

“Align Your Mission and Vision with Your Next Steps After Your PhD”



Maira Quintanilha



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Abstract Here, we interviewed Maira Quintanilha about her path from PhD to founding her own business—helping academics and researchers with their qualitative research projects. Having initially planned to be an academic, Maira found a new path after realizing she could build a business to teach qualitative methods online, a career path that would offer more flexibility and allow her to prioritize her family. Maira was drawn to academia to learn and inspire learning in others and now does that through her business. Maira shares many insights she learned along the way, such as finding your “zone of genius” and mentors, considering what you are passionate about, and investing in your own skill development.

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Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?

Maira: My name is Maira Quintanilha. I was born and raised in Brazil and moved to Edmonton, Canada, in 2009 (where I currently live with my husband and two children). I'm the founder and owner of Quali Q Inc. I help academics, researchers, and clinicians to design, implement, and write impactful qualitative research projects in health sciences and interdisciplinary fields related to health.

What was the focus of your PhD?

Officially, my PhD was in Nutrition and Metabolism at the University of Alberta, Canada (Department of Agricultural, Food and Nutritional Sciences). Yet, I have a hard time seeing myself as an expert in metabolism because my PhD work was in maternal health during pregnancy and postpartum with a very strong focus on social determinants of health and qualitative methods of inquiry. I learned to navigate the intersect of social and health sciences during my PhD, often standing up for my methods in a primarily quantitative department while not being well versed in social theories.

As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?

Oh, this is going to be a long one. I basically spent three years “finishing” my PhD, and in those three years, a lot changed. In July 2017, during my third and what could have been the last year of my PhD, I got pregnant with my second child. I had a Vanier Graduate Scholarship and had to make a choice: defend before the baby was born or use my second maternity leave privileges and defend upon my return. I

chose the second option, I was working with one of my supervisors, Dr. Maria Mayan, in the second edition of her book *The Essentials of Qualitative Inquiry* and loving it. I had decided to build a strong qualitative research portfolio and eventually pursue an academic position, so using my Vanier to build that portfolio made sense. In July 2018, when my daughter was three months old, I signed a contract with the Faculty of Extension to teach a graduate level course in qualitative methods in January 2019 and started getting ready to return to work in November 2018. I had a solid plan—teach the course, work on my thesis, defend, and seek either a postdoc or research coordinator position at the University of Alberta (moving somewhere for a postdoc wasn’t an option as my husband owns an engineering company here).

Then, everything changed in September 2018 when Elizabeth (my then 5-month-old daughter) was diagnosed with cancer. I lost my ground, my desire to work, to be a successful academic and for a while to finish my PhD. I pushed the thought aside many times, but it insisted on showing up frequently: “if I lose my daughter, what’s the point in having a PhD?” As much as I suffered during that time and until the end of her treatment (July 2019), I learned to ground myself in the present, to use mindfulness strategies and techniques to deal with PTSD, to tap (another mindfulness technique I learned from the psychologist from Kids with Cancer), to breathe, and to thrive amid the worst few months of my life. It was in those months when it was mostly her and I at home during the day (my son was going to daycare) that I started allowing myself to think about my future. I’m an optimistic, a maximizer, but I knew academia was not the best place for a mother who had a child who could require months of care in the future and needed the ability to drop it all and be at the hospital. Besides, I had decided I wanted a bigger family (which meant more kids and time off).

One day, I was browsing the Minimalist Baker website and came across their online course on how to take better photographs of food. I felt like I had won the lottery! I could build a business to teach qualitative methods online while being outside of the demands and expectations of an academic institution. Plus, I would have the flexibility I needed to prioritize my family. Little did I know how much work it would take to build Quali Q and what it is now (and what I want it to be two years from now). But I had a vision—I was dreaming again and it was all I needed to not give up on my career and my PhD. I started taking online business and marketing courses while on medical leave with my daughter, and when I returned to graduate school in September 2019, I had already established Quali Q Inc.

I defended in January 2020, and once my thesis was submitted and approved, I turned my attention to my business and it’s what I do now. I never imagined that I would be an entrepreneur or a consultant, but I would say I have been “becoming” one ever since I decided that would be my post-PhD plan. It felt so good to be able to tell people I had a post-PhD plan. I felt relieved, privileged, and empowered to have that answer because let’s be honest, PhD candidates, especially those who are close to defending, often dread the question “what’s next for you?”

Thank you so much for sharing your personal story of how your plans changed. Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?

I work approximately 30 h/week, and a big part of my work involves writing. With the decision to build an online business comes a commitment to creating consistent content that can serve the Quali Q audience. My weekdays involve meeting with current mentees or prospective clients for the one-on-one mentorship program, writing blog posts and weekly newsletters, and reviewing any work my virtual assistant does. To write blog posts and create the qualitative courses, I have to study and keep up with the literature so that I can learn new ways to teach concepts to my students and audience.

What do you like most about your work?

Two things drew me to academia: learning and inspiring learning among others. I get to do that now through Quali Q. I'm constantly learning about qualitative methods, marketing, habits, and behaviors while also supporting other people's learning and growth. It's what I like the most about my current role.

I believe all graduate students should understand what drew them to academia and what skills they have learned that could be applied to other work areas. It's important to understand their unique genius and the skills they used during their PhD that are within that zone of genius. The zone of genius is a reference to *The Big Leap* by Gay Hendricks. In the book, Hendricks talks about how there are tasks we're good and great at, and yet they might not be activities that we'd do every day and thrive in our careers. Finding our zone of genius requires looking within ourselves and critically thinking about what motivates us, what makes us feel energized about doing as part of our work and lives, and how we see ourselves contributing to society. If our work reflects our zone of genius, we're more likely to thrive in our roles and reach our full potential.

And what do you like least about your work?

Being a business owner comes with many responsibilities I don't like but need to do, including bookkeeping, understanding taxes in Canada, and, internationally, having difficult conversations with people about money. I'm not in this to be rich, but I need to make a living and sometimes those conversations need to happen even if I don't feel like having them.

How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed in your current position?

This is such an interesting question. I don't think I would have been able to do consulting without my PhD. I had a rich PhD experience that gave me both the know-how and confidence to start Quali Q and carry the responsibilities of my current position. I also think that having had success in acquiring funding and publishing as a PhD student boosted my confidence to support and inspire others. I do believe it's possible to build a successful career as a qualitative researcher, and this is something that came with my PhD experience. Another thing that I took advantage of during my PhD that has helped me succeed was the mentorship program offered to graduate students at the University of Alberta. I had one mentor in 2017 and another one in 2019, and they were both instrumental in decisions I made that led me to where I am now.

Can you tell us a bit more about what sort of questions you asked your mentors for advice on?

My first mentor had a PhD and was working outside of academia, so my questions to him were mostly about how he had transitioned from academia to government. It was so interesting because we sat at a coffee shop with my highly academic CV on the table and a few job postings available at that time, and started thinking about how my academic achievements would enable me to apply for those jobs. That exercise was powerful because it made me realize that I would not be transferring publications and awards to any job application outside of academia. However, I could transfer the skills that helped to publish the work and win the award, such as writing, facilitation, and communication skills. One of the skills that we identified as being a potentially useful one (for what I wanted) was qualitative research expertise. And guess what? I loved that! When we finished that mentoring relationship, I had actually decided to pursue an academic career post PhD, which changed again after my daughter's diagnosis.

My second mentor was a consultant, and when we met, I had already started Quali Q Inc. Our conversations were more about implementing systems in the business that would make it more effective and efficient. She was also a mother of three children, so it was very inspiring to learn how she integrated—not balanced—her personal and professional lives.

If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a position similar to yours, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?

I think they would need to really think about their zone of genius and whether what I do in my day-to-day work aligns with their skill set and vision. When it comes to being a consultant or entrepreneur, I do believe that there are some essential traits one must possess. First, a sense of adventure and comfort with a certain level of risk. You never know if your first business idea will work, and it takes a couple of years to start seeing results and financial rewards. Being resourceful and persistent also helps a lot. I've learned so much about so many things (from website coding and social media platforms to marketing and copywriting), and as proud as I'm to say that, sometimes, it does feel overwhelming.

If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?

I started thinking about my business model and services during my PhD and would recommend PhD students to do that. Going back to the idea of the zone of genius, I think they need to think about the skills they built during their graduate studies that were strong (within their zone of genius) and could be sold in the form of a product or a service. For those with product ideas who need capital, I would look for grants and local agencies that might offer support to small businesses. In Alberta, we have the Alberta Women Entrepreneurs (AWE) and Edmonton Start Up, for example. For me, I started taking online courses about how to create and sell online courses. I also began to read business and marketing books as well as listen to podcasts from marketing experts and successful online entrepreneurs. Interestingly (and not surprising to me), the thing that made the biggest difference in my current position was finding a mentor who does something similar to me with a different group and product. Learning from her has been inspiring and instrumental. In other words, seek mentorship and embrace the fact you're a lifelong learner.

A lot of people like academia because they feel it gives them an opportunity to work on a topic that they deeply care about. Do you think this is also true in your current position?

Absolutely and, dare I say, even more than I would inside academia. I get to choose the projects I say yes to without the pressure for funding or political forces. In the beginning, I said yes to things that now I no longer do, and it's part of growing and

becoming more established. I believe that the reason I get to do what I deeply care about is because I looked deep inside me when I decided what I cared about and wanted to continue doing post PhD. I’m a dietitian by trade; however, I knew that nutrition wasn’t the topic and skill set I wanted to develop and use in my next position. Could I do well in the world of dietetics? Oh yes! Is teaching nutrition or offering dietetic services in my zone of genius? No, and I recognized that. I recognized that what sparked passion, curiosity, and enthusiasm was qualitative research methods; thus, the skills I’m using in my current position reflect that. I think stepping outside of academia means discovering new ways (and perhaps traveling the least travelled paths) to work on things and topics one deeply cares about.

Another reason many like academia is that they feel it provides them with more freedom than they think they would get in other positions. How much freedom do you feel you have to work on what you think is interesting?

I absolutely agree with this. I think academia offers freedom and flexibility ... even more once you become tenured and have consistent funding. It was always one of the things that I loved and appreciated about academia. It’s also the main reason why I decided to start my own company rather than seeking a position in government or industry. In the beginning, the financial pressure (in other words, the need to not sink money into Quali Q) diminished my freedom to choose what to say no to, but not my work flexibility. Almost two years into business, I’ve had more freedom to do the things that I enjoy. My expectation is that as I become more established, I am more able to delegate responsibilities that I don’t spark joy in me and outside my zone of genius ... the best example I can give is bookkeeping.

Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who’s currently finishing their PhD?

Many people will tell you to look for people whose career you admire and try to emulate it. However, I would say there is something even more important that should happen before that. Look within yourself. What do you want your life to look like? What are your passions? What are your (current) goals and priorities? What matters most to you? What is your personal mission? These are not superficial questions; they require thinking, reflecting, talking to others.... If you don’t know yourself and what you want well enough, it’s easy to get lost in the course of a career transition and end up working outside of your zone of genius. You can probably do it, but you might not thrive (and let alone have fun along the way).

Then, align your mission and vision with your next steps after your PhD. When I had my first mentor, before my daughter was born, I had decided to pursue an academic career, and my plan was to seek a postdoc or a position as a research coordinator after my PhD. When my plans changed, I shifted to defining Quali Q Inc. services and the clientele and focused on learning how to start and run a business. However, those practical steps came after I decided what I wanted and what I was trying to build.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?

Invest in building your leadership skills throughout your graduate program. You might not see yourself as a leader, but within a certain circle of influence, you surely are. Leadership skills will build your resilience, improve your ability to communicate, boost your confidence and creativity. No matter your personality type, you can learn to be a great leader of people (think of books, podcasts, mentoring programs, volunteer opportunities, etc.), and that will be the best skill you'll hone in during your PhD. Whether you choose to stay or leave academia, strong leadership skills will open doors for you, and the right opportunity through one of those doors is all you need to find your own path post PhD. It's not always easy. Yet, how many great things in life are easy or come to us easily? Yes, not many. So keep at it while being true to yourself.

Thank you so much for sharing your experiences and perspectives with us, Maira!