research fellowships, which often demand exceptional qualifications and expertise.

Conversely, a second PhD may prove unnecessary for individuals pursuing professional advancement in practice-based careers, where experience, industry skills, and alternative credentials such as professional certifications or executive education are often valued more than additional academic degrees. In such contexts, the investment of time and resources required for a second doctorate may not yield proportional returns, making it less relevant for career growth or practical applications.

Instead of pursuing a second PhD, individuals can explore other forms of advanced learning that offer similar benefits with lower financial and time investments. Postdoctoral research, for instance, allows researchers to gain specialized knowledge and practical experience without the formal commitment required for a second doctorate. It provides an opportunity to deepen expertise, engage in cutting-edge projects, and expand professional networks within academia or industry settings [7]. Additionally, professional certifications in fields such as project management (PMP), data science, or finance enable individuals to acquire targeted, career-relevant skills in a shorter time frame. These certifications are often highly valued by employers for their practical and immediately applicable knowledge.

Another viable alternative is executive education, including programs such as MBAs, executive doctoral programs (e.g., DBA), or short-term leadership courses. These options are particularly suitable for professionals in managerial or senior positions, as they provide strategic, leadership, and business acumen tailored to career advancement goals [5]. Such alternatives offer greater flexibility and align closely with industry demands, presenting viable pathways for career growth without the significant financial and personal sacrifices typically associated with pursuing a second doctorate.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The decision to pursue a second PhD is a complex and multifaceted undertaking driven by motivations such as intellectual curiosity, career transitions, and the desire for interdisciplinary expertise. The study highlights that the benefits of pursuing a second doctorate include the ability to bridge knowledge gaps, contribute to innovative interdisciplinary research, and enhance professional opportunities in emerging or specialized fields. However, these advantages come with significant costs, including financial strain, time commitments, and the potential for diminishing returns in terms of employability. Challenges such as societal skepticism, institutional funding constraints, and the risk of over qualification further complicate this path for individuals seeking a second PhD.

For individuals considering a second doctorate, careful planning and strategic evaluation are essential. Prospective candidates should assess whether their goals can be achieved through alternative pathways such as postdoctoral research, professional certifications, or executive education, which often offer similar benefits with fewer financial and personal sacrifices. Those committed to pursuing a second PhD should clearly define their objectives, ensure alignment with long-term career needs, and seek institutional and family support systems to manage the challenges of time, finances, and personal well-being. Effective time management and milestone-based progress tracking are crucial for maintaining momentum and achieving success in a second doctoral program.

Universities and funding agencies must play a proactive role in supporting individuals pursuing second PhDs, particularly when these endeavors contribute to solving complex, interdisciplinary problems. Institutions should develop clear policies and funding mechanisms for second doctoral candidates, recognizing their potential to drive innovation and address emerging global challenges. Introducing joint degree programs, interdisciplinary research fellowships, and flexible study structures would provide alternative pathways for individuals seeking advanced expertise without requiring a full second doctorate. Funding agencies should consider expanding scholarship and research grant opportunities to accommodate candidates whose interdisciplinary work aligns with societal and institutional priorities.

Future research should focus on assessing the long-term impacts of pursuing a second PhD, both professionally and personally. Key areas for exploration include the employability outcomes for individuals with multiple doctorates, the role of second PhDs in driving interdisciplinary innovation, and the psychological and financial implications of extended doctoral study. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how second PhDs influence career trajectories, job market competitiveness, and contributions to global research agendas.

In conclusion, the pursuit of a second PhD reflects the evolving nature of higher education and the growing emphasis on lifelong learning. While the endeavor presents both significant opportunities and challenges, its value lies in the ability to foster interdisciplinary knowledge, address complex global issues, and drive intellectual growth. As academic and professional landscapes continue to shift, stakeholders must work collaboratively to support individuals who seek to expand their expertise, ensuring that second PhDs contribute meaningfully to personal fulfillment, societal advancement, and the broader pursuit of knowledge.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their heartfelt appreciation to all the professionals at VAALO avant-garde Limited for their exceptional support and contributions throughout this work. Their expertise, innovative ideas, and steadfast encouragement played a pivotal role in the successful completion of this project.

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Powell S, Green H. The doctorate worldwide. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education; 2007. Available from: https://books.google.com.bd/books/about/The_Doctorate_Worldwide.html?id=A1Kxku2xYuMCandredir_esc=y
- [2] Nerad M, Evans B. Globalization and its impacts on the quality of PhD education. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers; 2014. Available from: <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-94-6209-569-4>
- [3] Walker GE, Golde CM, Jones L, Bueschel AC, Hutchings P. The formation of scholars: Rethinking doctoral education for the twenty-first century. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 2008. Available from: <https://www.amazon.com/Formation-Scholars-Rethinking-Education-Twenty-First/dp/0470197439>
- [4] Boud D, Lee A. Changing practices of doctoral education. New York: Routledge; 2009. Available from: <https://www.routledge.com/Changing-Practices-of-Doctoral-Education/Boud-Lee/p/book/9780415442701?srsId=AfmBOoq0YPCo6E8CDNlM-xXOnjxWLckC14aGZpXR0hryDi6UpuLdTj5>
- [5] Gardner SK. Fitting the mold of graduate school: A qualitative study of socialization in doctoral education. *Innovative Higher Education*. 2008;33(2):125–38. Available from: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10755-008-9068-x>
- [6] Manathunga C. Early warning signs in postgraduate research education: a different approach to ensuring timely completions. *Teaching in Higher Education*. 2005 Feb 26;10(2):219–33. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1356251042000337963>
- [7] Mangematin V. PhD job market: professional trajectories and incentives during the PhD. *Research Policy*. 2000 Jun 1;29(6):741–56. Available from: [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0048-7333\(99\)00047-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0048-7333(99)00047-5)