



All change!

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A long time ago, in a committee meeting far, far, away, the London UK GRAD Hub decided to take a chance on something. They wanted to develop a new publication for Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs) that was a bit more engaging, a bit more relevant, and even on the odd occasion a little bit cheeky. They decided to hand over the publishing budget for what were printed newsletters and pay the money to contributors instead in order to encourage submissions for an online-only E-zine. That first publication was "LonDoc", specifically targeted at the capital's PGRs.

Two years later and the national version, GRADBritain, has been downloaded more than 12,000 times! We regularly get far more articles than we could ever publish, and the quality is rising all the time. But after two years at the helm of this exciting project, it's time for a change. I'm getting a bit long in the tooth by PGR standards (trust me, it's an old photo) as this September I will be finishing my postdoc and leaving academia to work for an innovative web-based startup company in the United States. Although I've loved my time in academic research, working in the private sector in my evenings and weekends has dispelled a few of the myths about working somewhere other than a university...

Our Deputy Editor, Liza Filby will be taking over from me as Editor-in-Chief from next issue. I'm most grateful to everyone at UK GRAD for putting their confidence in our team, particularly Maija Sirola who has committed a great deal of time to maintaining our independence and ensuring the magazine comes out on time each issue! Thanks also to our regular contributors Dr Flo and Kiri Bloom, and to all our readers and contributors around the UK and beyond. Special thanks are also due to Professor Norman Staines at King's who was a champion of LonDoc and GRADBritain from day one and who has always been on hand for guidance and advice.

As for me, I've got a few minor life-changing bits and pieces that need some attention; I'm marrying my fiancée Emma in October, we're uprooting ourselves (and two cats) to Boston later this year, and at some point I'm hoping to solve all of the problems of medicine.

Bye for now! Paul.

UK GRAD is changing! From September 2008 the current UK GRAD Programme will be widening its remit to encompass research staff ("postdocs") in addition to PGRs. The official launch will take place in September 2008 and the programme will focus on supporting the personal, professional and career development of all early-career researchers. Updates are available throughout the year on [UK GRAD's website](http://www.ukgrad.ac.uk).

Back to school

- Alison Wallace (Edinburgh) can, and teaches

“Researchers in Residence” is a scheme which partners early-career researchers with a school teacher to carry out activities related to their research in the classroom. As a biology PhD student, my aim was to promote science and show pupils that science can actually be fun! During training I learnt how to simplify all my boring science jargon and was briefed on the best ways to keep a class of teenagers interested - and believe me, they can be more intimidating than a whole room full of critical academics.

Researchers must spend between 14 and 24 hours of contact time with the pupils and the most exciting part of the scheme is that this can be spent doing *anything* that you and the teacher agree would be worthwhile to the pupils. So I started out by doing something which came easily – talking about myself, in the guise of a science careers talk. I’ll be completely honest here, standing in front of 60 teenagers trying to convince them that science is cool was completely nerve-wracking, but their enthusiastic response and unconventional (i.e. plain cheeky) questions made it a lot of fun! Over the next few months, I carried out a range of activities including heated ethical and moral debates on the Human Genome Project and opportunities to see my research. The most rewarding and challenging activities were probably the hands-on, messy lab ones, where I gave the

pupils the chance to use some of my laboratory equipment that they wouldn’t normally even see. I’d also like to think that they learned a bit in the process!

You may wonder why I chose to give myself even more work to do. There were obvious benefits – as well as having fun doing it, I developed my skills in communication, organisation, and assertiveness, to name a few. But the main benefit to me was the interaction with the pupils. Students were genuinely impressed when I told them about my PhD on cancer research, and they kept saying how exciting it must be to work in such an innovative area. I thought to myself “Yes, actually, it is!” and suddenly I couldn’t wait to get back into the lab. It is very easy to forget how genuinely exciting and rewarding it is to do a PhD and I felt refocused on the reasons I was doing it in the first place.

The scheme is open to anyone who is funded by the UK research councils, but if this doesn’t apply to you there are numerous opportunities to get involved with science communication, such as science and arts festivals or science centres, which are always looking for keen demonstrators. So if you’re feeling a bit unenthusiastic about starting to write that thesis, try explaining why it’s fascinating to someone else and you just might convince yourself in the process!

Top Ten: Signs you’re writing up



1. Mouth tastes like a family of heavily caffeinated dead badgers
2. Direct sunlight hurts your pink, glazed, scratchy eyes
3. You’re jealous of new parents; just imagine having a whole four hours of sleep each night!
4. Your chair has a rather deep bottom-shaped indentation
5. Friends are surprised to see you, they thought you’d died or emigrated
6. You’ve built a complex spreadsheet with colours, and pie charts to record your word count
7. You’ve completely lost track of the plot of all your favourite soap operas
8. 12 hours of inactivity per day plus comfort-eating equals “thesis tummy”
9. The sight of red ink on paper makes you feel nauseous
10. At some point you’ve daydreamed an imaginary life for the authors of your most-frequently used references

Writing around the subject

- Alistair Brown (Durham) on the benefits of blogging

Looking scholastically over his glasses, my A-Level history teacher declared: "To pass, you must read around the subject." Now, in my third year of a PhD in English and writing up frantically, I reflect that I am in this position precisely because for the preceding two years I have read *so much* around my subject.

But whilst the need to "read around" has been well-emphasised, less evident has been the need to "write around." Yet writing is, of course, the anticipated product of the PhD. Why, then does it get less attention? Possibly this is because in the academic game of "publish or perish," there is felt to be little value in writing diversely in media and on subjects that do not feed directly into quantifiable research. However, the RAE is changing to reflect the diverse activities that constitute "research." So, in a digital democracy in which ideas are widely disseminated and can be well-regarded even if not published in the conventional print journal, using a weblog as a place in which to "write around" the subject can have broad personal and intellectual benefits, whilst still contributing to the core process of research.

Umberto Eco once commented: *An intellectual should use newspapers the way private diaries and personal letters were once used. At white heat, in the rush of an emotion, stimulated by an event, you write your reflections, hoping that someone*

will read them and then forget them. I don't believe there is any gap between what I write in my "academic" books and what I write in the papers.

Whilst blogging may seem no different to writing diaries or letters to newspapers, the difference is that by publishing immediately for an unknown audience you are forced to frame your thoughts coherently and accessibly, rather than in specialist terms.



For example, Craig Laughton, a Mathematics PGR who maintains the popular [Gooseania](#) blog, notes how his blog drags allows him to practice writing. This is because a blog can act as an embryo of ideas in development that are umbilically attached to your area of research, yet still sufficiently distant to give you room to think a little differently. For example, when Richard Dawkins presented his television programme "Enemies of Reason", I took issue with his perspective in my blog; but although polemic has no place in a doctoral thesis (PhDs are passionless pages), six months later this post has mutated into

the first paragraph of my formal research. If I'd just written it down as a note, it would probably have been crumpled up in the cluttered cabinet of my mind or office, easily forgotten. By contrast, since the act of writing on the digital page in a structured way demands deep rather than superficial engagement, my blog post stayed in my mind over the months until I wrote my introduction, long after the initial light of thought had gone. Also, as readers respond to your posts with comments of their own, there is an ongoing dialogue which makes forgetting about them impossible.

A blog opens your research to a wider audience. Even if read by a dozen people, the blog reaches more than the three examiners who will read your thesis; academic blogs with thousands of regular readers are not uncommon, and there are whole networks of bloggers now debating research issues. Though the lone blogger may still be a voice in the wind, when linked to the holistic activity of departments and universities, personal blogs can provide a powerful way of reaching a readership who might otherwise not know about your research, whether disparate disciplines within universities or the public without. And if your days consist of solipsistic reading or lab work, then it confers a sense of value on your lonely PhD if its results are read by others beyond your world – maybe even my history teacher, "reading around" his subject on the web.

Dear Dr Flo...

Dear Dr Flo

I am a second year PhD student at a large university, which offers skills courses in lots of different areas. This year I wanted to attend several of these sessions on preparing to write up the thesis, writing academic papers and developing teamworking skills. I thought that they would help me feel a bit more motivated about my PhD and perhaps encourage me to think about what I need to get a really good job afterwards - I don't want to stay in academia. Unfortunately I needed to have my supervisor's permission to attend these courses and he told me that I was wasting my time on a lot of rubbish and would do better to stay in the lab and concentrate on the research. I'd appreciate your help as now I'm feeling demotivated.

D. Oldrums

Dear D. Oldrums,

I am very sorry to hear that you are having a tough time and that it has been made much worse by your dinosaur-supervisor. Sadly there are still some supervisors out there who refuse to move with the times and changed agendas and won't engage with training and development opportunities for their students or for themselves. Firstly I'd just like to give you a little bit of background about training and development for PhD students and then we'll have a look at how your particular situation might be able to be addressed. Your university is offering all of these opportunities to you because they are part of a

national initiative referred to as "the Roberts Agenda" or "the skills training agenda". This initiative has been around in universities for about 5 years now and is aimed at giving PGRs the opportunity to acquire additional skills that will help them complete their research degree successfully and on time, and get good jobs afterwards – wherever their career ambitions may lie. A Government report (called the Roberts Report, after it's author, Professor Sir Gareth Roberts) was published in 2004 and recommended that all PhD students and postdoctoral research staff should undertake two weeks' worth of transferable and generic skills training per year of their PhD or postdoctoral research contract.

Some universities have chosen to enshrine this two weeks in their policies and regulations and so you need to check whether, in fact, this is a requirement of your PhD or just an option. If it is a requirement, then you have that point to add weight to your argument with your supervisor; failing to complete enough training might actually delay your submission.

The whole point of these skills courses are intended to help speed up the PhD process and contribute to successful outcomes. Therefore, you should argue the case that time spent on these courses will make you more efficient when you're back in the lab; helping you complete your PhD faster or even writing academic papers to help boost your supervisor's reputation!

So what can you do to remedy your situation? Well, you could try reading up on the Roberts Agenda (lots of useful info at [UK GRAD's website](#)) and then discuss it with your supervisor. But if that doesn't work then it may be worth approaching a second supervisor (assuming you have one) or Head of Graduate Studies in your department and asking them to sign off your form applying to attend these courses.

If the worst comes to the worst, then you may be able to contact the people providing the courses (usually a Graduate School training unit or Staff Development unit) and ask them to register you on the courses without your supervisor's consent, explaining the situation in confidence to them.

Please don't let this one person's opinion stop you from taking up some very important personal, professional and career development opportunities. As you mention in your letter, attendance on these sessions can also really help to pull you out of the doldrums and enable you to meet other people in a similar situation.

Best of luck,

Dr Flo

Send your PhD woes to:

drflo@grad.ac.uk



Life at the top... by Professor Geoffrey Thickett

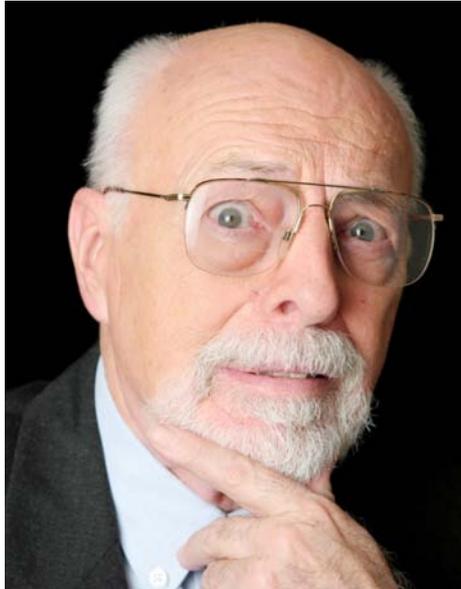
- Whoever said travel broadens the mind?

I am writing this in a nasty little room at Lynch College, Virginia USA, at the end of what can only really be described as a dreadful day! As a senior academic I'm obviously expected by Bookback College to attend conferences, but usually I manage to avoid going any further away than Oxford or Cambridge. This year I was invited to an International Symposium on T.S Eliot in the Unites States and told that they would not take 'no' for an answer. So, I wrote an amusing little paper called 'To the point – Eliot's use of the full stop in The Waste Land'.

The trip started going awry almost from the outset. I managed to get to the airport on time, but it was only 5am, so naturally I nodded off while waiting, only to be woken up by an airport cleaner and a policeman. They thought that I was a tramp! I admit that I hadn't yet had a shave, and my suit was a little crumpled. And it was unfortunate that the whisky I was taking as a present to the Conference organizer was hanging out of my pocket rather than in my luggage.... But still, it was mortifying.

The flight itself was fine, and I arrived on schedule in New York. I had booked an internal flight to take me to Whitchurch, the location of the conference. Everything went swimmingly and I arrived in Whitchurch and asked a cab driver to drive me to Lynch College. He did not really understand me though.

First of all I thought this was due to my accent, so I attempted the universal translation system of speaking slowly and loudly. 'LYNCH CO..LLL..EGE!' I repeated three times. But the man still shrugged at me with the blank expression you only see in wildlife documentaries. So I took out the conference invitation. 'Oh man!' he said, 'You're at the wrong damn Whitchurch! You need Whitchurch PA not Whitchurch VA!' What a disaster!



I had to get from Virginia to Pennsylvania as fast as I possibly could, which meant taking a truly terrifying Greyhound bus. The less-than-fragrant woman I was sitting next to appeared to be living permanently on the coach, and half-way through the night fell asleep and started dribbling on my shoulder. After six hours trundling through the middle of nowhere we finally arrived at our destination and I disembarked as fast as I could. Forgetting my suitcase.

I finally arrived at Lynch College and was met by my friend, and conference organizer Mitch Miller. 'Geoffrey, man, you look like a hobo!!! When it's the second time in two days that you've been told you look like a tramp, it does rather hurt your feelings... Mitch insisted that I borrow a shirt from him, but as I started my presentation less than an hour later I did feel that the knee-length shirt tails and rolled up sleeves were not doing much to boost my academic credibility. Especially as my jacket still had dribble marks on it.

The paper itself seemed to go quite well I thought, It was a relief when it was over and I waited for the interesting questions I was sure it would provoke. There was a very long pause, and then one hand shot up. 'Professor, excuse me for asking, but what exactly IS a full stop????'. I'm afraid I answered a little sarcastically, 'You know, the dot at the end of a sentence????!!!'. A sigh of recognition ran around the room. 'Oh, a PERIOD!'.

That's it, next time they ask me to present a paper anywhere they don't speak English properly, I shall have to pretend to be ill or something...

Prof. Geoffrey Thickett
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Bookback College
(with help from Kiri Bloom)

On students and boundaries

- Ian Kidd (Durham) on where to draw the line with students outside tutorials

Postgraduates occupy a nebulous position in the university environment – not quite students anymore but not yet ‘proper’ academics. This ambiguity becomes more problematic for those postgraduates who teach. Suddenly you find yourself with a dozen undergraduates every two weeks who call you “Mr...” (or “Mrs...”) and see you as some sort of authority.

Now, this is of course all very well. If the tutees prepare and overcome their nerves to discuss their ideas the tutorials should be fun and interesting. But then a problem arises when you meet tutees outside of the seminar room or the lecture hall. Especially in smaller collegiate universities – like Durham – you cannot have any sort of social life without bumping into tutees. This can be fine of course. Often students you meet in the street might smile or mumble a few words and carry on. Others might stop and say a few words – perhaps a quick question about essay deadlines or tutorial reading – and then carry on about their business. To an extent this sort of extra-tutorial interaction depends very much on the tutor and the tutees.

Some tutors like to keep a strict professional distance from their tutees. Others, like myself, are a little more relaxed and encourage a sort of informality – jokes and anecdotes etc. – to put tutees at their ease. Each tutor develops their own style, and there’s a lot of experimentation in developing it.

The informal style is my preference. However it does have certain consequences. Problems can emerge when more “informal” tutors meet tutees socially. A few months ago I was at a student union club night and was merrily dancing away when suddenly a figure launched himself upon me hollering “History of Scientific Thought!”



It was one of my tutees, a little the worse for wear. Many other times since I’ve met tutees in clubs or on bar crawls in fancy dress or downing shots of Tequila. Most of the time meeting students like this is simply amusing and often quite entertaining. But it never occurred to me that this might be a problem, until one night a tutee staggered across to say hello at some rock night or other, and a fellow PGR asked me who it was. When I replied that the rather squiffy gentleman in question was one of my first year tutees, he was horrified: “Why are you talking to them outside of class?! They’ll see you drinking! We have to leave immediately!” Nonsense, I said, everyone lets their hair down once in a while.

But then I worried: should PGRs socialise with undergrads like this? Should a tutor maintain a professional distance from his or her students? In Durham, this would effectively mean staying in all the time. Of course I don’t invite my tutees out for a pint or go clubbing with them, but equally I don’t avoid them if I bump into them in the street!

Postgraduates, like everyone else, are only human and they need to drink and dance and have a little fun every once in a while. So I think that postgraduates should bear two points in mind. Firstly a little sociability and friendliness between tutor and tutee makes the teaching experience far more enjoyable for both parties. Discussion is easier when everyone is relaxed and feels comfortable – people are more forthcoming with their opinions and they will come to respect you. Some will always push this informality a little too far, but then you just put on your “Stern Tutor” hat. Secondly there isn’t necessarily anything wrong with informal social interactions with students. Once they realise you’re human they’ll open up a little more to you. So don’t hold back from a little informality and teaching becomes much easier and far more rewarding. Don’t lose that edge of formality and discipline that a tutorial needs, but don’t treat tutorials like a chore and do care about your students: they will work harder for you and you’ll all enjoy it much more. Make the most of it before taking the plunge into the far more formal life of academia!

Taking control of 'Crackbook'

- Robyn Bray (Glasgow) is... worried about her privacy

I am relatively new to the world of social networking websites, having resisted the urge to publish my private life on the internet for years while everyone joined the Bebo and MySpace revolutions. However, like many graduates, I fell into the trap of Facebook with its tidy layout, university origins, and the lack of annoying music on its profiles. What really convinced me to sign up though was the fact that everyone I knew was using it and I could not help but wonder what I was missing. Soon enough I was absolutely hooked.

But what I had not considered when I first joined Facebook was the possibility that my students might want to be my 'friends'. After all, why on earth would they be in the slightest bit interested in what I was doing while their undergraduate lives were so much more exciting? But within days of joining Facebook one of my students had sent me a friend request. To make matters worse I had accepted it, failing to recognise her sporting a traffic cone on her head and blowing a party popper in her profile picture. Now I was faced with a dilemma. Should I remove her friend link and offer her an awkward excuse in class? Or should I frantically check all my Facebook content for appropriateness and delete that unspeakable photograph of me at that journal launch where the wine was free all night? But then the problem became even worse when I received a request from one of the lecturers in my

department. Not quite my supervisor, but certainly close enough to pass on that I had not been working frantically on that chapter all weekend as promised, but had instead been sitting on a beach outside Aberdeen with a couple of friends drinking beer! I subsequently developed a few suggestions for the safe use of Facebook by postgraduates:



Never accept friend requests from your students

I felt quite bad removing the few students who had accidentally made it onto my friends list. The main problem is not the content that you add to your profile, but the information other people can add. Your closest friend may enjoy linking that picture of you aged sixteen dancing to The Macarena at the school disco while dressed as Whigfield, but you must remember your students will love it too. If you want to maintain any modicum of respect in their eyes make sure they never see it.

Avoid friend requests from work colleagues

It can be a rather narrow distinction between people you class as friends and those you would describe as 'someone you know from work'. For these situations I developed the following test. You must ask yourself "would I go out for a drink with this person off campus, at a weekend, unprompted by any academic event?"

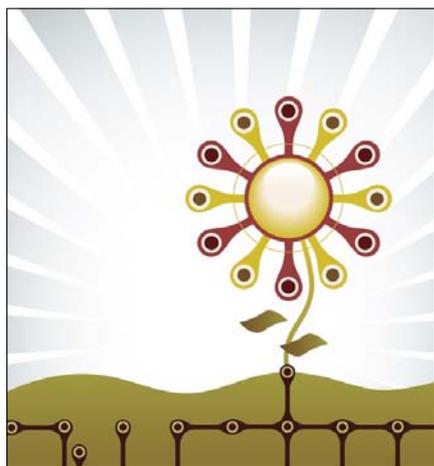
Learn to love security settings

After you log-in, follow the link for 'Privacy' at the top right of the screen and you will now be faced with a series of options. The most important one is contained under 'Profile – Edit Settings'. In here you can select what types of people can see your profile and there is an option to deselect undergraduates. Be especially careful of 'networks', as many can be joined by anyone (for example the 'Glasgow' network) and if your settings are not correct people in the same network can access your full profile without permission.

Facebook is great for letting PGRs communicate the 'outside world' while effectively procrastinating from any real academic work. But before you get hooked get your security settings in order. That is, unless you are happy for all your undergraduates to see pictures of you sellotaped to a lamp post naked...

Why not work for: A startup?

- Paul Wicks (King's) on joining industry on your own terms



You started in research to learn something new, develop novel ways of solving problems, and improve the world, right? Do you honestly believe academic research is the only way to do this? For many years, I did. I thought that there were two types of researchers in the world; noble, truth-seeking academics funded by charity and taxation to help the lot of humankind versus evil, out-for-a-buck corporate sell-outs that only published data that suited their needs and ruthlessly suppressed anything that didn't.

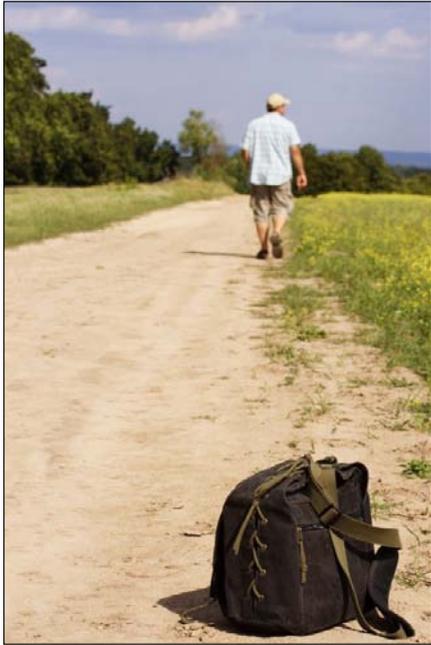
That was until I came across a few counterexamples for both cases. I attended a conference where it seemed all the university-bound academics were interested only in preening their feathers, boosting their publication records, and snubbing their rivals, with no interest at all in the benefit of patients. Around the same time, I started doing some part-time work for a "not-just-for-profit" company set up by the family of a young man affected by motor neurone disease, the topic of my PhD thesis. They had previously run a charity and collaborated with academics and so had a good sense of how both systems operated.

The main difference I've seen between a startup and academia is speed and the need to express yourself concisely. Every time I submitted a report to my colleagues, the feedback was the same: "Looks great. But cut it in half". Now, as someone used to writing 750 word articles to describe three years of work, I thought I was concise. But when you're providing information to the management team to help them make decisions, they trust you to have done all the analysis and reading without having to show your working. It's a little unnerving at first not having someone looking over your shoulder all the time, but it's empowering too.

The next big myth I've seen destroyed is that you can't publish if you're in industry. During my postdoc I've been publishing the papers from my PhD work, and now that those are in I'm actually submitting more papers as a result of my industry work than my academic post. Because we have an efficient system for data collection and don't need to spend 3 months applying for research grants to carry out small projects, we're able to react quickly to new developments in our field. Last year we were able to respond to a published case series with a research project of our own that went from conception to publication in just 5 months; about ten times faster than my previous experience of similar studies!

The big difference that everyone points to between industry and academia though is money. To be clear, most companies (particularly startups) do not waste money on first-class air travel or the extravagances of the first dot-com era. But if there's a choice between buying an ultra-fast laptop that will make an individual more productive and getting them a bargain-basement machine to save a few bucks, they'll always go for the former. It's not about cash, it's about perceived value. And arguably it's academic research, with its tendency to duplicate studies unnecessarily or carry out statistically under-powered studies that is actually more extravagant with other people's money.

Finally the biggest myth of all is that people working in industry aren't trying to improve things for other people; they're just as passionate if not more so! So, how can you find a startup that you like? Currently there are lots of companies sprouting up online, as part of the "Web 2.0" movement, tackling things as diverse as health problems to secure encryption systems. If you're more of a scientist's scientist then you might consider looking into startups geared towards environmental problems such as biofuels or energy conservation; they're desperate for talented chemists, engineers, and biologists. The best thing to do is get involved in industry events and scan the delegate lists for CEOs and CSOs. Also check out Startups.co.uk.



The end of the line

- Daniel McKee (Cardiff) on pulling the academic ripcord

chosen profession that had been growing increasingly vocal inside my preoccupied head: *Is this really what I wanted to do with my life?*

As an undergraduate, and even at M.A. level, philosophy had been a means to questioning the world in which I lived, for engaging with, and making sense of, our complicated existence; not as an academic, but as a person. Philosophy allowed me to better understand answers to questions both profound and pressing: what do I believe to be true? Is the war on terror just? Can we ever know right from wrong? What makes a government legitimate? Is there a god?

But as I began my doctoral work, I started to notice the subtle difference between being merely a *student* of philosophy, and training to become a professional in the field: after years of absolute intellectual freedom in the subject, there was now suddenly a 'right' way, and a wrong way to do things; a 'right' way that I was finding increasingly limiting. Each time my rewrites got a new seal of approval, I noticed that there was less and less of myself, and the original intentions of my work, appearing within their pages as, slowly but surely, the demands of my supervisor and department steered my research further and further away from answering the questions that had brought me to philosophy in the first place, and more towards fitting my thoughts neatly into some pre-existing

discourse within the field. The originality and uniqueness of my work which had gained me first class grades, grants and scholarships pre-doctorate, was now becoming a hindrance, as my writing became labelled as 'controversial'. The more I stopped to think, the more I realized that whilst I still loved philosophy's potential for enquiry, and the multiple ways in which my own way of looking at the world had been forever changed by the subject; and whilst I still loved teaching philosophy to the first year students I tutored in order that they could then have the intellectual tools with which to broaden their own views of the world. As a profession, academic philosophy seemed all too often to eat itself; where this revelation leaves me regarding a career, I'm not entirely sure.

It is a frightening prospect to realize that you've dedicated ten years of your life in training for a job you no longer want! That said, life is not always about the answers one finds, as much as it is about asking the right sorts of questions, and sometimes it is as useful to know what an answer is not, as it is to know what an answer is. For that small solace then, I thank ten stimulating years spent studying philosophy. It is only because of the subject's strengths that I became able to see its weaknesses and gain the confidence to reject it and embrace the uncertainties of a life now unplanned.

I started studying philosophy as an academic subject at A-level. A decade later, a successful philosophy BA, and MA under my belt, and just a few months to go before the completion of a PhD, it seems hard to believe then, recalling how eagerly I ran to the subject all those years ago, that I am now planning, post-thesis, to walk, just as eagerly, away. If you talked to me twelve months ago, I would have told you the same thing that I told anybody else asking about my life-plans: I am going to be an academic. Once the doctorate was in the bag, I would find a job in whatever department would have me, and there I would spend the rest of my days, philosophizing, teaching students, and experimenting with facial hair.

But philosophy is nothing if not self-reflective, and soon, as the major work of my dissertation was done and my mind found itself finally free to think on things other than the ethical justifications for political power, I began to at last address the nagging doubts about my

Doing a PhD long-distance

- Kate Karnehm (St. Andrew's) on educational commuting



Three years ago my fiancé and I decided we wanted to get married and begin pursuing our respective PhD's. Just one problem: I had been accepted at a university in Scotland, while he was attending a university in England. Given the requirements of his PhD we decided my PhD could be done long-distance. When my head of school, supervisor and admissions office all tentatively said it would be fine, I thought a lot of the difficult logistical work was done.

Very quickly I realized that long-distance PhD's are not ideal, and under most circumstances, it's best to live at the place you are studying. While I wouldn't necessarily recommend this approach to most people, family and work requirements sometimes make it a necessity. With some planning, initiative, and creative problem-solving skills, a long-distance PhD can be successful. The first big challenge will be meeting your obligations when you live far

away. A good calendar, an Internet connection, and a rail card become essential tools in making visits to the university successful. One of the most important things I've learnt is to buy rail tickets early, which means planning out as many of my visit days as possible. However, the down side to cheap tickets is dealing with last-minute changes of circumstance like cancelled classes.

A few hints about rail travel: first, the quiet coach is a great place for reading, writing, and sleeping. Secondly, trains will be late, so don't book appointments too close to the time you will arrive. If your train is very late, ask for a refund. Most train companies offer compensation if you're delayed more than an hour. Third, try to plan some other use for your time while you're visiting; attend a lecture, take a graduate skills course, or have coffee with a friend or colleague. And any time you are in town and can meet with your supervisor, let him or her know. It could be a long time till the next meeting, and most schools require at least two meetings with a supervisor per semester or term.

If you have friends living near your university, a place to stay for overnight visits may not be a problem, but make sure you're welcome! A hostel is less personal, but if you can get a quiet room away from partying backpackers, you may find it allows you more independence. One of your main jobs will be to

remind people that you are a student and they have a responsibility to you, as it's easy for long-distance students to slip through the cracks.

Given my infrequent time at my university, I have to work a little harder to meet colleagues and friends. Mandatory research and graduate training courses offer a great way to meet other postgraduates. Departmental lectures and post-grad forums fulfil the same role; try to attend and present at as many as possible. You will get to know names and faces in your department, and in turn, they will get to know yours. Working at your university is another excellent way to make contacts. While lecturing once a week may not be feasible, working a few days to a month at a time usually is. I've lectured on poetry to secondary school classes, mentored at a college experience week, tutored summer creative writing class, and welcomed new students to the department at orientation. In addition to helping fund my train tickets, doing temp work at my university has allowed me to make new friends, keep in touch with old ones, and learn some of the ins and outs of the university.

Writing a PhD away from your academic community is difficult and in most cases isn't worth the hassle. But in the arts, where much of the work is done alone anyway, it is an option. In my case the benefits have outweighed the hassles, and have made my PhD possible.

When's it due?

- Daniel Rhind (Loughborough) on that *other* incubation process...



I was sat in my usual place in the library at a desk that strained under the weight of unread articles, illegible notes and empty coffee cups. I was about to start another afternoon of 'writing up' when a librarian approached to collect a pile of books. Noticing that she was heavily pregnant I smiled and said "I can't imagine what it is like being pregnant". As she picked up the books she replied, "Sure you can, you're doing a PhD, aren't you?". As the librarian walked away I started to realize what she meant.

The News

When I first had the news that I was being offered a scholarship to study for a PhD I was filled with a sense of excitement and anticipation. I can only imagine that this is a similar feeling to that which first greets a pregnant woman whilst holding that little stick and hearing their big news. I also imagine that as these initial reactions fade they are replaced, as they were for me, with feelings of self-doubt

and nervousness. It is around this time that one has to pass on the 'good news' to friends and family. Their encouraging words and cheers of celebration do little to dispel the air of trepidation that fills your mind.

The Check-up

Then comes the first few meetings with the supervisor or doctor to check on 'progress'. The feelings of anxiety and wonder that one must experience when looking at the monitor must mirror those one endures when looking into the face of one's supervisor awaiting feedback from the first literature review. You just want to hear "Everything is fine". The realization of what is to come then hits home when you first hear the beating heart or the ticking mind of your supervisor. It certainly feels as though the amount of work produced is only the size of a walnut and this looks miniscule when compared to the fully grown baby PhD.

Cravings

Then there is of course the completely unexplainable cravings. Never before my PhD have I had such compulsive urge to watch *Diagnosis Murder*, *Neighbours* and *Countdown*. Anyone who tries to come between a PhD. student and their afternoon dose of inane television is likely to experience the sudden mood swings that are only matched by those in a pregnant woman. And don't even get me started on "Scrabblicious"...

The Bump

As the file on your pendrive starts to grow, you also get the feeling that something is kicking you. Whether it is the metaphorical kick of encouragement from the supervisor, the financial kick of the bank manager as the end of funding approaches, or the kick of guilt in the back of one's mind when out enjoying oneself rather than working, the kick is nonetheless as uncomfortable as the left foot of a growing baby. Although the kick can be cute and welcome at first, it soon becomes rather uncomfortable!

The final weeks

Then comes the time when your data is collected and the write up is well under way and you are continually asked "When is it due"? One tends to use the automatic response of "about six weeks". It seems far enough away that they won't ask again for a while but not too far that they question your progress.

The end

As I sit here in the library, both the librarian and I have the unmentionable just around the corner. Even its inevitability and proximity are not enough to allow us to talk freely about them. One instead tends to wince and change the subject at the very mention of labour or viva. Perhaps there are similarities between having a baby and studying for a PhD. Lets just hope for no complications in the final examination. Maybe we could both benefit from an epidural...



The final word...

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I recently had a request from an on-line broadcasting company wanting to video a paper I was giving to an academic seminar. Apparently, my thoughts on the Church of England's response to Thatcherism was deemed of interest to those of the web viewing-public. Whilst flattered at being asked, my response was a speedy 'no thanks'. The fear of ending up on YouTube far outweighing any career-boosting potential. But after some reflection I think I may have been too hasty...

The possibility of broadcasting my research got me thinking. How as PhD students of the twenty first century should we be communicating and promoting our work? I am sure I am not alone in fearing that my magnum opus, will end up merely as a footnote in someone else's book. Given the difficulty of getting a book contract, perhaps we should be thinking about other ways to communicate our findings.

Certainly we are all familiar with the usual communication methods; conferences, journals and the eventual book if you are lucky, yet the web provides us with the opportunity to be our own broadcasters.

Just as MySpace has recently been the force behind the emergence of a series of unsigned musicians, bypassing the need for a record deal, could it be that the internet could provide similar opportunities for budding academics to broadcast their research without the necessity of having a research contract? A MyPhDSpace perhaps?

Such opportunities would enable us to reach a much wider and more varied audience than an article tucked away in an obscure academic journal. In years to come, will we see academics 'doing a Radiohead' and premiering their academic 'album' on the web in a bid to subvert the academic 'industry'? This may all seem a bit far fetched and perhaps slightly unnerving. As academics we seek validation in the form of peer review rather than mass appeal, and thus there is a legitimate fear that the internet doesn't offer the same rigorous assessment process than say a journal article before it is uploaded. Just skim through any Wikipedia article to see evidence of that! Whilst any Joe Bloggs can create a website (or write a blog), not everyone can present at an academic conference or write a book for a University press publisher.

The internet also raises important issues about intellectual property as well as the obvious concern that anything put out there will inevitably be swallowed up in the void. Yet despite this, the web opportunities far outweigh the disadvantages, particularly for young academics.

For too long those academics given a public platform are often so far distant from new research that they simply repeat findings they discovered decades ago or worse still, they hire PhD students to do the work for them. In this new era, gone are the days when an elite bunch of 'public intellectuals', mostly through the medium of Radio 4, disseminate the work done in the sphere of academia to the wider public.

The web offers us the opportunity for all of us to be 'public intellectuals': it is no longer necessary to have a commissioned series with the BBC or a publishing deal with Penguin.

Thanks must go to Paul Wicks for his tremendous work in putting this magazine together, I shall be taking over the reins for the Summer issue so if there is anything you would like to see featured in GRADBritain feel free to email me!

The end bit...

GRADBritain is seeking contributions from postgraduate researchers, postdocs, and those with an interest in the development of early career researchers. We pay £50 for articles we use.

See our author guidelines at www.grad.ac.uk/gradbritain/ Issue 5 will be published in Summer 2008. Next deadline is Friday June 13th 2008.

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