

BEING A HIGHER DEGREE RESEARCH STUDENT AT THE ICS



Jasbeer Musthafa Mamalipurath



Tsvetelina Hristova

Gay Hawkins, Director of Engagement at the ICS and Sally Byrnes, Business Development Officer, talk to Jasbeer Musthafa Mamalipurath (JM) and Tsvetelina Hristova (TH), two recently completed ICS HDRs, about their experiences studying for a PhD at the ICS.

We started off with some background information about when Jasbeer and Tsvetelina came to the ICS and the nature of their postgraduate research projects.

JM: I joined the ICS in 2015 and my thesis explored knowledge production on Islam in the new media landscape, looking at it from

the post-secular framework. I submitted my thesis in 2020.

TH: I also joined the ICS in 2015 and submitted in October 2020. My thesis examined digital infrastructures and the outsourcing of medical services between the US, Europe, Australia, and India. It was an interdisciplinary project which involved field work in India and Australia and analysis of the technical documentation of key data standards in digital healthcare.

Both of you moved to Australia to do your PhDs, Jasbeer from India and Tsvetelina from Bulgaria, why did you choose the ICS?

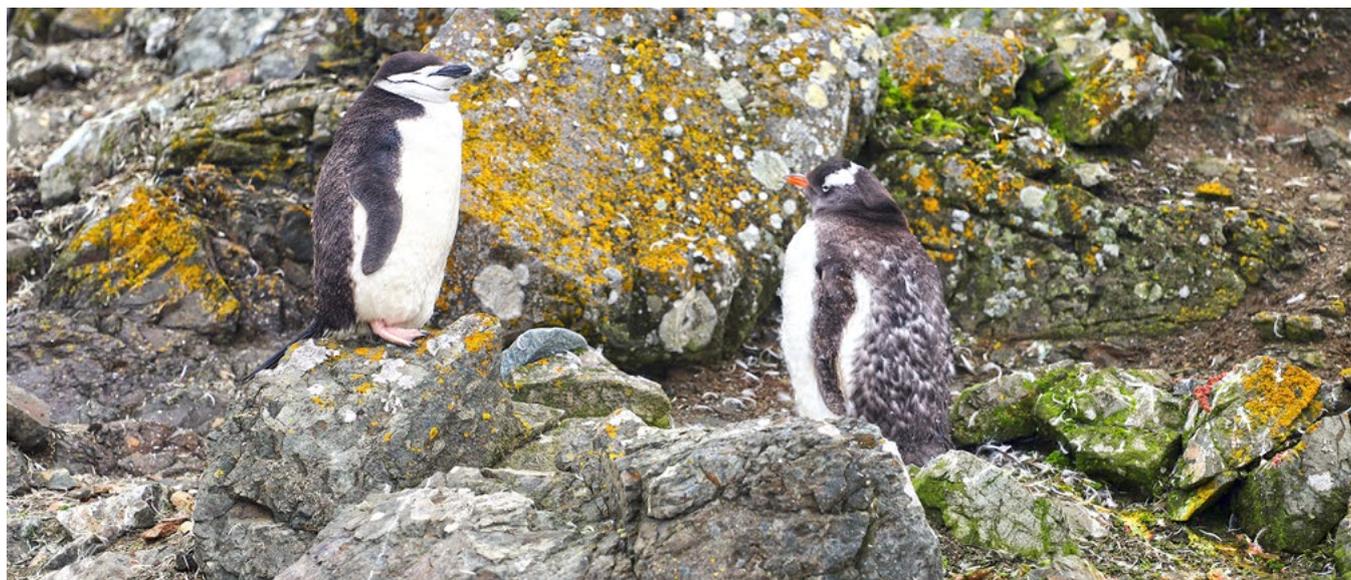
TH: I chose the ICS because of the exciting interdisciplinary research projects undertaken at the Institute. It seemed like a vibrant

environment where academics were doing cutting-edge research. I wanted to do my PhD at a place where I would not be limited by disciplinary conventions.

JM: One of the reasons that attracted me to the Institute was the cohort of the academics. Although many of the academics and their profiles were extremely new to me, I had conversations with a few of the academics when I joined and was able to find great supervisors.

What was it like arriving at the ICS and commencing your studies, how did you make that huge transition to a new country and new academic environment?

JM: Perhaps I should begin by briefly explaining my identities to give a clear



King George Island, Antarctica, taken February 2020 during the Antarctic Cities Youth Expedition. Photograph by Juan Francisco Salazar.

picture of how confronting it was for me to become accustomed to the academic practices at the ICS. I am a Mappila Muslim which is a very small religio-ethnic community from the coastal side of south India. I am also a Dravidian, I say this to describe the distinctiveness of my cultural and ethnic identity as opposed to the broader categorisation as Indian. These two ethno-cultural identities that I embody are also something that are historically revived, reinvented, and reformulated. 2015 was a very challenging year because it was my first encounter with a western academic environment. However, the people at the ICS played a vital role in making me comfortable in all possible ways. For me, the early days at the Institute involved not just an academic induction but a cultural induction. I met and interacted with people from all different walks of life with different skills and expertise.

TH: Yes, coming to Australia was a huge change and I did not know what to expect. My knowledge of Australia was almost entirely limited to *Crocodile Dundee!* However, I felt extremely welcomed and supported from the first day I visited the ICS and met the people there – staff, students, and researchers. Brett Neilson, my supervisor, was very friendly and introduced me to one of his other students, Giulia Dal Maso. Giulia and the rest of the HDRs have been great friends and intellectual companions throughout the years, from my very first week in Sydney. The Institute fosters a great culture of socialising through seminars, lunches, and social events for HDRs but also a lot of the socialising takes place spontaneously and students build great and lasting friendships.

Can you say more about the research environment at the ICS, what role did it play in supporting your research and developing your skills as an academic?

JM: The two best things about doing a PhD at the ICS are the quality of the research community and the opportunity to learn and explore new knowledge. Studying here

gives you the opportunity to interact with world class academics from cultural studies, sociology, economics, geography and digital studies. At the Institute these interactions happen in both formal and informal ways. After the weekly seminar, for example, you might end up in a very rich conversation with a leading academic in the corridors that can lead to a very productive research collaboration. What I really like is the kind of enthusiastic spirit that most academics at the ICS maintain, and the way this leads to very productive knowledge exchange where hierarchy almost becomes irrelevant. Whether you are someone like me who has 1 or 2 academic publications or whether you are someone who has got hundreds of academic publications, what matters is curiosity, the generous exchange of ideas, and a capacity to listen. My studentship at the ICS has helped me to define and articulate the kind of intellectual I have been in search of for many years.

TH: I was inspired and encouraged to be innovative in my research and to draw on theoretical work and methodologies beyond the ones that would be the obvious choice for my project. Apart from that, I was included as a research assistant on a number of projects where I could work alongside more experienced and senior academics and co-author publications with them. This has allowed me to learn and develop skills by observing how senior researchers approach fieldwork, project design, and writing and by receiving immediate feedback from them. Through these projects I gained invaluable hands-on experience and confidence in approaching my own research. I have had the opportunity to work with Liam Magee, Brett Neilson, and Ned Rossiter.

What about the wider culture of the ICS, how do you think doing a PhD here will help your career?

TH: I have a lot of friends who are doing their PhD or have done their PhD in other places around the world and I can definitely see there

is a big difference in how the ICS supports students. I have been involved in a few international and interdisciplinary research projects, which helped build my publication record and introduced me to a network of researchers with similar research interests in critical digital studies around the world. I was given opportunities to build a specific research profile, received great advice about how to do it, and my work was always respected and valued by the senior researchers. Now, when applying for postdoctoral positions, I can see how all this experience in conference organising, publishing, and collaborative international and interdisciplinary research adds to my skills. This means that at the end of my PhD I have a qualification and also diverse and valuable research experience.

JM: I feel that when I graduated from the ICS I didn't just have a degree and a set of critical thinking skills but also techniques to develop a career profile that would be attractive not just to the academic sector but also the non-academic sector. The ICS gave me opportunities to work in many different capacities as a research assistant, HDR representative, seminar committee member, engagement committee member, research impact officer and communications officer. There was a continuous commitment to developing diverse skills and supporting you. At the ICS you are not treated as a student unit you are treated as someone who is valued and contributes to the wider success of the Institute. The Institute is a very generous space, the culture that is maintained at the ICS is extraordinary in so many ways.

Gay Hawkins is a Professor in social and cultural theory and the Director of Engagement at the ICS. Jasbeer Musthafa Mamalipurath and Tsvetelina Hristova have both been PhD candidates at the ICS in 2019-20.