



# GRADBritain

A magazine for and by postgraduate researchers in the United Kingdom

## Testing times....

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With the election looming, it is becoming increasingly clear that whoever wins the public sector will be subject to significant cutback over the next few years. Unlike the NHS or schooling, our politicians aren't afraid to curb expenditure on higher education. Whether us academics like it or not, the fact is that the shutting down of a university department doesn't have the same 'emotive hold' over the electorate as the closing of a school or hospital. Despite increasing numbers going into higher education and the fact that HEI's contribute significantly to our nation's GDP, our universities are still seen by the public as little more than learned societies, a home for nutty professors and drunken debauched students, rather than being considered as what they actually are a key front-line service for the nation. This is a perception that both the government and academics need to publicly challenge, meanwhile however there is no doubt that our sector is entering testing times in the next year. In some universities the 'cut-back culture' is already being felt. Whereas a year ago, university departmental meetings were preoccupied with how to invest funds, now the predominant issue is where to impose cuts. This sounds all pretty bleak for us PGRs, especially those planning to enter academia. The key is for us to keep abreast of the issues and developments, and more importantly to be aware of the stuff that you have control over: i.e. your research, CV and skills. Nurturing these will put you in a better position of achieving tenure when that elusive job opportunity comes your way. Oh, and don't forget to vote.

On that rather depressing note, enjoy the spring issue of GB!

Liza

## CONTENTS

- 2 An education...
- 3 Postgraduate funding...
- 4 continued...
- 5 Passion, interest and curiosity...
- 6 To post-doc and not to post-doc...
- 7 Generation X needs some X-tra help.
- 8 A funny thing happened...
- 9 Dr Flo
- 10 National Union of Students
- 11 Second year blues...
- 12 The rough guide....

## Stuff wot might interest you...

**Careers in academia event 30 March, Manchester is an interactive one-day event that will address topics related to how to succeed in a competitive and complex research environment. Book your place [www.vitae.ac.uk/cia2010](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/cia2010)**

**You can find useful tips for writing your CV on Vitae's popular CVs section. Example CVs are also included for a range of subject disciplines [www.vitae.ac.uk/cv](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/cv)**

# An education

## Keith R Amery (King's College, London) on his journey to a doctorate...

When I went to my school careers officer and told him I wanted to be an archaeologist he nearly fell off his chair laughing. Well 25 grand in debt and 20 years later – who's laughing now Mr know it all! No, hold on a minute...? Well, the point is, if you have an ambition you should never let a little thing like reality or other people's negativity hold you back.....

This is the bit where the violins and tissues come in handy. At 7 I was diagnosed with a spacial memory problem grandly titled 'Topographical Memory Deficit'. Back in the seventies the answer was to dose you up to the eyeballs with the latest drug and diagnose you as incurable. So I went my merry way through life believing that even if it were possible for someone from a regular comprehensive to go to university, it wasn't going to be me.

To cut a long story short one saving grace is that I have always been disinclined to believe what I am told. I eventually ended up up at the door of Ipswich Museum, where I got a job as 'Documentation Assistant for the Humanities'. Two and a half years later, I had transferred the catalogue records for the entire Ethnographic and Local History collections. The one thing however I neglected to do was improve on my sorely lacking education.

I think I failed 'A' Level History four times which must be some kind of record, even for a Suffolk boy. Despite the hollow laugh of the careers officer ringing in my ears I was determined to take Field Archaeology instead. I also

gained a level of semi-fluency in Arabic. On completing a basic education I found myself applying (late) to University. I was surprised when I was invited to attend an interview at University College London, and you could have knocked me down with the proverbial feather when they actually accepted me to read Ancient History.

The long and the short of it is, despite earliest predictions I gained my BA and stayed another year to complete an MA before getting itchy feet and looking around for an alternative. A famous professor of Egyptology at Oxford granted me an interview and kindly offered to relieve me of £10,000 in return for the chance to do a second Masters, 'just so you can say you've been to Oxford'. Wisely I opted to keep the ten grand, just so I could say I turned down the chance to say I'd been to Oxford.

In 2006 I was disinclined to pursue a career as an archaeologist and opted for the more convivial environment of the art market. Life has a funny habit of not turning out the way you expect. I gained a second masters in Arts Market Appraisal from Kingston University, where they now let me loose teaching the MA's, and then applied for the PhD at City.

I don't think I am in a minority in all of this, I am surprised by how many PGRs come out with the line 'I was always told I was stupid at school'; it's as if doing a PhD is somehow a way (albeit a really expensive and time-consuming way) of proving to yourself and that teacher that you are not that daft after all.



## Top Ten:

### Signs that the PhD is taking over...

- 1 Your laptop has been switched on continuously for as long as you can remember.
- 2 You have ceased seeing your friends, they have stopped calling and you can't remember the last time you did anything non-work related.
- 3 'Down-time' is doing your footnotes.
- 4 Even your supervisor reminds you of the importance of taking a break.
- 5 You consider a couple of days at a conference in a not-so-glamorous location as 'a holiday', viewing the train journey as an excellent opportunity to work.
- 6 You fool yourself into thinking that working at every moment is the best way of maximising your time. WARNING! working while either cooking or doing exercise is liable to end in injury.
- 7 You see everything through 'thesis-tinted' glasses; who knew that 'The Avatar' was a brilliant elucidation Adorno's theory on aesthetics?
- 8 You keep a note pad and pen by your bedside just in case you wake up in the middle of the night with an 'eureka moment'.
- 9 You have an overblown sense of its worth and importance. i.e. classic case of not-seeing-the-woods for the trees.
- 10 You never finish it.

# Postgraduate funding - another way

**Luke Blaxhill (King's College, London) has done all the hard work so you don't have to...**

Most things in life come down to money, and postgraduate study is one of them. If you're not one of the 15% fortunate enough to possess a full scholarship, the chances are that funding your PhD, Masters, or PGCE gives you a headache. Studying is expensive - paying fees and maintenance yourself will probably cost over £1000 a month, and nearly twice that if you're an overseas student. Finding this money isn't easy. Unless you're eligible for a Career Development Loan, borrowing at a reasonable rate is just about impossible in the current economic climate. Finding a productive part-time job which will leave you enough time to still study properly is equally difficult.

Are those of us without that elusive scholarship destined to be eating economy spaghetti and worrying when – or if – we'll manage to finish our courses? That's what I thought six months into my PhD. Nobody would give me a brass penny, and I feared the wolf might soon start scratching at the door.

## **Postgraduate funding from charities: a world of mystery**

One way to gain funding - I'd been told - was to look for alternative bodies, especially charities, trusts, and foundations which might help. Easy to say, of course, but harder to do. My university had some links on its website to charities, but I was ineligible for almost all the awards - most being restricted to certain subjects or nationalities. I was left with just three more 'general' ones – even then, there was no guidance on which would be

appropriate for me, or how I could submit a strong application. The only information was in the Prospects Essential Guide to Student Funding. Sounded promising, but it had only two pages on charities. Everywhere I looked, charities and trusts were being touted as potential sources of funding, but nobody was saying how. There was apparently treasure in the jungle, but maps were in short supply.

For a while, I was put off. Even if I could find the proverbial needle in the haystack, and locate a suitable body, what chance would I have of gaining anything? The Sidney Perry Foundation say they receive twenty applications for each one that succeeds, and the Southdown Trust caution that their awards rarely exceed £100. Was it really worthwhile spending several days completing an application? Working a few extra hours overtime at the bar seemed a better bet.

But I decided to persist and over the next two and a half years, I gradually managed to win 35 awards from various bodies, and have been able to fund my PhD almost to research council levels, raising about £40,000. I list these quantities not to blow my own trumpet, but to demonstrate that charities really are a major alternative funding option if they are used properly. I feel very privileged to have had all this support, and I want to try and help other students access the voluntary sector for their PhDs, Masters, and PGCEs.



There isn't much information around on charities and trusts, and most postgraduates are put off even considering them due to a number of common misconceptions. The first myth is that they are all extremely specialised. Yes, there are bodies like the Leverhulme Trades Charities Trust, that helps the spouses or children of grocers, pharmacists, and commercial travellers, and the Vegetarian Charity, that funds only vegetarians and vegans. But the majority are simply general bodies concerned with helping people (not necessarily even specifically students) overcome financial barriers in doing what they want to do, especially in relation to education or training. Examples? Check out the Stapley Educational Trust, the Humanitarian Trust, the St. Clemant Dane Educational Foundation, and the Leatherseller's Company. These bodies will help almost anyone, and there are hundreds of others. You just need to be able to find them. (continued on next page)

# Postgraduate funding - another way

The second myth is that these bodies are poor. Charities vary enormously - some are very small, but most have assets of over a million pounds. From your perspective, this means awards (usually) of £500-£2000. Small beer in comparison to research councils, but still significant. Plus, of course, you can get awards renewed each year, and get backing from multiple bodies. In fact, when you gain one award, other charities are more likely to see you as a credible investment, and may also offer support. So funding can soon mount up. It's also worth mentioning that charities make fast decisions - they usually have four or six deadlines a year, and reply within two months, which makes them a great choice for quick fundraising.

The third myth is that the application process is complex. In reality, application forms are usually short, and your statement to one charity can be reused when you apply to others. Charity committees will be most interested in your financial situation, and how plausible a case you present to overcoming your difficulties. Showing you are working hard, have a part-time job, have minimised your living costs, and have a 'backup plan' if funding does not emerge will get you further than a painstakingly planned research statement and a glowing CV. Charities are really very different from 'academic' funding bodies like research councils. The fourth myth is that charities are

massively oversubscribed, and that the chances of winning awards are slim. It is true that some receive considerably more applications than they can fund, but many others actually do not receive many student applicants, mainly because so few know about them or consider applying! The Stapley Trust, for example, makes awards to 90% of students who apply.

The fifth and final myth is that these funds are only available to home students. This simply isn't true. Yes, there are some bodies which are open only to UK nationals, but many others will consider anyone currently resident in the UK. Plus there are a whole host of funds for people of particular nationalities. Whatever your age, nationality, or strength of CV, there are bodies out which can help you.

## Introducing the 'Alternative Guide to Postgraduate Funding'

When I met Shuzhi Zhou – a PGR scientist at King's who had also had a lot of success with voluntary sector funding - we decided to write a guide to obtaining postgraduate funding through charity. The 'Alternative Guide to Postgraduate Funding' is a comprehensive 50-page manual which shows you how to locate charities which might be able to help fund your studies and how to complete a strong application. It also contains over 100 links to potential funding sources. Whatever your subject, whatever your course, and whatever you need funding for

(including research and conference expenses, and for 4th year PhD support). It was published in August 2009, and is already helping dozens of students, selling over 50,000 printed or electronic copies to date.

## How can I get 'The Alternative Guide'?

Contact your university's Student Funding Office or Graduate School to ask if the 'Alternative Guide' is available. If your university hasn't subscribed, you can buy a copy on our website for £4.99. This is a promotional price (normally it's £6.99) which will expire on 31st March 2010. For more information, or to buy the 'Alternative Guide', visit <http://www.gradfunding.co.uk/>.



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# Passion, interest and curiosity are not enough

**Mabelle Victoria (Open University) on the importance of enchantment..**

It was December 18, 2008. I remember the day well. That morning, I had a casual chat with a colleague who had just passed her viva. Julia was putting her books and other paraphernalia into a box. She was moving into her 'real world' office as an academic. I grabbed that opportunity to ask her just one burning question: If there was one thing you could have done differently what would it be? Little did I know that her answer was going to change the trajectory of my very own PhD. In fact, her answer turned my PhD world upside down.

There wasn't a hint of hesitation in Julia's voice. It seemed to me that she had reflected on that question many times. She said that she had often wondered whether she had chosen the right topic. You see, at the beginning of her research, Julia had been torn between two subject areas and had ended up choosing the one that was a little less challenging and a little less interesting but which offered the path of least resistance. She was in her mid-40s and felt pressed for time. She also had a family to support and was very eager to get back into the world of work. She had to complete her PhD in the shortest time possible so she could have a career before she reached retirement age. Although she did not sound at all sad or regretful, I could sense that a big part of her still wondered whether she sold herself short by not taking the challenge of the other topic.

At the time of our talk, I had completed a successful pilot study in my research site in the Philippines and spent one-and-a-half years building up a healthy literature base about the topic. However the more I reflected on Julia's advice, the more I was seized with fear: fear that although I was passionate about my research, it would not be enough to carry me through two-and-a-half years of gruelling postgraduate work.

Most PhD survivors say that you have to be passionate about your topic; you have to be interested in it because you have to live it day and night, for better or for worse. But, I thought to myself, I have always been very passionate about travelling and other cultures. But never did I once consider giving up my job and spending the rest of my life exploring the many wonders of the world.

There has to be something more I thought. I needed to be enchanted. To be enchanted with one's topic means to feel an invisible force that both frightens and emboldens. It is an inner knowing not so very different from what great musicians and artists feel when they say 'I did not choose this vocation, it chose me.'

The thought of having to tell my supervisors that I wanted to change my topic, made me very anxious but the feeling of enchantment translated into confidence and risk-taking. It took several supervision meetings before I was able to convince them.



I still do not know how I managed it but in a matter of nine months, I was able to conduct a pilot study, negotiate access, get ethics approval and so on, while at the same time familiarizing myself with a whole body of literature. I completed my 3-month data collection in December 2009 and am now in the process of analysing my data and writing my chapters. I worked like a maniac, but was only able to do because I was completely, 100% committed to my subject.

I still have a year to finish writing my thesis. But I am certain that when I get to the last page of the Conclusion, there won't be the slightest bit of 'what if' in my mind. I guess part of the enchantment is feeling that you don't have a choice, that you are compelled and driven to undertake a study just because...

# To post-doc or not to post-doc...

**Blanka Sengerova (University of Oxford) on making the right decision...**

You're spending sleepless nights designing that last (elusive) experiment, writing your thesis and trying to read in precious spare moments. You can relate to every one of the top ten signs in this edition and you never want to lay eyes on another track change/ analysis output/ chapter re-edit (\*delete as appropriate) ever again. You're a PGR trying to finish off and the thought of becoming a postdoc is the last thing on your mind. You're ready to leave academia and head to pastures new. As someone who is coming to the end of their first year in a post-doc position, I thought I would share my thoughts on why an academic research post PhD may be worth a second thought.

Just over a year ago, I was convinced I was ready for a change of scenery. So definite that I started applying for science writing and industrial positions. Things were looking positive and I was invited for interviews, the last of which took place in the same week as a PhD related conference. This was to be my last academic conference as an academic researcher. However, while talking to fellow delegates and scientists at varying stages in their careers my future plans took a complete U-turn. These people spoke with such dedication, passion and excitement - all things that had been lacking in my interviews earlier that week. While each of these jobs had been at reputable companies with excellent facilities, the 'spark'

was missing. That elusive 'spark' was enough to make me want to stay in academia and pursue an academic career. I weighed up the pro's and the con's and a year later, here I am.

Firstly, a post-doc place gives you the chance to rediscover the fun of research. During the last months of your PhD, you may have forgotten why you embarked on the journey in the first place. The pressure of finishing up often dampens any passion you had for your subject. In contrast, as a post-doc you can focus on findings and publishing and reignite your interest in your subject. From what I have experienced so far, being a post-doc may be the best time you'll ever have in academia. You don't have the thesis pressure yet you don't have to worry about funding your group.

Secondly, the work schedule of a post-doc is fairly flexible. In industry (or in an office environment) you may be expected to account for every hour, work core hours, etc. whereas many research supervisors in academia will tend to take the attitude of 'as long as the work gets done, I won't frown at people for leaving early.' Finally, on a more serious note, whatever your final career choice doing a post-doc will only be an asset. Whether you decide to stay in academia in the long term, embark on an industrial career or work away from the bench, the experiences of a post-doc will be of benefit in many contexts. Transferable

skills is a phrase that's drilled into you during your PhD, but building up your skill base needn't end with submission. Presentation skills, project management, negotiation and writing manuscripts are skills that are enhanced during a post-doc and will prove invaluable whatever career you go into.

With this all said, there are downsides to doing a post-doc. The obvious one is the fixed-term contract. You will always have the niggling thought that in X years time you will have to look for another job. The fixed-term contract also makes it difficult if you want to take a break for some reason - to go travelling or maybe take time off to have a family. This break isn't added onto the end of the contract and if you don't manage to publish anything you will inevitably find it harder to get another post. Another consideration is that after one post-doc, the second post-doc might seem like the only option. It's worth remembering that the academic world is a pyramid and not all of us will get a tenured position. The first post-doc might be fun but what if you're still on fixed-term contracts after 10 years after your PhD? But these decisions can wait.

Finishing a PhD is stressful, but the post-doc research journey is quite different so don't let your experience now put you off - I certainly haven't regretted it!

# Generation X need some X-tra help...

**Andrew Rollinson (University of Leeds) on the forgotten generation of PGRs...**

In my research group, approximately 40% of PGRs are in their late twenties to early forties, myself included. Not unusual? Well we are all studying for PhD's in Energy Engineering, and a list of previous occupations of these thirty-somethings comprises of a shoe factory manager, police officer, food manufacturer, office designer, and acrobat. Though none of us have grey hair, we have all returned to full-time study after an extended period in the rat race for something interesting, challenging and different from the world of work. I'm positive that we are not the only ones.

My university now has support structures in place for mature students. Their Life-Long Learning Centre caters for those students who are over 21. They even give special attention to those aged between 20 and 30. But why is this facility only designed for undergrads? My university admits that they aim their support at undergraduates so is it that my research group of over-30-somethings is unique? I don't think so. I recently attended one of my Lifelong Learning Centre's undergraduate mature student get-togethers and over 50% were postgraduates who said they had all come along because they were missing 'adult company'. Admittedly a bit harsh on our fellow PGRs, but the point is that we thirty-somethings are a neglected group within the postgraduate community, even though we make up a large proportion of it.

We also have specific experiences and specific needs. More often than not, we have deliberately opted out of first careers and into academia as a way of requalifying as something else. This makes our attitude and outlook to doing a thesis much different perhaps to those who have been in academia since their BA or mature students studying for one after retirement. The fact is that mid-life PGRs do not have the necessary support structures to help especially those of us who are finding it tough changing careers.

Us thirty-somethings are also more likely to have children in school which creates the difficulty of getting to and from the office/lab every day. Probably because of these ties we have usually chosen the university most local to where we live. Home commitments often make it difficult for us to fully engage in the life of the university unlike younger PGRs or mature students whose children have already grown up.

Many of us also have spouses who shoulder the financial burden while we are studying, with many of these partners making serious sacrifices so that we can study. For the singles among us, they are likely to have relocated and may find it difficult establishing roots in this later stage of their life. PhD study is a solitary existence and I believe that this is a particular problem for those of my generation in postgraduate study.

My university does have a postgraduate society, but this tends to put on events and champion issues which are unique to younger PGRs. At my age, I would just feel downright daft 'hanging out' with the PGR kids paintballing or on a pub crawl. I sound my age, but maybe there is a lesson here. I believe that universities need to address our specific needs and realise that there is no blanket PhD experience for all.

With the present economic uncertainties it is feasible to assume that more and more career-change PhD students will be entering academia. They will come out of academia in their late 30s if they're lucky, and will need expert advice on re-entering the job market. They've specific problems such as childcare, social and financial support that need addressing. As for my university, they are thankfully beginning to recognise that this is an issue which needs addressing, my only hope is that more and more universities do the same.



# A funny thing happened on the way to the library...

In GB's new regular feature on the strange world of research, Fiona Willans (King's College, London) recounts her shaky start to her PhD fieldwork...

The truck bumped to a halt and the sound of drums started. A group of fifteen year-old warriors, faces streaked with paint and torsos slick with sweat, danced around me in such a way that I found myself being moved in the direction of the school chapel. Inside, the rest of the students were waiting expectantly to find out who this evidently important visitor was.

A man came forward and clasped my hand, leading me to the front of the chapel, where a girl hung a garland of hibiscus flowers around my neck and everybody clapped. I maintained a steady smile, pitched somewhere near that of an eager game show contestant, while the school principal prepared to address the congregation.

'Staff and students', he began. 'As you know, we have faced many difficulties finding someone to teach us English. We have searched for spare teachers but found no one. We have been praying for many years that God will find a solution. And now he has.'

I was nervous about the way this speech was progressing but, at this point, the principal faltered and asked me my name.

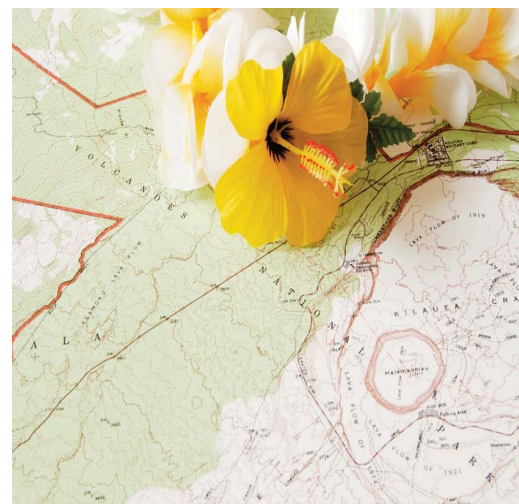
I supplied it and he continued...

'God has not failed us. He has sent us ... this lady ... her name I have forgotten again but that is not important ... and she is going to be with us now for the next two years, during which time we will all become masters of the

English language.' He smiled triumphantly across the sea of faces, while I was filled with horror. Two years? I had come to this island in Vanuatu for two months to do some fieldwork, and had no intention of helping three hundred people become masters of any language. Apparently, my attempts to communicate this via radio from the capital city hadn't been successful. I began to feel the weight of the garland round my neck.

Inevitably I was asked to speak. I thanked the principal for his kind words and the students for their welcome, but then it was my turn to falter. I explained that there had been some kind of mistake and that actually I was not able to stay for two years, because I had to return to my university in England. The chapel fell silent. I caught sight of a table outside, groaning with food, attended by large women in colourful dresses keeping flies away. The women beamed back at me encouragingly. I took a deep breath and smiled, announcing that this visit was just to do some preliminary research and assess what type of help was most needed. As soon as my course was finished, I promised I could catch the next plane back to Vanuatu, ready to teach them all they wanted to know.

The tension lifted. They had waited five years; they could hold on a little longer. God had not failed them. All smiles again, a hymn was sung, and I was marched back outside to the food table, where I was presented with an enormous plate of laplap and octopus.



And so began my first stint of linguistics research in Vanuatu. That was in 2002, but I did indeed return to teach for three years, before coming back to England to continue my own academic journey. I am now a PhD student preparing to return to the Pacific for the fifth time, armed with a little more local knowledge that should hopefully prevent some of those early misunderstandings.

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Do you have any research experiences you would like to share? If so, send it to [gradbritain@vitae.ac.uk](mailto:gradbritain@vitae.ac.uk).

## Dear Dr Flo...

I am in the final stages of a history PhD – I've been a full-time student for just over 3 years and am writing up my thesis with the intention of submitting it within the next 2 months. I have several problems which I would really appreciate some help on – I am so exhausted and demotivated that I am finding it hard to drag myself to the library or my desk to do yet more drafting and re-drafting when it already feels as though I've been writing for years. My supervisor is also highly critical of my writing and sends every chapter back to me with substantial comments and criticisms, necessitating yet more re-writing. I really physically cannot take much more of this and I just want the wretched thing submitted and out of the way. How much longer is this going to take?

From 'Light at the end of the tunnel is an oncoming train'

Dear Light

Your email sounds very despairing and yet is probably very familiar to lots of PGRs. Writing up is actually very hard work and emotionally very draining. Let's see if I can help you to deal with some of these issues.

Firstly, the writing itself. Most people find writing to be a difficult process. Most writing involves personal elements besides the physical writing – such as time management, tenacity, motivation and goal-setting and I wonder whether you are managing your time effectively. It might be helpful if you set yourself a target of how much to write or revise each day and what you want to achieve by the end of each week. And don't forget to reward yourself every time you achieve your goals! It can be very dispiriting to keep redrafting but the ability to review and improve your writing is a critical element of making it more readable.

It also sounded from your email as though you are not necessarily receiving the feedback from your supervisor that would be most useful to you. I would strongly suggest that you arrange a face-to-face meeting with your supervisor and discuss with him/her what you actually need. It may be that your supervisor is focusing so much on the detail of

the grammar and sentence structure that they are missing the fact that you are worried about whether you are getting the key message of the thesis across. Try to come to some agreement with your supervisor about feedback that will help you. You could ask your supervisor to provide one written example of how your writing style could be improved which you could then use as a template. This would avoid the constant criticisms and re-drafting which you describe in your email. You can then ask your supervisor to focus on the 'bigger picture' messages – is the key argument clear? Do you support your argument with sufficient evidence? etc.

I am also wondering whether there is any additional support in writing skills for you at your university. Do you have access to researcher skills development workshops? One university I know of has even won a bid from the Royal Literary Fund to have two resident 'Writing Fellows' – published authors who are there to offer one-to-one sessions on how to improve your writing for PhD students. It is worth spending some time on your university's webpages to see if there is this kind of support.

Lastly is the issue of your exhaustion and demotivation. There is no doubt that the final stages of writing up are often the

hardest part of the PhD. The end is in sight but there are still huge hurdles and a lot of hard work to deal with before it is properly over. I can't pretend to you that this is easier than it is, or that there is some way round this. It is hard work and it is emotionally draining and you need to manage your stress. I wonder when you last had a day off or some time away from your PhD. It is very important that you do take regular breaks and have the occasional day off during the week. I would also recommend that you have at least one day per week resting and doing something different – even if it's only the washing and food shopping! I appreciate the feelings of panic, but taking breaks, sleeping, eating properly and taking some exercise will all help to make you more productive in the times when you are working. You may be physically at your desk for seven days a week at the moment, but you will be more productive if you work for six days and have a day's rest every week. There is always mileage in resting both your body and mind.

Good luck, Light – I'm sure you will make it!

Do you have a problem that you would like to discuss with Dr FLo? If so, email [drflo@vitae.ac.uk](mailto:drflo@vitae.ac.uk)

# PGRs and the NUS: can the twain ever meet?

**Dr Debbie McVitty (NUS) on what NUS can do for you...**

Let's say you are a busy PGR student. Your time is taken up with research, conferencing, teaching, more research, seminars, and trying to imagine a world in which you don't eat, sleep and breathe thesis deadlines.

You might live far from your institution and you probably have a partner and family, a social life, and paid employment to hold down. It's not implausible that when you think of the students' union, you think of that building where your students source the beer that makes them unable to stay awake during your 9 am class.

On the other hand, this picture might not be true at all. PGR students are as varied as their research topics and you might be actively involved in your students' union, agitating for a better funding deal for postgrad students, organising postgrad socials or coordinating volunteering or researcher development opportunities.

If you were more the former than the latter, it would be understandable. Historically (and with a few honourable exceptions) neither students' unions nor NUS have exhibited best practice in understanding and meeting the needs of postgraduate researchers. But the times they are a-changing. In the past twelve months NUS has undergone a major restructure, enabling it to create a brand new Postgraduate Campaign, with a committee of postgraduate student representatives. It has also taken on a full-time staff

member to conduct research into the postgraduate experience and work with organisations like Vitae, the UK Council for Graduate Education and the Higher Education Academy to develop policy on postgraduate issues.

This year, just to kick off, NUS has conducted a survey on the experience of PGRs who work in HE, particularly as teachers. Some are happy with how teaching is managed; others have found the experience of teaching undergraduates stressful,



badly paid and poorly supported. Yet there is no reason why teaching should be an unpleasant experience. NUS has also been working with the results of the HE Academy's Postgraduate Research Experience Survey which tells us that around 40% of PGRs are not satisfied with the intellectual climate in university departments. Despite improvements in provision over the last five years, some PGRs still feel isolated and excluded from departmental research cultures. One obvious example is a lack of dedicated space for postgraduates where PGRs can meet, socialise and plot future collaborations. The stakes are high for postgraduate researchers in the current economic climate. As PGR numbers grow while sources of funding shrink, PGRs will find themselves under greater pressure to be productive, to submit within an approved

deadline, to see their supervisors less often, to list a wider range of skills on their CVs and to be satisfied with short-term postdoctoral employment contracts.

Yet, paradoxically, the government sees PGRs as crucial to economic growth in the UK, while universities value PGRs because of the contribution they bring to the research environment. PGRs are, quite simply, the life-blood of any research institution, a potentially powerful cohort in agitating for change.

Students' union officers recognise that university structures, by and large, were not designed for PGRs, and want to know what they should be doing to improve support systems for postgrads. The more PGR students engage with students' unions, the more students' unions will be forced to take into account PGR concerns. Likewise, once students' unions begin to understand what the issues are for PGRs, they will find it easier to lobby for improvements. NUS encourages students' unions to talk to PGRs in ways which don't drain time away from research. Some institutions have a separate graduate union, some have a full-time elected officer with sole responsibility for postgraduate students and others have a postgraduate society. Find out how it works in your institution and if it does what it is supposed to – represent your views. It might be a distraction or it might be the chance to really make a positive difference to your PGR experience.

# Overcoming second year blues...

You have the illness, Sam Gibbons Frenedo (Cardiff University) has the cure...

In the roller coaster few months at the start of my PhD in the thrills of a new city, new friends and an exciting new research project, I couldn't really imagine what 'second year blues' might feel like. Now, frustrated by my topic, fearful that the end is fast approaching, I definitely have a case of the 'second year blues'.

I am still not out of it, but I do feel that I have developed some strategies and outlook to overcome the darkest days which I thought I would share. So what, I hear you cry, is the panacea for all our woes? How does one remain sane whilst doing a PhD?

## 1. Do other stuff.

Like a marathon runner on mile twelve; the initial adrenaline has worn off, your legs are tired and you're a long way from the end. Like a relationship which has reached its fourth year; the initial fluttering heart and churning stomach has long gone and you're not going to propose for a while. You need some time alone. Don't neglect your PhD. You must still cherish it but remember to make time to do other things.

Perhaps attend some lectures on a completely different subject. Economics if you're a biologist or physics if you're a sociologist. How about spending a couple of hours a week learning a language or writing articles for websites you've only just discovered? Or join a nitting club, sport's team, anything really, it doesn't matter. Outside activities will complement your knowledge, make your love for your PhD stronger, and without

## 2. Look at the big picture.

'You wanna watch this kid' said my supervisor, waving his hands around and grinning as he helped another student load an electrophoresis gel, 'I've got DNA fingers'. As well as being an extremely geeky joke, I've always remembered this moment for his enthusiasm, which is, at almost all times, infectious. When I'm feeling frustrated with my project, I think about the fact that there's a life time's worth of interesting things to find out and just because this moment is dull, doesn't mean the whole thing is. If, after forty years of research, my supervisor is still excited by the simplest of experiments, there must be something in it.

It's important, I think, to step back from your myopic view and look at your project not as a singular entity, but as part of a progression.

Reading around your subject as much as you possibly can helps to put it all in to perspective. By seeing how it fits, like a piece in a jigsaw puzzle, into the current understanding of the subject gives more meaning to your work and makes it easier to motivate yourself.

When your experiments are failing and it feels as though the Gods of academic research are deliberately making fun of you, take heart that others are succeeding, that great research is being carried out all over the world. You must take hope from this, rather than letting it crush your soul.

## 3. Remember it will end.

I don't mean to suggest that you should wish away the present, quite the contrary in fact. For given the seemingly unstoppable nature of time and it's refusal to wait for anybody, it's important to bear in mind that it will probably run out and, before you can say 'jesuschristw hatthehelljusthappened' you'll be thrown, screaming, into real life.

Being able to complete a piece of novel research is an amazing opportunity and one that will be over before you know it. As a PhD student you can concentrate fully on your own project, free from all of the stresses of a post-doctoral career, or any other career for that matter. As many academics will tell you, the PhD years is practically the only time in your research life when you have no other responsibilities apart from your research. Just as some say that youth is wasted on the young, so do overloaded and pressured Professors say that PhD's are wasted on PGRs. Enjoy the fact that you are able to indulge in your interest free from departmental meetings, RAE, a massive teaching timetable and other demands on your time.

So whenever you're feeling beaten and battered by your project, fed up at being the lowest on the academic food chain, remember there is no time to feel sorry for yourself, no time to mope around. You've got a lot to do, so stop wasting time and get on with it.



# A Rough Guide to..Vitae

**Lorna Taylor: Deputy Editor**  
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I am fairly confident that every PGR has experienced tough times during their research. But Vitae is on hand to help out! Its advice on how to stay balanced and focused and avoiding common pitfalls, definitely makes the Vitae website one of the most important and helpful tools available for PGRs.

## **Managing your research project**

You don't have a boss to answer to and there is no 9-5. However, according to researchers at Vitae, the phrases of 'project management' and 'SMART objectives' are two ideas that are not limited to our employed friends. The management section of the Vitae website provides practical advice on keeping your research realistic and on track. The 'do, delay, delegate or dump' mantra and the online time management workbook are two of the impressive practical tools that are definitely worth a read.

**Managing yourself:** A well structured project plan is unlikely to provide results when you are stuck in a cycle of self-sabotage. Vitae has outlined the patterns of common bad habits and provide helpful advice with a raw and 'go-get-em' motivating approach. Are you an over-committer, perfectionist or chronic procrastinator? How are your bad habits standing in your way and ...

more importantly how can you tackle them. The website not only outlines common problems but provides easy tools for addressing them.

**Balanced and creative:** Vitae has produced downloadable online booklets providing advice on achieving work-life balance and nurturing a creative edge to your research.

Vitae has produced 'balanced researcher' booklets which are also available for downloading. Based on accounts from a series of workshops the booklet summarises strategies that other researchers have found useful when balancing the demands both in and out of the office. Going beyond the 'make sure you schedule in time for holidays' the booklet provides a variety of techniques that are practical and easily applied and definitely worth a read.

Creativity may not be the first word that springs to mind when considering a deadline restricted research project; however, Vitae's second guide 'the creative researcher' highlights how a creative component may fuel your research and give you the ability to step outside the box in order to get real results. The practical guide to opening up research questions and ten tips for

nurturing creativity provide food for thought for those wanting to integrate a new creative dimension into research and boost their inspiration.

**PGR Tips:** Vitae also provides a monthly email bulletin of advice and information. The easily accessible tips are directly focused on our needs as doctoral researchers.

**Events:** The website also publishes details of forthcoming conferences and events. This year's annual postgraduate conference addressed the current state of careers in academia, providing a realistic view of what academic careers entail. Keep an eye on the website for news of the next conferences and events...

**Planning:** Vitae has put together some useful advice for your future career path: the options, how to focus your search, tips on producing the right CV and applying.

Schedule in a coffee break with the Vitae website and make it a part of your personal development plan. [www.vitae.ac.uk](http://www.vitae.ac.uk)

## **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 all articles we use.

See our author guidelines at [www.grad.ac.uk/gradbritain/](http://www.grad.ac.uk/gradbritain/). Issue 11 will be published 1 July 2010, deadline for submissions is the 1 June 2010.

## **Editorial Board:**

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