

GRADBritain

A magazine for and by postgraduate researchers in the United Kingdom

Back to school....

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So another academic year begins with a new cohort of eager PhD students ready to embark on the intellectual journey of discovery and....desperation. But fear not, GRADBritain is on hand to guide you (and existing PGRs) through the torturous maelstrom that is postgraduate study.

For the autumn issue, we have a truly engaging collection of articles to whet your academic appetite and tickle your funny bone. Given the current economic crisis, it is apt that we should address that perennial theme for PGRs; financial matters. Christopher Rice offers some helpful advice on funding options during the writing up stage, we also have Ed Packard reflecting on the financial benefits and social constraints of living with the parents. Never one to shy from controversial issues, this issue of GRADBritain also includes an anonymous article by an MA student defending his right to work for an undergraduate essay writing company, with a response piece from the 'other side' by Dr Kate Bradley. We also have the usual heady mix of Geoffrey Thicket, Top Ten as well as an article by our deputy editor on 'getting started' for all you new postgraduates at the beginning of your PhD journey.

Happy reading, Liza

P.S. PGRs might be interested in a new initiative by the British Library who are hosting a series of open days for new PGRs. Each event is focused around a discipline with workshops planned for English, History, Social Sciences and Modern Languages students. The days will combine a general introduction to the library services with specialised sessions on specific subject material. There are travel bursaries available for those attending from outside London. Interested? If so, email: highereducation@bl.uk.

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Stuff that might interest you...

Vitae's PGR tips is a monthly email, which offers tips and advice on diverse aspects of the postgraduate experience. Recent issues have covered negotiations, giving presentations, critical reading and handling peer review.

Register for the mailing list at:
www.vitae.ac.uk/pgrtips

And the point of a PhD is....

Salvatore Campisi (Salford) on the reasoning behind research.....

When I embarked on my PhD three years ago with a thesis on the resonance of music in the works of Hermann Hesse, I had major reservations about the whole process; I used to wonder: 'Is this going to make me a better person or, be of any use to anyone?' While a researcher in medicine can discover a vaccine, or a PGR in business can come up with an ingenious way of marketing dog food, a thesis within the humanities is in most cases confined within the boundaries of academia. 'Pithy' titles such as 'Reception of the cognitive aspects of post-modernist novels in the late... ' or 'An elucidation and theological critique of the assumptions about...' speak for themselves.

Hesse, the focus of my research, shared a similar view on the subject; to him, music was to be *played*: clever things could be *said* about the works of Bach or Haydn but 'not a soul would be the better for it.' As for my thesis, it was unlikely to impact on anyone but my supervisors. I also felt there was an underlying paradox; for in literary studies you are expected to adopt a rigorous and 'scientific' approach, and yet the object of your investigation is just... 'fiction'.

I've always been eager to learn, to broaden my horizons, but was this really going to be the case? Was I going to be one of those who deal with the secondary aspects of a seminal author, simply to have a 'Dr.' before their surname? Was I going to join the ranks of those who raised

the activity of 'splitting hairs' (sorry... 'scrutinising') to the status of a discipline? I didn't want to be governed by what Milan Kundera terms 'the ethic of the archive', according to which unpublished material and paragraphs rejected by an author are piled up and published by researchers as fundamental to the understanding of the author in question. And most importantly, I didn't want to turn into a 'geek' who knows very little outside his field of expertise (see the all-embracing meaning infused in the Latin 'universitas'). At such moments, recalling G. B. Shaw's warning that, 'No man can be a pure specialist without being in the strict sense an idiot', would cast me into despair.

This, though, was three years ago and, as time went on, my initial concerns have gradually given way to more practical ones (e.g. 'how do I finish it?'). I recently looked again at my first paper and was surprised by the conspicuous gap in quality between this and my latest writings. The arguments of the former were flimsy compared to the better orchestrated ones of my many-times revised thesis chapters. My optimism was boosted even more when I remembered a researcher, philologist and thinker, who sometimes complained about the ethic of the archive but who came up with some formidable insights into his contemporary society by delving into the world of ancient Greeks.....

That geek was Friederich Nietzsche, nuff said eh?....



Top Ten:

Signs that the new year is here....

- 1 You are feeling optimistic, enthusiastic and positive about your thesis.
- 2 Shopping for new stationary feels like productive PhD-related activity.
- 3 You fill your shiny new diary with an exhaustive list of seminars and workshops in the naive belief that you will attend them all.
- 4 After a three month break, you are genuinely looking forward to seeing your supervisor.
- 5 You actually consider attending your university's postgraduate social event.
- 6 The new intake of undergrads looking youthful, lost and hungover inspires a mixture of envy and condescension..
- 7 Registering for your 7th year in higher education fills you with a serious sense of despair.
- 8 The entrance of your department has been fully redecorated, complete with shiny new sofas and scatter cushions. Yet your chair still only has three legs and your desk still bears last year's tea-mug stains.
- 9 The bill for this term's tuition fees comes through the post.
- 10 You soon start to wish it was the summer holidays all over again.

The art of conferences

Helen Li (Manchester Business School) on the benefits of getting together....

The PhD journey is a roller coaster ride of peaks and troughs, indeed one particularly daunting task is that of presenting your research at conferences. Having spent the summer attending and speaking at these three-day intellectual spectacles at both home and abroad, I feel duty bound to offer a few helpful suggestions on how to capitalise on conferences.

Be selective and targeted

A common issue faced by many fellow PGRs is lack of funds, and therefore it is essential that you are selective in which events you decide to attend. Do not get in the habit of saying yes to every one: conferences are like parties, only choose the best to grace with your presence. So consider whether the conference is targeted to your specialism or is the key gathering for your field. Look out for high quality, well-established conferences that match your research area; both postgraduate and academic conferences. And make sure that you pay the PGR discounted rate for participating!

Build your network from internal to external

Participating and presenting at conferences provides opportunities to network and engage with the academic community. It is worth finding out if anyone from your own institution is attending. If yes, then take the initiative and email them beforehand, introducing yourself and your research project. It will mean that you will at least have one person to

talk to at that awkward evening reception on the first day! And they will hopefully introduce you to others, who will introduce you to more others ...such is the nature of networking at conferences. But remember that networking is only a casual conversation of false promises and faked enthusiasm unless it is followed up with an email or meeting. Business cards are essential, although admittedly a trifle naff. But hey, nothing says 'unprofessional' more than you rummaging round in your bag for a bit of scrap and a pen to scribble down your email address which the contact will inevitably be unable to read and will most probably lose.

Be very well organised and prepared

Good preparation and thorough organisation are key. Make sure that you understand the nature of the conference you are attending, including who is speaking, the format, venue and location. Conferences organised by a professional body are for example likely to have a very different feel to a purely academic conference.

Also prep yourself: you should be able to summarise your thesis topic into three main points and in no more than two minutes. A clear and concise summary is the key here, and if necessary, practice in front your friends, parents, dog, mirror, until you can wheel off a thrilling yet brief breakdown of your research topic.



Get the most out of feedback

Presenting at a conference is an ordeal in itself, so why not ask one of your colleagues to attend your session and make notes of all of the questions and suggestions that you receive?

When dealing with comments and questions try not to appear overly defensive. Indeed, there is a definite knack of answering questions on your research: always flatter the questioner, thank them for their question and for offering a significant insight into your paper etc. Then proceed to completely ignore the question, weaving the answer round to a issue/topic you had to edit from the original paper- but also making sure that after the conference you go away and come up with an answer to the original question.

Be excited and inspired

The major reason for attending a conference is the way in which it can provide a healthy dose of inspiration for your work. Feed off of other people's appreciation and enthusiasm for your research! Moreover, listening to other academics research can also act as great intellectual stimulation for a fledging PhD student. Conferences have the additional benefit of being a break from the routine of going to and fro between the lab or the library. So, get out there!

Defending the indefensible?

Ziggy Garrett* on the growth of undergraduate essay writing companies.....

It's not even lunchtime yet and I've already earned myself £100 for two hours work. And all without having to leave the comfort of the British Library Café. Such is the earning power and convenience of working for essay writing companies. Whether we like it or not these services are growing. Fast. And they are becoming increasingly sophisticated: the days of downloading irrelevant homogenised essays from US websites are over. The brief I have just completed required me to write 2000 words to a very specific question, I was sent the student's notes, grade to which they aspired, and the set reading list. No plagiarism software in the world is going to be able to detect that this isn't the student's own work.

Of course, such companies do not promote themselves as undermining academic credibility and standards. One particular company website states that "it provides model examples of academic research that are intended to be used by clients as inspiration for their own work...services could only be construed as cheating if model work was handed in by clients as their own - something we strongly discourage." Bless those naïve entrepreneurs! Indeed these organisations discourage it so much that I have had essays sent back to me for amendments along with the supervisor's comments.

The popularity and success of these companies reveal two major flaws in our higher

education system; firstly, undergraduate intake has increased to a point where supervisors don't know the students well enough to detect whether the work is theirs or not. Secondly, graduate funding is in such an inadequate state that graduates are signing up in hoards to sell their intellectual capital. The reaction by academics on the whole has been to morally condemn these companies and the students who use them, which seems to me a complete waste of time. These people are willing to pay to cheat their way through university- clearly respect for academic standards is not high in their priorities. Whilst there is also a tendency to blame the writers, who are only doing it to help meet the cost of graduate study.

So instead of harping on about the immorality of plagiarism, let's just review why these essay-writing companies are thriving. For the people that use them, it's obvious enough; they buy themselves a customized degree. For the writers, what's the incentive? Is it just the money? Well yes. I failed to secure research council funding this year, having already taken a year out to save up the fees and found myself in the uncomfortable position of not being able to cover my living costs and dropping out of my Masters was not an option.

If I am slightly hesitant to condemn these companies, it is because they have enabled me to pursue further study,

when all legitimate means failed. Of course there is lots of part-time work I could do instead, (and I do have three part-time jobs on top of my line in essay writing) but the real attraction is how well this job fits around my studies. I can work on the essay within my own schedule. My earning power relies upon the speed I work on a brief; the longer I take, the less I'm making per hour. It forces me to produce intellectual academic arguments at speed with an economy of knowledge which is great training for the sort of journal and article writing that will be the daily bread of an academic career. Furthermore the task of writing a spectrum of essays, from a first to a third also has its benefits. For by writing bad essays you become aware of what constitutes a good one. And all this for an extortionate fee!

So, forgive me, but in the feudal system of graduate funding, these essay companies emerge as the Robin Hood, stealing from the privileged and lazy to give to the intelligent, hardworking and under-subsidised. Not only this, many of these companies have used their profits to set up PhD studentships and bursaries for their writers- something universities tend to ignore when criticising them. Graduate funding is in crisis, particularly at Masters level, with even the most capable students falling through the research council lottery. And these essay companies represents the savoury end of the wedge.

Defending the indefensible: a response

Dr Kate Bradley (Kent) offers her own reflections on essay writing companies and those that write for them.....

Ziggy's article defending why he feels no guilt in working for these essay writing companies is misguided and naive. If it is true that postgraduates are signing up to ghost write essays for lazy undergraduates, then this is an extremely worrying development. By criticising academics for 'harping on about the immorality of plagiarism', Ziggy misses the point about why academics value integrity as a means of ensuring the quality of research. Ziggy and customers also fail to understand the value of a degree. You don't buy a 'customized' degree, and you don't pick one up when you get 3,000 Clubcard points: you have to put effort in to get something out.

Coursework is not a meaningless exercise that lessens the amount of time one can spend in the union bar. Essays, reports and all the other forms of assessment are part of the development of students' understandings of their subject. It is integral part of teaching and learning, and those students who get someone else to do it for them be warned. Things have a habit of catching up with you, usually through the plagiarism committee. Or worse, at a job interview where the interviewers happen to have studied your subject and have been looking for a chance to discuss their love of sociology or biochemistry with some terrified interviewee soul...

I will be blunt – most students who attempt to plagiarise do

so thinking that lecturers are too stupid or busy to notice. Do not be fooled by Ziggy's assertion that the students will not be found out. It is not hard to detect such work. There are the simple clues: the student who cannot string two ideas together in class suddenly producing cogent work; writing styles that change dramatically from essay to essay, or which simply don't scan with the student's command of English; referencing that mysteriously improves; the readings that you know they haven't got hold of in the university library. Lecturers are experienced professionals who regularly spot all manner of incidences of plagiarism – as demonstrated by how busy plagiarism committees are in the weeks after coursework deadlines and before exam boards. And if the cheat's essays slip through, a shocking exam performance usually raises red flags.

It is quite right that those postgraduates who ghost write essays are disciplined. It might not be your degree that is on the line, but you are still a central figure in the academic offence. Think about it – you wouldn't ghost write a journal article or monograph for someone else! You not only run the risk of jeopardising any future career in academia if discovered but your work would forever be held in suspicion- do you really want to be forever known as the academic who use to ghost write undergraduate essays- how will your students or other academics ever respect you?

Let's not forget that academia is a small world where memories are long. Academic work stands or falls on the integrity of the researchers – the rigour of the research and data collection, the consultation of existing literature, and the researcher's expertise within the field. This applies as much to BA or BSc students as it does to research professors.

Ziggy is naive if he thinks that writing these essays will help with his intellectual development as a postgraduate- it certainly won't help for writing articles later in your career – you flex those muscles by writing articles at that level, not from concocting something that might pass muster as a 2:2. Ziggy would be much better off applying his considerable aptitude for pithy, succinct and engaging writing to freelance journalism.

I agree that funding for postgraduates is appalling, but the answer doesn't lie with these companies, even if they fund studentships! Unless the system changes dramatically, the answer is a boring one for those who want to pursue postgraduate studies: be realistic about your chances of getting research council funding, and do your homework on career development loans, grants, fellowships, part-time work and even part-time study. An MA or PhD is a financial as well as an academic commitment– don't flush it down the toilet for a fast buck. Even if the electricity bill is £872, and the rent's gone up by £100, your integrity is priceless.

The Conflict of the babies...

Naomi Hoogesteger (Durham University) on juggling baby-child undergraduates with toddler thesis.....

Invariably I have had a wonderful summer taking advantage of the gargantuan expanse of time and the valiant efforts of the British sun. Free from teaching, I revelled in this unmatched period of productive research and writing time, which was only interrupted by the odd university workshop or academic conference. My baby thesis was nurtured and nourished over the summer months without an ickle undergraduate in sight. But turning around the blustery corner of October, the Conflict of the Babies comes into view. I am the mother of a healthy PhD project, but in the early weeks of the Autumn term the teething of my new baby-child undergrads gets in the way of the less vocal thesis-toddler.

Most of us at some time or another, take on a teaching or demonstrating role during our PhD in order to earn a little extra cash and enhance our C.Vs. Genuinely, I believe most enjoy it. I do the majority of the time, although every October I resent the way it encroaches on the health of my thesis in the initial weeks. I have been teaching in the Spanish department over the past few years, and yearly the same situations arise. As required, I make myself available in my office for one hour a week so that undergraduates can come and seek help or Kleenex. Some shun the specific time that I offer, but many demand so much more than an hour. I have heard every excuse under the sun to avoid the 9-10a.m slot on Friday mornings, ranging from

the honest: 'I'll be too hung-over after going to Love Shack on Thursday' to the 'Sorry, I forgot we'd arranged to meet during your office hours but can I see you later this morning?' Some motherly instinct in me always stirs. Take my dealings with Frank for example, I wanted the fledging-fresher to be happy in his new environment, so benevolently allowed him the joy of a Michelmas perma-hangover and timetabled him in for the afternoon. However, having spent twenty minutes waiting for him to arrive, his grogginess means that it takes ninety minutes just to clarify a particular pronoun usage.... Celia is another little one who is having a few teething problems, I am certain she sent me her apologetic cancellation of our meeting (at five-past ten) from her bed via her Blackberry. All of which results in me wasting another sixty-five minutes of the day which would have been better spent nourishing baby-thesis rather than wasting my academic milk on ungrateful undergrads.

Spending time answering emails is another burden that befalls the post-natal PGR teacher. Having navigated their way to the first week's class without problem, the babies invariably struggle to find my office for the second seminar even though it is clearly indicated on the internet, on timetables around the department and in the module information they all have. Over half email me asking what the homework was, a further dozen ask if there is any extra



reading they can do. I point them in the direction of the turgid Butt & Benjamin book of Spanish Grammar to bolster their resources. Stephen has already read it twice, after a three hour discussion, he finally lets slip that he is actually a native Spanish speaker...Whilst Bruce is another one who emails me with a query which results in a lengthy discussion on the possible career-paths available to him with a B.A. Hons. Dunelm in Modern European Languages.

I have now come to the conclusion that this wasted time is simply down to fresher eagerness and naivety, as it inevitably peters out after three weeks. For the rest of the year I usually only have to answer sporadic emails and, thankfully, my babies do eventually learn the concept of 'office hours'. Of course, during those initial weeks I would have preferred to spend time with my embryonic brain-child thesis, who bears his abandonment well shoved to the back of my desk. However, upon reflection, helping undergraduates to find their feet in the first few weeks is invaluable for their enjoyment and enthusiasm, and I have to remind myself that I was in their position once, long long ago!

Life at the top by Prof. Geoffrey Thicket

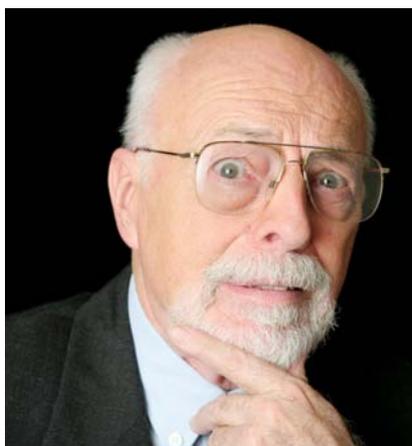
New Beginnings.....

It's the end of my first week at Royal Holloway University College (Outer) London - and now that my books are all unpacked my new study looks like home. I have a lovely view across the quad, and I don't mind too much that I'm very close to the bell tower even though all my shelves rattle on the stroke of every hour. As first weeks in new jobs go, it wasn't THAT bad. That is to say, it could have been far worse.

They are very efficient here at RHUC (O)L, and on Monday morning I had to attend my 'induction' (what a horrible word that is) and have my photograph taken for my new staff identity card. I am never at my best on Monday mornings, and unfortunately this Monday was no exception. I sneezed when the flash went off and the horrible little student temp charged with the job refused to take another. So I now have an identity card (which will run out in 2022) where I look remarkably like the Elephant Man!

Ah well, it can't be helped. Tuesday was disastrous in a slightly different way - I got horribly lost. This university has some very interesting buildings. Including two 1960s concrete monstrosities which were built in mirror image to each other. The only difference between the two buildings is that one has blue floors and the other red. If you happen to forget which building you are in (this must happen to other people apart from myself?) you can wander around for hours trying to find the seminar

room you are meant to be teaching in. A few students gave me strange looks as I marched up and down the corridors with my home-made map muttering 'red or blue? Red...or blue?'



It didn't give my new students the best impression of me, I must admit. By the time I arrived at this 'getting to know you' meeting I was a babbling wreck. I got all the students to introduce themselves. Another very mixed bunch. I have a student who's name I cannot spell or pronounce who comes from Outer Mongolia. He is very charming - mainly because the only word he seems to know is 'yes'. My Russian student is quite the opposite. Ivanka is tall and beautiful and seems to think that by agreeing to be my student she is doing me a great favour! She spent most of the meeting rattling her jewellery and talking on her gold-plated mobile phone.

I decided to set the students a very easy written assignment, so I could get an idea of their writing style before we begin official tutorials. I have to give my Mongolian student top marks for cheek. He turned in a very nicely written little essay. I liked it very much. It was only after a whisky and a little afternoon nap (my new office doesn't have a sofa so I woke up when I fell off my chair) that I realized the essay was one of mine! The stupid boy had handed in an essay plagiarized from MY OWN BOOK! If he's going to learn anything this year, it will have to be how to cheat in a more subtle way!

At least the other Professors seem to be friendly. Professor Coffin has the office next to mine. He's an archeologist, with office shelves that are full of dead things in jars and artefacts that look like they really might have been looted rather than legitimately acquired. I decided not to say anything about the Mummy he's got propped up in the corner. I don't mind where he got his 'finds', for he was very helpful when I set off all of the fire alarms in the building by accident. How was I to know we weren't allowed toasters in our studies? I get the impression I still have a lot to learn here!

Prof. Geoffrey Thicket,

RHUC (O) L

(with help from Kiri Bloom)

Writing up: taxing or just taxed?

Christopher Rice (University of East Anglia) offers some advice on financing that inevitable fourth year.....

I am a science postgraduate researcher and I have been 'officially' informed that the aim should be to complete my PhD within three years. When I mention this to seasoned post-doctorate researchers they smile at the suggestion and nod sagely to one another as if there is a collective understanding that this is in fact an impossibility. The question as to whether it is possible to balance the final year of a PhD between incessantly writing and endlessly completing experiments/research, while trying to fit in luxuries such as sleep and food, is a lengthy debate which could fill many articles.

So, after listening to many gleefully-told horror stories of PhD disasters, pale-faced and nauseous, I have more or less accepted the possibility (or probability) that my write-up may run over into a fourth year. This, in itself, is not a disaster and does provide me with the opportunity to extend my student lifestyle for just a little longer, albeit with no funding. Therein however lies the problem – I will not officially be a student but neither will I be starting a career. I will have fallen through the cracks of the system and will suffer from being “neither fish nor fowl” – and importantly, I won't be the only one!

This leaves a 'fourth year' researcher with two distinctly unappealing options during their write-up. Option one: balance a part-time job that is not particularly motivating, will inevitably cause the write up to

continue far longer than desired and will give rise to the following scenario: Imagine yourself being in full creative flow, and then having to suddenly shoot off in order to fit shoes, flip burgers or whatever, to make ends meet. This option hardly lends itself to producing a well-written thesis. The other alternative is just as unsavoury but has been suggested by many as an obvious solution.



Option two: 'sign on' for job-seekers allowance thus doing away with nasty taxpaying and instead claiming seemingly undeserved monies on the understanding that you must actively seek a job that is almost always unwanted during the final stages of the PhD.

One would hope that on this issue common-sense would prevail and that PGRs in the writing up year would not be punished through taxation but would neither be rewarded through benefits. Instead, could PGRs not just be left to write up their thesis and then take their new qualification and experience out into the 'real world' and be subjected to the full force of Her Majesty's Treasury?

If you are starting a new science PhD and are funded by certain research councils, you will be funded for four years including a full year's paid write-up time. This seems to have been fuelled by a grudging acceptance that science PhD students need the full three years in order to generate data and publications while attempting to hone transferable skills and become a well-rounded researcher.

So, with the problem sorted for new PGRs where does that leave the students who have fallen through the cracks? After consulting the local Graduate Studies Office for the University of East Anglia it turns out that some local authorities accept that there is a problem and are willing to grant local tax exemption including council tax if the student can obtain a letter explaining that he/she is still effectively studying full-time and can get this signed by their supervisor.

So, if you are approaching the end of your PhD and it looks as though you will continue into another year, don't worry you are not alone and there are systems in place to make sure it won't be a nightmare situation. If in doubt ask people in the know: fellow students, recent doctorates, the people at your graduate studies office and the local councillors in the town hall. Hopefully, a sensible solution can be found to ease the financial pressures.

That'll just leave you with the thesis to worry about then!

Dear Dr Flo...

My problem is purely financial. When I started my PhD in biochemistry about 18 months ago, I was on a studentship from the university for one year and this provided me with a contribution towards my living expenses. However, I have spent the past 6 months borrowing money from my parents and the bank and have run up a huge overdraft. I'm now in the situation where the bank won't lend me any more money, my parents have helped me as much as they can afford to do and I am living on virtually nothing. Obviously I am looking at getting a job but I work 12 hours a day, 6 days a week in the lab in order to keep on top of my research and I can't see how I would fit a job around doing my PhD. Although I said this problem was purely financial, I am getting desperate – I am thinking of quitting my PhD even though I love my research. Many of the friends I was at school and university with are earning good salaries and not working as many hours as I am and I am feeling extremely resentful. Yours Skint and Resentful.

Dear Skint and Resentful,

I can understand how resentful and desperate you must be starting to feel and it is important for you to recognise that, even though your other friends are earning good salaries, amongst the PhD community you are certainly not alone. And this situation is now extending to undergraduates with the recent introduction of tuition fees.

There are several issues bound up in your letter to me – firstly there are your feelings of isolation and desperation which need to be taken seriously. Without wishing to over-egg the pudding, financial problems play a large part in contributing to depression. This is generally a result of the person concerned not talking to anyone who can help them sort the situation out, so you need to recognise that you have taken an important first step in writing this letter to me.

There are a number of places you can go to seek professional financial advice. Your bank may be able to provide you with advice from a financial adviser – this service is often free to customers and many of these financial advisers are independent of the bank. The advice and guidance will be worth listening to but don't allow yourself to get sucked into doing anything you don't want to do- remember these people work

on commission!

Two other places to go for financial advice are your local Citizens Advice Bureau and the Student Services section of your university. The CAB will offer impartial financial advice and they won't try to sell you loans.

Your Student Services centre should be able to provide you with someone who can talk to you about financial options which are specifically available for students, some of which may be only available at your institution, e.g. hardship funds or special bursaries. I would advise that you start with an appointment here and then move onto the CAB and bank financial advisers as necessary.

If you feel that taking on paid work whilst you finish your PhD then there are a few things that you might need to consider. Firstly, you will certainly not be the only PhD student in your institution who is balancing a part time job with their studies. This is an increasingly common situation and even though PhD students often receive a stipendiary, they still find that it is not enough to live on, particularly if they are based in London. If you feel that you need to follow this route then my advice is that you try to take on work that is based at the university where you are studying. It is far easier to work in

an environment that understands what a PhD is, why you are doing one and what is required in order to finish it. Secondly, if you are working at the university then you are not adding on any additional commuting time or expenses. Your department may be able to help you by giving you additional teaching/demonstrating responsibilities which usually pay well and will have the added benefit of looking good on your CV. If you find that you have no alternative but to seek work outside of the university, then just be careful to ensure that it does not completely eat into your research time- you may also wish to consider changing your registration to part-time if you feel this is necessary. It is also important to involve your supervisor in all of this as much as possible, remember they are there to help you through the PhD, whatever hurdles may arise!



Do you have a problem that you would like to discuss with Dr Flo? If so, email drflo@vitae.ac.uk

Home sweet home: PhD and the parents.

Ed Packard (LSE) of the joys and pitfalls of living rent free with the 'rents....

History has often been changed by awkward trios working together in confined spaces: for example, Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin thrashing out the shape of the post-1945 world at Yalta. Less spectacularly, cold war has also broken out between me and my parents, owing to my continued inability to finish my PhD and 'get a real job.' Parental criticism would not normally be a problem, but the three of us are currently living in the same house. Why? It seemed a good idea a year ago...

I was in the third year of my PhD, running out of money and constantly distracted by the many diversions of city life. I figured that moving back to a small village in Suffolk would remove temptation and allow me to focus exclusively on my work. No more hour-long coffee breaks with friends, a lack of parties and fewer hungover mornings. I'd reached the writing-up stage: what better way to stimulate creativity than a countryside retreat?

Yet while living with your parents can easily destroy your social life, I have found that even the countryside offers unlimited scope for procrastination. A walk with the dog can turn into an afternoon in the pub, observing the quirks of my fellow villagers over a few ales. I spend my weekends cycling around obscure hamlets and old market towns. Living on a farm also presents its own unique experiences: for example, I have found myself knee-deep in mud

at one o'clock in the morning helping to extract calves from stubborn cows.

There is currently much talk of the 'boomerang generation'. This consists of those twentysomethings who have spent time at university before moving back with their parents when confronted with the burgeoning costs of the 'real world'. Even if this has become a statistically more popular option, I'd not recommend it for those who have little or no income to contribute to the arrangement. My parents work hard for their money and I'm (quite literally) eating into it. Moreover, my younger sister has a well-paid and respectable job and makes no such demands. I volunteered to do some arbitrary tasks – walking the dog, washing up, making cups of tea – to contribute something without taking too much time away from my study, but how many cups of tea equate to a month of rent? Along with the guilt comes a sense of worthlessness: I feel like a leech, a freeloader, a parasite. Given the usual worries about the quality and value of my work, this adds up to a rather heady cocktail of self-doubt.

Prior to moving home, I'd always got on well with my parents. "They're more like friends!" I would lie to my actual friends. Yet, while valuable and wonderful in many ways, parents are perhaps not the best people to turn to for emotional support during a PhD.



Mine believe that people of my age (26) should have steady jobs and a spouse. Instead, I am wedded to my research for which I get paid nothing. Neither of my parents could tell you the title of my thesis, let alone what I'm trying to argue. The only enquiries they will make are "Is it nearly finished?" and "How many words have you written today?" These are well-meant questions but ultimately frustrating because the answers are always "No" and "Not enough", usually followed by sulky silence. It is a complete contrast to living and interacting with other PhD students, who are much more likely to empathise with obstacles and frustrations that can seem petty to 'normal' people.

On reflection I shouldn't be ungrateful. One disadvantage of postgraduate study is that you can become very self-absorbed and I haven't really considered this from my parents' point of view. They willingly allowed me to move back and interrupt their lives, they even re-decorated the attic so I could have a study. I do not think moving home has been the easy option we all thought it would be a year ago, but I'm sure we'll miss each other when it's all over...

Hospital Research: to boldly go where no sane psychologist has gone before?

Victoria Maskell (Durham) gets her scrubs and gloves on.....

I think most would agree that the fundamental aim of a PhD is to be innovative and creative and to contribute new understandings within our relevant disciplines. Therefore, when I was given the opportunity to work on a particularly inventive project in a hospital setting I jumped at the chance. Visions of me acting out scenes from *ER* and *Casualty* circled in my brain. It felt almost virtuous to be working in a field that didn't involve asking undergrads to fill in questionnaires about things that they already knew the "right answers" to (one of my earlier "great ideas" that I would prefer to forget). Unfortunately, I can safely say that the reality was far removed from the red carpet research lifestyle I had expected. On my journey to psychological enlightenment, I came across more pitfalls than I could have ever envisaged, but like any good fairy tale, there was a happy ending. So if you are all sitting comfortably, I will begin.

My journey started with a word I now shudder to say... ETHICS. A process that I would seriously consider pulling my finger nails off to avoid. It is there for an invaluable reason, but it appears that you need a degree in advanced form completion before you can put in a preliminary application. After 12 months, yes 12 MONTHS, I succeeded. During this time I became a Facebook pro, got cleaning the whole house down to a 30 minute job and constantly re-arranged my

wardrobe into seasonal colours and fabrics. My advice here would be to grit your teeth and bare it. I had invaluable help from my supervisors and consultant, without whom I would still be wallowing in a pit of forms, revisions and new versions of protocol.

Right, ethics done, I was ready to go – questionnaires printed in triplicate, shiny new identity badge and my mega-pixelled camera (paid for on research budget) ready to roll. Cue for another obstacle to rear its ugly head – the curse of the new girl. For weeks I wandered the ward not seeing a familiar face and feeling horribly out of place. There is no sense of continuity in a hospital, every ward is different. The one I worked on had a staff of 70 nurses on a mixture of day and night shifts. This meant I was constantly having to introduce myself and my study, and trying to avoid the looks that silently said "who the heck is she?" Needless to say, I felt like an intruder for what seemed like months. Again, I persevered and things did get better! I even wore scrubs on some occasions, something I was stupidly excited about.

Obstacle number three: why is it people can be behaving perfectly normally and as soon as you reveal a camera they freeze (think Chandler from *Friends*) or become very suspicious? I understand that some people are camera shy but this seems to be intensified in a hospital setting. In this case it is best to reassure the subject

in question that you are not checking their make-up skills, how many grey hairs they have or if they have kept up their manicure appointments.

Cameras aside, the biggest problem is being in the right place at the right time. I have tried different strategies; sitting on the ward day in day out – not to be recommended unless you can both tolerate the constant smell of baby poo and can make yourself invisible at busy times, (which frankly is 24 hours non-stop in a hospital). Be prepared to take research articles (otherwise known as fashion magazines) with you while you wait, but also try to leave the nurses your number so they can call you if plans change. I have had many an hour's journey saved by very helpful nurses!

I have decided that hospital research from a psychological perspective is both essential and feasible if you are prepared to overcome certain obstacles. And, although it was no *ER* drama, my experience of hospitals was probably better than most- I survived without contracting MSRA and gained some excellent research in the process!





A Rough Guide to.....getting started

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You have managed the interview process, arranged the supervisor, obtained the visa and negotiated departmental regulations...phew; you can finally start your PhD! Here's a quick guide to getting started with your research and how to tackle initial problems and panics.

A fresh start

The beginning of your PhD is a good time to make a fresh start... Take stock, correct previous inefficiencies and get ready to hit the ground running. Small things can make the difference such as getting into the habit of backing up material or maintaining a system of filing. Time management skills are also essential if you want to control your workload. Concentrate on the things you want to achieve, and try to avoid spending days in an unfocused frenzy of activity. Finally be proactive. Whether it's contacting your supervisor or joining the student forum, being proactive will provide much needed structure and help you settle into the new environment. Make an effort to get to know the non-academic staff and existing doctoral students on your programme. They're the ones

who know how things really work in the department.

Find your feet.....and a desk to put them under

Unfortunately, despite best efforts on your part, some things may not go to plan when you begin. In the first year of my PhD I moved desk three times, found myself without a computer or phone line for three months and seemed to be continually justifying why my papers were on the desk of an honorary staff member that hadn't been seen in the department for years..... It soon became evident that obtaining space and facilities would be the first hurdle on my academic yellow brick road.

Work space is crucial: you can be left feeling out of sorts psychologically if you have no place in the department physically. Try to find out what you are officially entitled to. If you feel that arrangements aren't suitable, talk to your supervisor. From desks to paperclips, it is useful to work out where you stand and what is available to you.

Develop your internal boss

When I embarked on my PhD one of my friends commented

how lucky I was to be my own boss....interesting idea I pondered. I now had no boss to peek over my shoulder or to tap their watch when I rushed into work late. However, I soon realised that I had to consider my PhD like a full time job and recruit myself as my own boss. Development of an internal boss can be vital for self motivation. Work hard and play hard! High productivity combined with well deserved breaks should stop your PhD pervading every aspect of your life and keep you motivated for the years ahead.

Small fish in a big sea blues....

To get onto a PhD programme you must be hard working, dedicated and most importantly of all (bashfulness aside) quite intelligent..... In your first year you will realise that other people are not just as clever as you, if not,...wait for it....cleverer. This realisation will hit you at the same time as the 'I'm not clever enough for this' panic. Instead of feeling inadequate, why not appreciate the fantastic resources and people available. Being surrounded by academics who share the passion can be fantastically inspiring and can remind you why you started this PhD thing in the first place.

The end bit...

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See our author guidelines at www.grad.ac.uk/gradbritain/. Issue 7 will be published on 1st March 2009. Next deadline is 1st February 2009.

* Please note that the asterix indicates a pseudonym.

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