

GRADBritain

A magazine for and by postgraduate researchers in the United Kingdom

Everything is different,
but nothing has changed!

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Welcome to a new look GRADBritain (check out the colour scheme), a new Editor-in Chief (myself), and the launch of Vitae, the new organisation that builds on the work of UK GRAD (see below for full details).

This summer issue of GRADBritain is a fun-packed array of goodies: on the practicalities of doing a PhD, we have a piece on the problems of dual funding, some pointers from Simon Lambe on doing a part time PhD, as well as the personal reflections of Dr Andrew Hill offering some worthwhile advice on completing the thesis. In a discussion on the politics of higher education, a student from Manchester tells us how the changes in the university fiscal structure and a shift to business style of management are forcing students at Manchester to mobilise and speak out. Paul Wicks, our former editor, has provided one last swansong before leaving the world of academia with a piece on turning human anxieties into productive emotions. Finally our new deputy editor, Lorna Taylor, in the first article in a series entitled 'Rough Guide to doing a PhD' discusses the all important student-supervisor relationship. Fear not, we also have our regular features including our resident agony aunt, Dr Flo, Top Ten, and the fictional ramblings of Prof. Geoffrey Thickett at Bookback College, Happy Reading.

Liza

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NEW PROGRAMME ANNOUNCEMENT

Vitae

The Vitae Programme builds on the work of the UK GRAD Programme and the UK Higher Education Researcher Development Group (UKHERD). Its vision is for the UK to be world-class in supporting the professional development of researchers and researcher careers. Vitae works with universities and other employers, research funders, national and international organisations, government, and researchers themselves.

For further information about specific offers and the range of our activities please visit the new Vitae website at www.vitae.ac.uk

Dedication is what you need....

Simon Lambe (Surrey) on overcoming the barriers of part time study.....

You may not realise it, but over two-thirds of PhD students are not only studying part time, but are paying for it completely out of their own pocket. I include myself in this group as a student in the second year of my PhD in history. Whilst I can't offer advice on completing, I wish to offer some personal reflections on how to cope with the process. The immediate challenge I face as a self-funded part timer is lack of money. Unlike full time students, part timers are not entitled to the same benefits such as discount travel or council-tax exemption. However, these constraints have forced me to think quite entrepreneurially about how to raise funds. Thus I shall soon be auctioning a signed football shirt from Fulham Football Club with all proceeds going to the 'Simon Lambe Academic fund'! I would advise taking a similarly imaginative approach to raising funds, investigate what is out there in terms of additional grants and bursaries. The *Grants Register* is a good place to start.

I have been fortunate to gain employment as a research assistant for academics. This has provided me with sound editing, writing, and research skills, as well as something to put on my CV. I also work part time in a university library which is not without its benefits, including free access to their stock withdrawals! Try to work for an employer who will be sympathetic to you doing a PhD. University administration is a useful one, with the added benefits of a free PC and printing

facilities! If you do end up working within the institute where you are registered, it is also worth finding out if they offer staff members a reduction on fees, as in the case of the University of London. If you are paying the fees yourself, I would recommend you register part time and pay part time rates, even if you intend on finishing within three years. You can make the same demands on your supervisor/ institute but without the additional cost.

Part time study requires a minimum of three years and nine months to complete, which I have set as my unofficial deadline. In fact I have come to think of myself as full-timer in disguise! Yet this also has its drawbacks; evenings and weekends are taken up with research, indeed, the notion of free time is completely alien to me.

As a part-timer it can be easy to feel dislocated from the wider academic community so I try to attend as many conferences, postgraduate events and give as many seminar papers as time permits. At the very least, such activities remind me why I am actually doing a PhD.

Finally, don't be ashamed to put that you are a part time student on your CV; present it as a strength rather than a weakness. My supervisor told me recently that part time study was good training for a job in academia as it required the same mix of multi-tasking, solid time management and absolute dedication to your subject!



Top Ten:

Benefits of conferences:

- 1 The mess in your lodgings gets tidied away magically by little elves every time you leave.
- 2 Free coffee all day long.
- 3 Now it's not binge-drinking, it's 'networking'.
- 4 Get to meet other PhD students who have a worse supervisor than you.
- 5 Opportunity for smug Facebook status updates e.g. '.....is contemplating the Rhine...'
- 6 On-going potential to scoff, snipe, and snigger about competitors' work.
- 7 Get to dress up like someone with a real job.
- 8 Socially acceptable to geek out for several days.
- 9 Get to add to your collection of delegate badges.
- 10 Ideal time to absorb future blackmail information on senior people in your field.

Funding at what cost?

Kate Seymour Mead (University of West England) on the dual funding balancing act.....

Picture the scene: you're coming to the end of your masters. You love your topic. You've identified a further couple of studies you could do. Your supervisor has dropped subtle hints that you could succeed at a PhD, and that she would be prepared to continue supervising you. You've maxed out your credit card, spent your overdraft and are avoiding the 'when are you getting a real job' line of interrogation from your parents.

Then.... Ms Business comes along with a proposition: 'We're interested in your line of research, and have a certain problem to address. If you look at our problem, we'll fund you AND pay your expenses'. At last, hurrah, riches beyond the dreams of Croesus (or at least a twelve grand stipend). You might not be able to buy yourself a house, but at least you can afford a new pencil case, the occasional sandwich and an annual conference. Even better, someone has taken an interest in your research, contributing hugely to your self esteem, and you're demonstrating a track record in attracting funding before you've started your work.

You sign up immediately, without meeting Ms Business's colleagues, reading a contract, or discussing intellectual property. You can't wait to crack on. Nine months down the line however, things aren't looking quite so rosy. It turns out there's no such thing as a free lunch after all. Your industry partner doesn't understand the

academic requirements. Your academic supervisor thinks you spend too much time being a skivvy for Ms Business. What looked like a great collaboration now feels like a bit of a burden. You're no longer sure you want to work for Ms Business, and your topic seems to be getting further away from you as it increasingly meets their needs. Your self esteem is back to rock bottom.

This is very much what happened to Carla. Her funding came from a research organisation with an industry sponsor. It wasn't until Carla attended a networking event with other PhD students that she realised working a day a week for the sponsor was unusual. The situation was exacerbated by the industry sponsor expecting a marketable product at the end of the PhD, and seeming not to understand that this was not going to turn Carla into Dr Carla. Working relations became strained, with Carla having to spend a lot of time balancing her commitments to her industry partner and to her academic work. Fortunately, as Carla became more confident in the direction her research was taking this relationship became easier to manage, although conflicts in expectations were evident throughout.

Nicholas had funding from the same group, but with a public sector sponsor, who again, had certain expectations of the direction the research would take. Nicholas' problem was not with competing pressures,

however, rather than with trying to get certain staff in the sponsoring organisation to take an interest. Even worse, Nicholas seemed something of a poison chalice, with his industry supervisor emigrating, the supervisor at a collaborating university retiring, and an immediate supervisor going on long term sick leave. Nicholas is concerned what further fates may befall his remaining colleagues.

It isn't all bad news: Georgina, for example, has had an excellent experience with her team. She is well supported and extremely well resourced by her governmental sponsor, and expects to be guaranteed a job with them at the end of her studies. Her supervisory team works well together, and the sponsor is at arms' length, but well engaged. Needless to say, she does not have to spend days on 'client liaison' and is able to get on with her research.

So what is the moral of this story? It is simply that funding can come at a cost. By accepting funding from a sponsor, you are inadvertently giving an outside party some input into your research. However input into, doesn't have to mean control over, and with careful management, some prior planning and a good deal of negotiation, it should be possible to develop an excellent collaborative arrangement. There might not be such thing as a free lunch, but sometimes the price is worth paying.

Reigniting the Spirit of '68

Paul Smith (University of Manchester) on the internal changes within the University of Manchester and the possible implications for postgraduate students.....

This year the University of Manchester will be saying goodbye to one of Britain's leading feminist historians, Sheila Rowbotham, who will be retiring at the age of 65. This retirement, however, is not of her own choosing. Despite wishing to stay, the University has refused to extend her contract into the next academic year. Worryingly, Rowbotham is not an isolated case. Other academics, including the equally prestigious Terry Eagleton, are also being refused extension on their contracts. As PhD students, especially non-historians, why should we be concerned that these professors are being forced into retirement, especially as our generation are finding it increasingly difficult to find jobs?

Yet, if we look beyond our immediate interest, we must consider how the Rowbotham case represents wider changes going on in our universities; that is the transition from public institutions to ones run on private business model- a change which I believe will be to the detriment of all our careers.

In the case of Manchester, its policy towards its professors must be seen in the context of more substantial changes. Since the merger with UMIST (Manchester Institute of Science and Technology) in 2004, the university has implemented a strict fiscal policy. Buildings have been sold off, student services reduced, and staff have been refused extension on their tenure. Yet whilst the University has been implementing these

cuts, they have also been splashing out on new flagship buildings that have restricted access for students. Money is also being channelled into funding 'celebrity academics', most notoriously Martin Amis, who according to reports, is paid £80,000 for just 28 hours work a year. Whilst not disputing Mr Amis' qualities as a writer, his



Manchester salary could alternatively fund four postdocs salary for one year- how does his appointment therefore demonstrate 'good business sense' from a world class research university like Manchester? The Manchester example represents a worrying trend in England's universities, where the adoption of a business style of management may lead to cost savings, but ultimately fails to benefit the student body and the research community at large. Universities should be centres of learning and research, not institutions subject to targets and profit.

However, opposition and protest from both staff and students to these changes are increasing. On the 22nd April there was a building occupation in Manchester University which involved

over 300 students, organised by a group calling themselves 'Reclaim the Uni.'

This inspired a similar occupation in Southampton University, signalling widespread student discontent not seen since the introduction of tuition fees. We have also set up a Facebook group called 'Save Sheila Rowbotham' to keep students and supporters informed of the ongoing negotiations concerning the Rowbotham case.

Such initiatives indicate a willingness by students to get involved and more importantly counters the view that this generation are simply self interested customers, generally apathetic to the wider issues going on in higher education. Indeed we see ourselves as reigniting the spirit of '68, forty years after those great student demonstrations. Getting our voices heard, letting the university bureaucrats know that we will not sit back and allow such changes to fundamentally alter our public institutions for the next generation of students and academics. We must assert that knowledge should not be a commodity, students should not be viewed as customers and academics treated as economic units.

GRADBritain did contact the University of Manchester for a response to this article but they were not available to comment.

Life at the Top....by Professor Geoffrey Thickett

Time to move on.....

I never thought I would be writing this, but today is my last day at Bookback- my beloved Bookback. The College has been my Alma mater, and indeed my home (don't tell anyone!) since my undergraduate days, but I've been tempted away by a job offer just too good to turn down. Royal Hollandaise University College (outer) London (known as the easily remembered RHUC(O)L) has offered me a fellowship! They have finally have given me the academic recognition that Bookback seemed so unwilling to bestow. And not just any fellowship, but the Fawkes-Mallory Fellowship itself! I'll not only get a better wage, but a slightly larger office, and a Green robe with a matching ermine-trimmed velvet hat to wear at formal occasions! I think I'll cut quite a dash walking around in that, and there's nothing in the rules to say I can't wear it whenever I like.

But all this new glamour aside, I shall still be very sorry to leave Bookback. I have finished packing up my office now. I found some very interesting things hidden behind my bookshelves and under my desk, including a whole unopened bottle of whisky and a shopping list from 1973! I unfortunately also found out that the books had become a structural element of the room. When I packed my last stack of books, the part of ceiling it had supported fell down. Professor Trellis was not well pleased, but I do think it was rather hasty of

her to 'bagsie' my office the minute I mentioned I was leaving.

'Geoffrey, there are some very suspect stains!' she proclaimed, following me around MY office with one of those alarming faces and a bottle of disinfectant spray. 'Looking at that couch, anyone would think you had been living on it for years and dribbling in your sleep! The whole place smells of whisky and cheese



sandwiches (what an accurate nose that woman has)....and the DUST! When was the last time this room was cleaned??' I didn't bother to explain that I had paid the cleaner NOT to come in! One unfortunate down-side to all this is that I'll have to make a whole new set of academic contacts and of course pay off or befriend a new collection of University staff. It's taken me years to talk the caretaker into doing my laundry for a small fee. The cleaner very kindly made me a goodbye cake. I think she

is sorry I am am leaving, she will be losing a significant top-up to her wages when she can no longer rely on my 'protection money'. But I'm sure she will easily find ways to blackmail Prof. Trellis too, maybe by threatening to expose her addiction to spray polish and her obsessive-compulsive filing.

I had hoped that by moving jobs I might be able to leave some of my more challenging PhD students, but alas, it is not to be. Bookback gave me a wonderful reference, but only on the condition that all my students (even Marvis Bunion-Smythe) move with me. Mavis just had her 93rd birthday, but apart from the fact she smells of wet dog and mothballs, and needs a zimmer to get around, she's as fit as fiddle and excited about the move. I hope RHUC(O)L library has been warned about her door-jamming abilities and tendency to holler loudly and drink neat gin in the quiet study area.

As for the other students, I've heard that Tree may have already set up home in the surrounding woodland on the RHUC(O)L campus. Really, I don't know how I end up with such strange students. Let's hope a new semester at a new university might bring me some nice normal ones!

Prof. Geoffrey Thickett, Head of Dept. (with help from Kiri Bloom)

The Psychopathology of Success

Paul Wicks (King's College, London) on turning that doubt inside out...

At some point, everyone with a psychology degree has sat down and 'diagnosed' their friends with every psychiatric condition known to medicine. It's very easy, because so many of the conditions we describe as being pathological are often just extreme forms of perfectly healthy traits that are present in all of us. So how come we haven't evolved out of these distressing feelings? One possibility is that certain negative emotions like depression, obsessive tendencies, or paranoia might actually be useful. I'm not in any way trying to minimise the distress when these emotions manifest themselves into full-blown mental health conditions, but I am interested in the way that many successful people turn negative emotions into more helpful attributes.

Turning it to your advantage:

Depression

A persistent state of negative thoughts about the self, low mood and physical symptoms such as weight loss or insomnia.

Realism: When you go for that job interview should you assume that they'll be blown away by your natural charm and winning CV? In truth, having the occasional negative thought about one's self can give you some perspective and motivate you to work harder at something. The key is not to be

universally positive or negative, but to plan for both contingencies. Get yourself out of the habit of assuming everything will be fine and get into the habit of being prepared to deal with a bad situation.

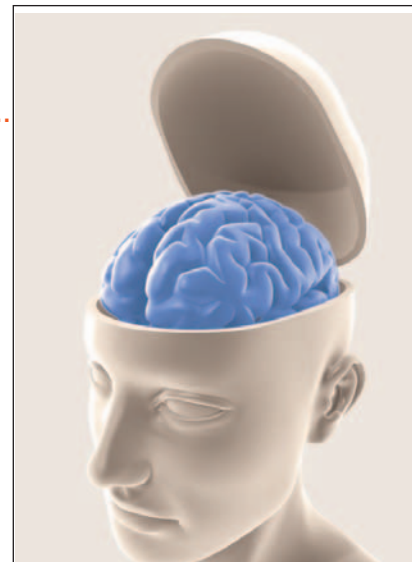
Mania

A mental state found in bipolar disorder, characterised by excessive energy, euphoria, grandiosity, creativity, and goal directed behaviour.

Drive: Surely the pinnacle of human evolution is our ability to make rational, logical, balanced decisions, right? Wrong. Rationalists are the people in the meeting saying 'yes, that's all well and good but...' and then give you all the reasons why something can't be done. People with mania (or hypomania) frequently have flights of fancy about how they can do something amazing, change the world, or gain great recognition for something. They don't listen to the 'yes, but' brigade, they just get on with it. This doesn't mean saying 'yes' to everything, it means doing things you believe in, regardless of what other people tell you. Sometimes you need a bit of grandiosity to do something great.

Anxiety

A physically unpleasant fear reaction motivated by worry, intrusive thoughts and perceived stressors in the environment.



Responsibility: Which is more motivating: having 'Dr' in front of your name or failing your PhD and having to tell everyone about it? I'm guessing the latter! A number of contributors of GRADBritain have used the expression: 'Feel the fear'; it's good advice. A bit of anxiety can keep you on track, even if you need to generate it yourself. When you set a deadline, hold yourself to it, even if you think it is unrealistic. Don't let the deadline slip, work yourself harder instead! If you're having trouble motivating yourself with the positives, write down on a piece of paper all the potential negatives that could occur if you don't reach your goal.

Addiction

A recurring compulsion to engage in an activity despite potentially harmful consequences.

Dedication: Which bit of your job gives you a real 'buzz'? Getting a paper submitted? A sincere thank you from a patient? You need to get yourself

hooked on the moments like this and willing sacrifice other parts of your life to get there. You can focus on your work-life balance once you've cured cancer or written your first book. In the meantime, clear your social calendar and focus on getting as many of those 'buzz' moments as you can every week.

Egotism

A pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and a lack of empathy with others.

Pride: It is a curious habit (particularly in Britain) to habitually defer to others, or let them take the credit. But remember, nobody is ever going to market you as well as you can. So, insist you get first author's position on research you've done the work for, stand up and ask questions at conferences, write letters to journals, do some public engagement with the media, and make sure that you have an established presence on the internet so that when someone puts you into Google they immediately find out just how productive and great you are.

Obsessive tendencies

Intrusive and unpleasant thoughts that cause individuals to repeat unnecessary thoughts, actions or rituals.



Perfectionism: Journal editors are funny folk. You could have blown your field wide open with your latest insight, but if you accidentally use the wrong style of formatting, there's a good chance they'll get quite sniffy about it. Similarly, if your supervisor is a nit-picker for grammar then you'll feel frustrated that you're always chasing commas and subjunctive clauses instead of intellectual discoveries. So declare yourself a perfectionist. Learn, really seek to find out how to proof read your work. Read your work out loud, every word, and look at each word individually, don't just skim over each sentence. Take away people's excuses to find fault with irrelevant details by making sure they're perfect every time.

Paranoia

Unfounded beliefs that one is being persecuted, monitored, or conspired against.

Discretion: Did you hear the story about that PhD student at that conference one time? Yes, I imagine you did. So did his supervisors, his friends, his seminar group, and some members of his family. The fact is, research is a fairly small world and you have no way of knowing who knows who. For all their intellectual trappings, academics are notorious gossips! So if you feel like having a rant about your supervisors, don't do it in the canteen, you never know who may be listening.

As they say, discretion is being able to raise your eyebrow instead of your voice.....



Do We Really Need 'Career Development'?

Ian James Kidd (Durham) on how to market yourself in the job market...

As a PhD comes to an end and the inevitable search for a job looms on the horizon, more and more of one's academic time will likely be spent on what might be called 'career development'. Universities often hold training courses for this sort of thing: 'how to write an academic CV' or 'Publications: publish or perish' and so on. Career development includes everything that you need to do to move successfully from being a diligent post-graduate researcher to a tenured academic.

Academics after all, aren't just researchers and teachers, these days, they are also administrators and accountants with extensive bureaucratic demands being made of them. As Hobbes might have said 'it's a war out there' and aspiring post grads need to work hard to get jobs amidst fierce competition in an increasingly aggressive professional arena. In real terms, then, career development in all its forms, can make the difference between the good postgraduate who gets a job and one who doesn't. So, as much as it might seem like a symptom of the fastidious slogan-hungry culture of our post-Blair society, it really is something that matters.

In my own case, at least, this wasn't something I'd really thought about. Much of my own academic planning involved questions about my research rather than planning for the inevitable job search. Initially my ideas about this were rather naive: one writes a thesis, perhaps a few publications,

some teaching experience, and enthusiastic references from the supervisor. This view, I now realise, is hopelessly unrealistic. Universities and departments are scrupulous and discerning employers. It's not enough for a postgrad to be good at what they do, if what they do can't be sold and presented in a manner attractive to a department with particular research interests and teaching needs.

Remember your CV should reflect the particular job/institution to which you are applying as much as it reflects you! This isn't to say that duplicity and a certain Machiavellian grit are what one needs to get ahead. It's simply the case that getting an academic job isn't as simple as one being good at what one does, we need to be able to sell ourselves in the right way.

There are other benefits to career development. The clearest is that it really does help an aspiring postgraduate to think critically and clearly about their research, teaching and experience. It's one thing to look at these in an academic context- in terms of one's research project- but quite another to see them in a professional context as a department advertising for a lectureship will consider. Planning will also identify your strengths, and show you what you need to expand on; does your teaching correlate with your research? Do you have excellent publications but minimal administrative experience? Are the subjects you can teach ones commonly



required by undergraduate syllabuses? Career development will help you understand what you need to do to become an attractive candidate.

These remarks hopefully show that there is an important difference between an effective postgraduate researcher and an efficient tenured academic. On these terms, then, career development isn't a needless exercise in speculative narcissism or an indulgent egocentrism, but an important aspect of one's successful advance into academic life. The difference between a good postgraduate, and the good postgraduate who gets a job, might not simply be down to high quality teaching or research, but to their ability to design and manage their skills and advantages in a way that others, perhaps, do not. On these terms, 'career development'- onerous as it might sound- might just be what makes that crucial difference.

Dear Dr Flo...

I am a final year, part time PhD student in the social sciences. I am 45 yrs old, and started a PhD to aid an already successful career in management. When I started I was designated an excellent supervisor but unfortunately in my second year my supervisor left for a post abroad. After that point things started to rapidly downhill, I wasn't assigned a new supervisor for six months despite me pestering the department. I was eventually given an interim one, who unfortunately doesn't have any expertise in my field and, although willing, cannot give me the direction I need. I am now in the seventh year of my PhD and need to finish, but I just don't see how this is possible without a fixed supervisor who knows my field and is able to evaluate my work as I reach the concluding stages of my research. I don't want to make a formal complaint or rock the boat, I just want to finish my PhD. Any advice would be appreciated.

Angry and Upset.

Dear Angry and Upset,

This is a very difficult situation and one which I entirely sympathise. Sadly there are occasions, when PhD students (particularly part time students), tend to get forgotten when a member of staff leaves a department. This said, most universities have a code of practice which state that a student, who has recently lost their supervisor, should be assigned a new one. The problem occurs, as your situation testifies, when there isn't anyone else within the department with the relevant expertise. In this situation, the university should provide an internal supervisor with experience of the institution's regulations and processes, and an external supervisor from another university with the appropriate expertise.

Your comments about not wishing to make a formal complaint are familiar. Many students are reluctant to speak out formally when something goes wrong; ultimately they need the institution's help and support in order to pass the thesis and therefore feel that making a complaint would create a difficult and uncomfortable situation. This said, however, if an institution has contravened its own guidelines then you are well within your rights to make a complaint and still get the support in order to finish your PhD.

There is, as the old adage goes, more than one way to skin a cat and I think that there is more than one way to make a 'complaint' and still get what you want; to complete your PhD. I think that your best approach would be a staged offensive.

Firstly, you should arrange a meeting with the tutor in your school/department who is in charge of postgraduates. Explain the situation clearly and make the point that you want a new supervisor as quickly as possible. Highlight the areas where the department has failed to meet the institution's own code of practice, and explain that whilst you don't wish to make a formal complaint, you may be left no other option unless the matter is resolved satisfactorily and quickly. Be pleasant (not threatening or angry), acknowledging the difficulties but highlighting the responsibilities of the department to you as one of their students.

If this doesn't yield results, then you need to repeat the same process but by working your way up the institution's hierarchy. Universities are generally hierarchical institutions and in order to get things done, you need to play the game and make sure that you do not go over somebody's head. Your university's hierarchy will



probably go something like this: Head of Graduate studies; Head of Department; Dean; Head of School; Registry; Vice-Chancellor. By the time that you get to the academic registrar, you are in the realms of having to make a formal complaint so if you don't want to do this, it is worth resolving it before it gets to this stage. You may also find it useful to contact the Graduate school central to the university, to ask for their advice and if they can provide you with someone to mediate in meetings if necessary. This can be still be kept at a relatively informal level.

On another note, before you do any of this, do familiarise yourself with the institution's and department's code of practice and complaints procedure so that you feel comfortable with the process you choose to take.

Best of luck,
Dr Flo

Send your PhD woes to:
drflo@grad.ac.uk

PhD Bound and Binded

Dr Andrew Hill (Open University) offers his personal reflections on overcoming expectations and getting it done...

Whilst the subjects of the PhDs people are working on of course vary enormously, one thing hopefully unites us all: getting finished. (I say 'hopefully' as when I was doing my PhD, more than ten years ago, I did meet a few people who made me wonder whether they had any intention of finishing!)

I don't think it's too much of a caricature to say that amongst PhD students a typical conception of a thesis runs something along the lines of: it should present the author's more or less triumphant entrance into the academic world, establish them as a significant scholar in the field, and should be the most important piece of work they'll produce. And whilst at this point in one's fledgling academic career all of these things may seem to be the case, with the benefit of hindsight, I not only doubt their validity, I wonder if these type of notions don't add to the already considerable pressures of completing a thesis.

Don't get me wrong. The PhD should be about carrying out research on a scale you've not previously experienced. It should be about developing one's ideas and presenting a piece of original research. And it does still present a significant rite of passage- from student to academic. Yet, in terms of getting the PhD done, I think it is important to see the PhD for what it is- or what it has become.

Partly this insight is hard won from personal experience. I can still remember the moment now. I was towards the end of my

PhD looking at some recently completed theses by others in my department. Compared to my own heroic attempt to fundamentally reconfigure the relationship between culture and politics, what struck me was how focused, how precise, how well calculated a number of these theses were. These were the ones that, now I was on the verge of completion, struck me as revealing something important. They defined their subject very precisely- rather than being too ambitious. They reviewed the relevant literature succinctly. They set out their well considered methodologies. They presented their analysis without making any stratospheric claims about their significance. Then they concluded....and here's the key thing - they'd completed and passed.

I remember thinking 'okay, that's how a PhD can be approached, that's the straightforward way. That's what I could have done. How simpler my life would have been over the last three years...' Ideally, I would have had this epiphany at the beginning of my thesis, but things don't often work out like that. I suspect that even if I had look at these theses at that point, I would've written the same PhD I did eventually write filled with a sense of hubris, of, 'yes, but i'm going to do it my way...and really make an impact.' Or maybe, my thesis was more like these completed ones than I imagined - by that stage I was so immersed in it that I'd lost any sense of proportion. Or, perhaps, the authors of these seemingly so well constructed works had felt



similar concerns about their theses when they too were on the point of submitting (I've never met anyone who is satisfied with their thesis when they are about to submit).

So....given the pressures to finish within a set time limit, worries about debt incurred, and a thousand other anxieties, I'd offer these soothing words: The PhD isn't an endpoint- it's a process, an apprenticeship in your trade, another stage reached. It's something to traverse and to use as a platform, and it gives you the chance to work out a lot of things about becoming an academic and the thrills and spills of undertaking research. But, it's not much use 'even' in these terms, if you don't get it finished.

Murphy's Law: the joys of a science PhD

Michelle Pierce (University of Leeds) on the law of the Lab.....

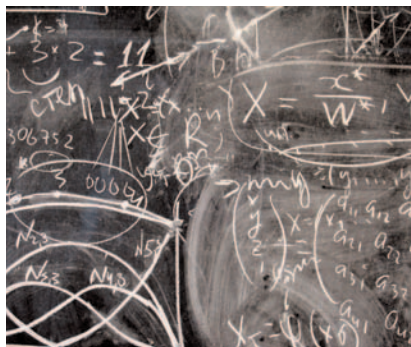
Picture the scene: you're busily tapping away at your keyboard, having decided that today is the day you will finish that chapter you've been labouring over for months. The sun is shining, you have no distractions and the words are just flowing onto the page. You haven't written this much in weeks! Suddenly, you hear a 'bleep!' emanate from somewhere near your left elbow. A cold sweat breaks out all over your body. You've heard that noise before. The last time you heard it something else happened, your screen....

'EEEEEEK! My screen is blue!!!!' The sudden shriek causes the other postgraduates in your office to reflexively minimise *Solitaire* and run over to see what the panic is about. 'When was the last time you saved your thesis?' 'Err, Tuesday?'

Of course, your hard drive never expires on a normal day. It never decides that five solid hours of browsing on Facebook was too much for it. Oh no. It happens when you are in the middle of an extremely long task that will now require starting again from scratch, or when you haven't backed up your data for a month, or when the IT department is on an 'away day'. But worry not, fellow postgrads, there is a scientific explanation: it's called 'Murphy's Law'.

Murphy's Law applies to everything a postgraduate does. It does not discriminate between disciplines, but its effects are felt most keenly by those whose work is experimental rather than

theoretical in nature. As a biological scientist, my experience of the Murphy phenomenon has been quite extensive and agonising. Murphy's Law states that your equipment will break down a fortnight before that conference presentation for which you desperately need



more data. It also decrees that the quality of your Western blot is inversely proportional to how critical it is for your research. It is Murphy's fault that your brain slices are top quality, but only on the day of the cup final/postgrad ball/best friend's hen party, forcing you to work late to take advantage.

I have come to realise that the only way I will finish my thesis is to learn to avoid the situations in which Murphy's Law presents itself. To this end I have compiled a list of tips to help other experimentalists keep their sanity during their doctorate:

1. Perform your most important experiment just after the deadline passes for that conference or seminar. Everything will work like a dream, you'll just have to accept that you'll never be able to tell anyone about it.

2. Don't try too hard. The latest evidence suggest that the more care you take with your protocols, the poorer the result. Slap it about, throw it on the floor, and stand on it a few times. It'll be perfect, I promise.

3. Take extra care with the last procedure in your experiment. Murphy *will* wait until you've spent six months labouring on it before he strikes.

4. Take advantage of the days when your supervisor is away at a conference. I guarantee you'll get fabulous results when he/she isn't there to witness it.

5. Save your work. Obsessively. Have all your data backed up in three different formats and store them at separate locations. I heard a horror story about a postgrad who had three different copies of their data, on CD, DVD and external hard drive, only to have the office they were all kept in burn to the ground. Ouch!

6. Keep your lab notebook up-to-date. The day you perform the most technically brilliant piece of work ever, will be the day you forget to write down what you did. Thus you will a) never be able to replicate it, and b) have no idea why you did it in the first place.

So next time you are tearing your hair out at the irony of it all, you know who to blame...



The Rough Guide to doing a PhD...

Lorna Taylor, Deputy Editor, (King's College, London)
gradbritain@vitae.ac.uk on finding that perfect relationship..

Imagine your perfect supervisor. Do you envisage a genius with the wisdom of Solomon, communicative skills of Martin Luther King, pastoral touch of Florence Nightingale and an emphatic sense that would make Ghandi green with envy? I thought as much. One of the most important decisions you have to make in your postgraduate career is the selection of a supervisor. This decision can make or break, leading to fruitful encounters for years to come, or a period of awkwardness and disappointment. Here are some little hints to hopefully guide you through the supervisory relationship from day one.

1. Looking for that 'special someone'

Hurrah, you've decided you want to do a PhD and have beautifully documented the details of your proposed project. But you can't do it alone; a PhD isn't an independent piece of research and finding the right supervisor is crucial. Your undergraduate tutors and the internet can both be worth consulting to help you find the most suitable person. It is worth taking the initiative and arranging a meeting. They may be an established academic but it is important

to meet in person, to be sure that there won't be any major clash of personalities. Also, if possible, talk to their existing students; incidentally, it is not a good sign if they can't even identify their supervisor on the department mugshot board!

2. Relationship expectations

One 'must have' requirement of your supervisor is that they have an interest in you and your success. In short they should provide support, advice, guidance, reassurance through the difficult times and congratulations during the inspired moments! It is also important to realise what they are not; unlike your undergrad tutor they are not your teacher, boss or search engine. The more specific details of your relationship are all subject to negotiation. You may want to meet once a month or only as the need arises, be given a clear sense of direction or be left to your own devices. Whatever the case may be, you need to set the ground rules from the outset to avoid future misunderstanding and mutual disappointment.

3. Your end of the bargain

Your role is to be hard working and enthusiastic. If either of

these are lacking, your supervisor will start to feel that their time is being wasted. Supervisors are busy people with their own commitments. Make sure your relationship with them is as smooth and easy as possible so keep to deadlines, answer emails and attend meetings. Take their advice and criticism on board but don't be afraid to challenge them if you disagree.

4. The 'not so happily ever after'

So what if it all goes wrong? There are various options, none of them are particularly pleasant. Firstly it is worth talking to your supervisor about it, but be tactful rather than accusatory, and try to negotiate a more effective way of working. If the problem escalates you may have to part with your supervisor which will not be easy. Try to seek advice from a personal tutor or student forum to help you through the process. Chances are, such a depressing scenario won't come to pass; just be aware that it could, without careful selection and planning by both parties. Most likely, you will have an effective, rewarding and ultimately successful relationship!

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.

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