

GRADBritain

A magazine for and by postgraduate researchers in the United Kingdom

Another year....

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I dread this time of year. As if the chaos of a new academic term combined with my annual bout of SAD wasn't enough, this year my 'autumn blues' has been compounded by the fact that I am gearing up for submission. So it has been a real comfort to read the articles sent in from readers for the latest issue of GRADBritain. This time around we have some reflections on starting a doctorate, finishing up, doing it part-time and a piece by a PhD-widow on how to sustain a relationship as a PGR. Personal fitness trainer Jon Le Toq also writes about the importance of keeping fit during your studies. This issue we have also included a comment and response piece addressing the role of bureaucracy and administration in academia. We also have our usual features of Dr Flo, Top Ten and deputy editor's 'Rough Guide' which this issue looks at the career prospects for PGRs.

To all of you for whom 2009 signals the start of your PhD, welcome to GRADBritain, I hope that you are adjusting well to your new life as a PGR. If not, do not fear, GRADBritain is on-hand to offer advice to help you get through it.

Happy reading, Liza

P.S. Please check out Vitae's consultation (details to your left). It will be of interest to anyone involved in the personal, professional and career development of researchers. Involvement can be in the form of full consultation or completing the survey. Also for those part-time PGRs out there, please check out the report 'Understanding the part-time research experience' which can be downloaded at: <http://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy-practice/74571/Part-time-researcher.html>

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Stuff that might interest you...Researcher development framework

Researchers thoughts and comments needed!

All individuals and organisations with an interest in the career development of researchers are invited to respond to this consultation. The consultation is open until Friday 11 December 2009. Further information about the framework and the consultation can be found at www.vitae.ac.uk/rdfconsultation

Part-time PhD, part-time life

Eliose Radcliffe (King's College, London) relates her experiences on a tricky balancing act...

From everything I have read about the experience of being a PGR, there appears to be little firsthand accounts of what life is like as a part-time student. However thanks to Vitae's recent report *Understanding the part-time research experience* more is now known about part-timers experiences.

I have been a part-time PGR for the last two years. This is combined with a job as a researcher in the same department. Embarking on a PhD while being employed inevitably has both its benefits and drawbacks. Earning a salary is an obvious plus and, if like me, you are working as a researcher, you are learning on the job as well as carrying out your own PhD research. However time is not something that tends to be on your side. I find myself constantly feeling guilty for not dedicating enough time to work on my PhD and when I am working on it I feel I should be working on the project that I am paid to work on! The PhD can feel like it is never-ending, especially when you compare your progress to full time PGRs. Herewith some advice for any of you out there who are struggling to cope with balancing the two:

Make contact with other part-timers. This is essential to curb those feelings of isolation. In my department PGR's meet regularly for a writing group and most of the members are part-timers at different stages of their PhD. This group has proved a great source of advice and encouragement. Even if you are only in contact with other part-timers in the virtual world then

this is a good start.

Be realistic about how long it will take you to complete the PhD. Do not compare yourself with full-timers who will be working to a completely different timetable. Try not to panic or make yourself feel guilty, it will only leave you feeling frustrated. Accept that that you are not going to be able to spend as much time on the PhD as you would want.

Organise your time carefully and be flexible. As a part-timer I find the amount of time I can dedicate to my studies varies from week to week depending on professional and personal commitments. So it is essential that you are focused and organised. Momentum is also important, you need to be able to dedicate sustained periods of time on your thesis- this may mean that you utilise that annual leave for study rather than on a holiday!

Separate work from study. If, like me, your PhD studies take place in the same office space as you carry out your paid work then ensure that this day does not get overtaken with your job. It is surprising how many hours can be lost just answering emails. Don't be afraid to tell people that you will deal with work issues on a non-PhD dedicated day.

Talk to your employer about setting aside some dedicated time for your PhD. Employers can often be flexible regarding time for training or personal development and might consider a PhD a suitable equivalent. If you don't ask, you don't get!



Top Ten:

Signs that you are nearing the end...

- 1 You are a walking, talking thesis, unable to hold a conversation on anything else but refusing to answer the dreaded question about the submission date.
- 2 You are convinced that your doctorate has been a complete waste of time, adds nothing new and will not be read by anyone.
- 3 Your supervisor starts lecturing you on the right way to format your footnotes.
- 4 You wished you'd copied those first year notes up properly.
- 5 You wonder what the hell you were doing for the first two and a half years of your PhD.
- 6 You dream of collecting that beautifully bound finished copy from the printers.
- 7 You start planning your post-submission party, although you can't invite anyone as you are unsure of the actual date.
- 8 You look forward to getting that all-important 'Dr' on your bankcard, knowing that it will make no difference to your dismal bank balance.
- 9 You apply for jobs conscious that you won't get an interview, but naively excited by the prospect of post-doctorate career.
- 10 You've ceased caring whether it's any good and just focus on getting it done.

Career pointers for credit crunch PGRs

Michelle Johansen (University of East London) on why its best not to panic..

The academic job market is shrinking at an alarming rate. Horror stories are circulating among anxious early career researchers... 'Between 70 and 100 applicants are applying for every lecturer position'... 'If you haven't had a book published you won't get shortlisted for an interview'. I could go on but you get the general idea.

To separate fact from fiction in the current jobs market, I spoke to half a dozen lecturers in the social sciences with many years of teaching and appointing experience between them. Before sharing their thoughts with you, it's worth highlighting the basics steps you should be taking to improve your job prospects in this difficult economic climate. It goes without saying that the more publications you can list on your CV the better, and that articles published in peer-reviewed journals are more highly-regarded than e.g. publications of conference papers.

Everybody agrees that teaching experience is valuable. All postgrads know they must network all they can and most realise that they should present papers on their research in as many different locations as possible. Some appreciate that evidence of international activity is viewed as a sign of serious scholarly intent, and go all out to deliver research papers at overseas conferences.

In addition to these basics there are seven key points that I would like to share with my fellow PGRs.

Affiliate yourself: Affiliate yourself to at least one research centre or special interest group. If there isn't one which suits your needs, set one up. It needn't be anything large-scale or ambitious (at first): the important thing is to find or create a secure position alongside like-minded scholars from which to launch your assault on the wider scholarly world. Involving yourself with a centre, group or institute gives you valuable experience of collaborating on funding bids or assisting with conference administration. It also provides you with a clear research identity. This is never more needed or appreciated than during the post-submission period when you might otherwise feel slightly lost.

Disseminate your research: Seize any opportunity you get to disseminate your research outside the academy: 'a candidate who had taken History into the wider community (schools, museums, community groups) would appeal to my department.'

Realistic publication plans: Potential employees will expect your CV to include clear and realistic plans for publication and research. Devote a couple of days to producing these plans and be prepared to expand on them at interview. Be aware that you will be questioned on what you're going to do next and what you think you could do if necessary.

Adopt an 'I can do that' approach. Most departments need people who can contribute to a range of different teaching areas. However obscure your

own research, you need to be clear about what else it enables you to do in broad teaching terms: 'Our department looks for the ability to think and teach beyond one's specialist field.'

Send out your CV. One lecturer I spoke to admitted she kept a CV folder containing speculative approaches from early career researchers. If it becomes clear that an additional tutor will be needed in the last few weeks before teaching starts, she revisits this folder to see if there's a candidate able to step in at short notice. So you never know: be enterprising, pro-active and thick-skinned in your approach.

Don't give up! The general consensus among senior academics is that most PGR's will have to serve an apprenticeship of sorts before they secure a fixed position. Expect to accept part-time jobs and frequent changes of jobs, within and outside the borders of the academy. This type of fractured, uncertain PGR experience has always been the norm. In the current economic climate, we might expect to do too much work for no money at all, taking on voluntary duties and commitments to display our enthusiasm and to expand our skills base and expertise. However, the advice is don't give up: 'tell them they should be determined and stick with it because the rewards on offer are potentially huge.'

Michelle Johansen is part of the **History Lab Plus**, a network for early career historians. For further information see www.history.ac.uk/histlab.

The academics vs. the administrators

Ian James Kidd (Durham) offers his perspective on burdens of bureaucracy...

Academia is a difficult business for many reasons. For some, it's the stress and pressure of teaching, for others, the omnipresent threat of the 'publish or perish' initiative, whilst for yet others it's the dire state of the current academic job market. However, one big problem within British academia is the increasing managerialism and 'bureaucratisation' of academic life. By this I mean the increasing over-regulation of academic teaching and research activities: module 'teaching outcomes', departmental 'research strategies', 'professional development programmes', 'annual staff reviews', citation indexing, bibliometrics, and the insidious Damocles sword that is the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Each university will have its own version of these, but doubtless these administrative schemes will, in some form or another, be familiar to most postgraduates, if only from the discontented mutters of their supervisors. The general verdict is, it seems, that academics are over-managed, over-regulated, and subject to constant interference from their departments, and, on the distant horizon, the Government.

The reasons for this managerialism are complex and include various political and economic initiatives, many of them stemming from Thatcher-era education policies, but others date from more recent EU actions such as 'Bologna Declaration'. The details aren't necessary here, for my concern is with the stifling effect that

this 'managerial culture' is having on academic life, and more particularly on 'postgraduate morale'. During a recent departmental committee, one of my professors gave a charged monologue about the frustrations felt by academics who being 'ordered around' by faceless administrators. I afterwards asked, with the naiveté of youth, whether things 'were really that bad.' The predictable reply was a resounding 'Yes!'. The professor then asked whether all this bureaucracy didn't put me off? Of course, yes it did, I replied, but philosophy (my subject) is what I want to do and for that reason I'm willing to press on regardless.

Moreover, the managerialism corrupting academia is endemic to many professions-politics, healthcare, the media. Leaving academia for another career will not mean that I will escape such oppressive bureaucracy but will mean that I will be stuck in a profession for which I lack passion and drive.

I told this same story to a fellow postgraduate, who was similarly horrified at the realities of academic life: that after all the faculty committees, health and safety training, and sixty-page funding proposals, on top of lecturing, one might have a few hours a week for research- However, she seriously questioned whether, after the stresses of a PhD, it was really worth it. In her words, 'I'm a philosopher, not a pencil-pusher.'

This issue is important, since

it can severely impact on the morale of postgraduates, tomorrow's academics. Perhaps, in a sense, it's a good thing that most postgraduates aren't aware of just how choked with administration academia is-but, on the other hand, it'll be a nasty shock and, as my supervisors put it, 'when most new academics find out, they get out.'

This all sounds very doom-and-gloom, and certainly there are no signs, as yet, that universities are going to ease up the administrative load. However, there are some encouraging signs. The most obvious is the fact that almost every academic loathes the administrative load they are put under, and such 'discontent' can't be suppressed forever. Most academics just want to be given the resources they need and then be left alone to do the job. Utopian as this might sound, it's a far from impossible dream. Some older faculty members will remember the 'good old days', in the 1960s and 1970s, when academics enjoyed far more freedom to teach and research unencumbered by interminable reviews and committees. After all, the increasing numbers of undergraduates, all of them savvy 'education consumers' who want to know where their money is going, there is some justification for bureaucratisation-but not to the Kafkaesque extents we see today. So there is certainly a desire for change- so that administrators sign the cheques, keep the books, and leave the thinking to the academics.

The academics vs. the administrators: a response...

Dr Fiona Denney, Nicola Sainsbury and Jennie Edridge (King's College, London)

There is no doubt that academia IS a difficult environment for lots of reasons, but there our agreement with Ian Kidd must come to an end. Whereas Ian and his departmental professor felt it necessary to lump all university administrators together and blame the current evils of the academic world on them, it is certainly not the case that all administrators are the same (anymore than all academics are!) or that they are to blame for the increased regulatory burdens.

It is the case that UK HEIs have seen a massive increase in regulatory and other requirements over the years. The HEI environment today is vastly different from the relatively-unfettered one in the 1960s that many academics remember. But this has happened for a number of reasons, one of which is that the spending of public money should be accounted for and that the tax-payer in the UK is increasingly demanding more transparency and clarity about what their money is being spent on. There are very few tax-paying adults in the UK who would argue against increased regulation of public institutions to safeguard mis-uses of public money. One only has to think of the recent MPs expenses scandals to recognise this. In addition, the students and the academics themselves have been asking more and deeper questions about how important university decisions are made – what criteria are used to award

degrees, grade papers etc and from the academics – what criteria are used in grant-funding decisions, the RAE outcomes and how editors decide which papers to publish, amongst others.

It is not the administrators within the institutions themselves who are to blame for the increase in regulatory and other requirements that have come the way of higher education in the UK. Instead, these changes have come about as a result of wider cultural changes, a better educated public, more people going to university, government policies and greater scrutiny of the public purse. The administrators and professionals at the heart of universities actively seek to divert these administrative burdens away from the academics. It is indeed worth noting that if the professional administrators did not exist, then the entire paperwork burdens of QA requirements and RAE submissions (amongst other requirements) would fall onto the shoulders of the individual academics. One wonders, if this were the case, whether they would then have any time at all for teaching or research. Or thinking...

It is also important to note that professional administration within universities provides a career opportunity for PhD students who are no longer sure that research or teaching is for them. Universities work best when academics and

administrators work together for the good of the organisation and not against one another. Ian Kidd's article is not helpful in that it reflected an old-fashioned view of "us versus them" that is not constructive in the highly competitive, modern climate that UK HEIs actually operate. It is worse still that his article was targeted at PGRs as it is truly worrying if this attitude to administrators is being inculcated into the academics of the future. These outdated attitudes will not help change anything for the better.

It is considerably more helpful and constructive when people with academic backgrounds become administrators (where there is a good career path in many organisations), and when administrators undertake further study as part of their personal and professional development. It is also beneficial if these administrators deliver training and presentations on what they do and engage actively with academics as their colleagues. On both sides, this presents opportunities to increase understanding of the different working environments and to facilitate communication for the common goal of benefiting students, teaching, research and the institution itself.

Are you fit to study?

Jon Le Toq on the benefits of working out while working on your thesis...

Studying for a PhD can fast become a vicious circle of low energy levels and waning concentration, with tasks taking twice as long as they should. It is quite common for PGRs to neglect their health and fitness during their PhD, especially in the final stages of the thesis. But fear not, PhD does not have to stand for Physical Health Deteriorates! You should not ignore your health as it will only leave you vulnerable to recurring illness which can interrupt your research, leave you feeling depressed due to low self-esteem and even threaten your mental sharpness.

The reason so many fail to stay fit and healthy whilst studying is a belief that exercise takes a lot of time to be effective. Many people believe that longer is better when it comes to exercise so it becomes a choice between time-consuming gym sessions or doing nothing. It doesn't have to be this way!

Here are the greatest lies about exercise and what you can do avoid them:

1. Long, moderately paced cardio is required to burn fat whilst shorter sessions of weight training just makes you big and bulky.

Wrong. Focus on high-intensity sessions which combine cardio interval training and weight training for maximum effect. Even if you could find time to train for 5 hours each week, it still leaves 163 hours each week for work. If all you do is run or cycle, you have to go for longer each time to provide a challenge for your body.

Boring! Short but intense training and intervals can elevate your metabolism for up to 38 hours after the session which means you burn more calories even when you're slaving away at the laptop! You'll also keep stress hormones down in comparison to long runs which have been shown to elevate cortisol – you have enough of that from worrying about your thesis!

2. You need time to get to a gym

Wrong. Your body will react best to training with bodyweight and free weight exercises and short intervals. This can be done with weights at home or in the park where you can sprint around.

You'll also benefit from the fresh air which will stimulate your brain.

When you feel good about yourself and get the right balance between the intensity of exercise and hard study and the lows of relaxation and rest, you'll be amazed at how easy it is to live a fit and healthy lifestyle and the benefits this brings to your work.

So try to schedule three or four 20 minute exercise sessions spread through the week. Once this becomes routine you'll start to crave your 'Me time'. Eating the right food is also important. Make a healthy shopping list of non-processed food and commit to preparing food each evening for the next day.

Eating high carbohydrate meals like sandwiches and pasta dishes will lead to a blood sugar drop an hour or so later. You



don't want this down time as you need you to maintain and sustain focus. Instead eat proteins, vegetables and small doses of healthy fats for consistently high energy levels and low body fat.

Try to get to bed before 10.30 at least three times per week – you'll be much more time-efficient. Drinking at least 2 litres of water everyday will also keep you alert, stimulate your energy pathways and mental alertness.

There is no such thing as a stressful situation only a stressful reaction. Your reaction is determined by how much you look after your body and mind so make sure that you keep them both in tip-top condition with just a little planning and regulation. You will start to feel like you have more energy, greater concentration and focus for the ultimate goal of finishing that PhD.

Jon Le Toq owns Storm Force Fitness an online fitness company dedicated to getting busy people fit through short workouts and healthy eating. You can get his 42 day step-by-step guide at: www.fatlossactionblueprint.com and his delicious healthy recipes at www.fatlosscookbook.com .

Blogging your way to completion...

Suzi Richer (York) on how a blog can help you with the thesis-slog

My blog, 'Springtime', became a vital aid in the final writing stage of my PhD. My thesis was concerned with archaeology and palaeoecology, but my blog was about food: buying it, growing it, making it and photographing it. Creating various dishes and blogging about them helped me in some surprising ways. I say to all readers, that the power of food goes beyond nutrition!

You could argue that it was having an alternative focus on that gave me the much needed break from writing-up the thesis. I struggled with taking time out. Guilt always niggled away at me; I would think, 'I should writing or correcting or compiling my bibliography'. Writing for the blog still gave me feelings of guilt, but it wasn't as bad. After all, I had to make breakfast, lunch and dinner regardless, so I could justify that part to myself, and I was at my computer anyway, so I would just write the occasional sentence or two as it occurred to me. It didn't feel time-consuming and actually productive.

Doing something different also meant that I 'met' new people. I was astonished that people were a) reading Springtime b) commenting on it c) that the comments showed genuine support and interest. When you're trying to get a methodology chapter finished at midnight and someone from the USA leaves a comment at that time (yes – I did check the blog fairly frequently) it made the writing process less lonesome.

So far, I could also be referring to any hobby, social networking site, texting or even chatting to a friend and that side of it was fun, relaxing and different. However, what I did not anticipate was how blogging actually helped my PhD writing in other unexpected ways.

After writing pages and pages of a descriptive results chapter, I was beginning to lose the will to live. Using the same vocabulary and sentence structure was tiresome beyond belief. The nature of my PhD was quite scientific; and try as I might, there was little scope for creativity.

Writing my blog became a liberating experience. I could suddenly write in whatever style I chose and there was no one to stop me or question me! Writing in a different style also helped me to see that I could make my results chapter more interesting, even if I only tried to change the sentence structure slightly. I don't think this was something the examiners even noticed, but it made a huge difference to my morale and getting the darned chapter finished. The other side effect of writing Springtime was its ability to help me over periods of writer's block. By taking a step back from the PhD and writing what came out naturally, Springtime helped me to start that first sentence of the next chapter, which had previously seemed so elusive.

Another unexpected bonus was the structure it gave to my working day. Time management is such an important part of getting the PhD to completion and I have only just realised that I have quite a short attention span. Giving myself rewards for finishing a chapter or 'x' thousand words, didn't really work with me. I needed shorter targets to work to. Whoever would have thought that making marmalade and steak pie would provide the answer! Every 45mins to 1 hour I would give myself a 15 minute break to complete the next stage in the kitchen or write a quick paragraph about it for Springtime. It did wonders for my motivation and word count!

If you decide to try your hand at blog-writing in the final stages of writing-up the PhD, do so with caution. You have to give it structure, or it will take over your life. I found the structure that I imposed on the blog helped me to enforce structure on my PhD writing, but it could very easily have consumed me. Also, don't tell anyone you're doing it! With the best will in the world friends and family will already be asking, 'How's the writing-up going?'. Your blog is your space with no pressure attached, so don't invite it in.

'Springtime follows the ups and downs of finishing a PhD ... and how to grow some vegetables and bake some yummy food!'

Where did the last months go?

Tijana Vukicevic (Queen's University, Belfast) on finishing (or not).....

It's September and I am extending the submission date for my Psychology dissertation. Where did the past few months go? It was only May when I sat down to complete the rest of my write-up having finished my data collection. I'd finished the research, the progress monitoring forms were filled in, supervisors assured and yet 6 months on, I'm still grappling with statistical analysis. What happened? Great expectations happened.

I naively thought that working hard towards a deadline would mean reaching it. How wrong I was! I started seriously writing up over a year ago, but the time and effort put in isn't an automatic indicator as to when you'll finish, even though the deadline can be an important motivator for us all. Missing the projected submission date can mean financial strain, the delay of a well-deserved holiday, and for most of us the delay of just getting rid of the thing!

When I first sat down to analyse my work, I still thought I had a hope of finishing by that dreaded mid-September deadline. So I breezed and blitzed and huffed and puffed my way through, only to find that what I had written made no sense at all. I hadn't answered any of the research questions, and I wasn't thinking logically.

Everyone will have different stumbling blocks during their PhD. For me, the literature review was predictable. I had done many before, I was familiar

with the work and I knew what to look for. The goal-setting was straightforward, and the amount of work involved was palpable. The analysis on the other hand was full of twists and turns and feeling-around-in-the-dark sort of work, and the particular type of analysis involved was something I had never done before. No amount of late nights could compensate for that, and working with a clear head was essential.

No matter how much you plan ahead, and how much time you spend on your work, you have to calculate in a bit of time for the less predictable bits of your PhD. Even at that, it may not be enough if your work takes a new direction.

For a thing as big as a PhD dissertation, there's only so much you can do. Seriously. There are stakes, stakeholders, instruments to be ordered, materials to be organised, and a sheer mass of work to be got through that cannot be rushed. Every single PhD is very different in content and volume, and yet after 3 years ultimately you're on your own.

Supervisors have a role to play in determining realistic goals. Some can underestimate the amount of time you have or the amount of work that's involved. Typically, their guess is as good as anyone's, and I would say you should trust your own judgment, as well as considering others'. A month ago my supervisor believed I would finish on time, yet I think I'd be lucky to finish before Christmas.

Luckily, there is hope, fellow PGRs. And that hope is called the PhD process.



That illusive phenomenon that everyone talks about from day one, but that will evade you until you reach your final year. That process has taught me more about acceptance than the Declaration of Human Rights.

During your PhD you have to be prepared for what's coming, and if you're not, get used to it quick. From my own experience, the difference between getting a PhD and not getting one is precisely that characteristic. The ability to press on despite anything that might be happening to you in your personal or academic life. The ability to bounce back- even if it takes you a while to do so. I say the ability, but I really mean the process of understanding that this is the only way you will get through it. Unfortunately, neither enthusiasm, beauty, brains, elbow grease, eureka moments, fists or fights will get you there. Just put one foot in front of the other and soldier on.

Throughout my PhD I have thought about quitting about at least 100 times, and at the toughest times even more (try 100 times per day). My advice would be to plough on. Working towards a deadline gives you focus, but don't let it take over. It's a petty thing to be thinking about when you've got more important things to do!

Dear Dr Flo...

I have just successfully completed my PhD – I had my viva last Thursday and passed with minor corrections (spelling and typos mainly). In the run-up to the viva, it seemed as though the world would be my oyster when I completed but I woke up on Friday morning feeling very depressed because I now have no job and no money – just huge debts. I have, as yet, not been able to get a further research or teaching post in a university and I am very concerned about the job market at the moment. I did my PhD in 19th century English literature with a view to having an academic career but there seem to be no academic openings coming up in the area I live in. I really don't know what to do and am hoping you may be able to advise me.

Frustrated Academic

Dear Frustrated Academic,

First of all, congratulations on having successfully completed your PhD! This is a massive achievement. You now have the highest qualification that it is possible to obtain in the UK and no-one can ever take that away from you. Following the massive emotional, financial and time investment necessary for a successful completion, it is not unusual for PhD students to wake up after their viva feeling that their lives are over. And indeed in one way this is true. One part of your life – that of being a PhD student – is indeed over and it is entirely normal to feel a sense of loss as this comes to an end. Without wishing to sound like a cliché, however, in every ending is a new beginning. Now it is time for you to give your future life some shape and investment. It sounds from your letter as though you had not given your future career thought – you had made the assumption that a PhD would necessarily open the academic doors for you. Sadly, this is not the case. The recession has already had an impact on many institutions – government funding has not increased, return on investments are lower and some universities are looking at having to make staffing cuts.

Against this backdrop, you need to work out what really drives you and what you want to do as a

career and not let the current financial situation interfere with your dreams. You just may have to be more creative in scoping out the path you take to get there. You talk, for example, about wanting to become an academic but how much teaching have you done? Can you demonstrate that you have engaged with the other facets of academic life besides research – administration, teaching and being involved with the life of the institution. Your investment in other skills besides the PhD research are those that will make you stand out when jobs do surface.

It is possible for you to get another job to pay the bills whilst you get experience relevant to becoming an academic. You could, for example, take on some part-time teaching at a local further education college or university that specialises in part-time evening classes. These pay well and will give you an ideal opportunity to get teaching experience and to make contacts, whilst contributing to paying the bills. You can then find other work during the day as necessary.

Or you could seek out another career by identifying the wider, generic skills you have already developed and applying those to a different sector. And don't forget that your university's careers service will be able to

provide you with useful advice and guidance and help you with writing a CV and application and preparing for interviews. Most university careers services are available to students for a while after they have graduated and you would do well to utilise this expert advice. In particular, they will help you identify the skills you have acquired through managing and doing a long-term research project and guide you on how you can present these skills for jobs outside of academia.

I'm sorry that I can't change the situation for you and promise you an academic post, but the reality is that there aren't going to be enough academic jobs for all those people completing PhDs and post-doctoral positions and most will have to think about other careers. I wouldn't advise anyone to leave it until after their viva is over – this is a serious decision that requires investment and thought from the earliest possible moment.

Good luck with your future career. Think carefully about what you want to do and then seek the best possible ways to get there.

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

For better or for worse...

Steven Clarke on the problems living with a PGR and their PhD.

She sits there ignoring me, staring at the screen, only nodding occasionally. She is distracted, not interested in what I am saying or doing or how my day went. When I try to coax her away, she does so reluctantly... Then, like a moth to a flame, she is soon back sitting at her desk, head in hands, looking frustratingly at chapter II of her thesis. Not even X-Factor and the prospect of Cheryl's dress, Simon's cutting remarks or Danni Minogue's botox-injected fake smile enough to tear her away from her desk. I have surrendered my masculinity and pride by agreeing to watch X-Factor with her, and even in this bold gesture, I am rejected.

This is more than an occasional scenario. This is not only every Saturday night, but most days of the week; for when she is not researching and writing her PhD, she is either checking emails, writing funding applications, or attending conferences. It is hard living with and going out with a PGR you see. She says I don't understand- her job is not 9 to 5 and she can't just switch off like most people. But then I don't think she fully realises how difficult it is for me to be dating one.

Even she would admit that she can be a nightmare, for if she is not working, she is thinking about working. She has serious mood-swings and can be restless and irritable. Having spoken to other partners of PGRs, these are quite common and are not confined to the female sex.

These stressful bouts are infrequent, but their timing is easy

to predict, often surfacing at the start and finish of every term and the night before a deadline. I am told that during the last six months of the PhD they become a weekly occurrence.

Our arguments often take a familiar course. 'You have no idea of the stress I am going through' she cries, so I try to de-stress by suggesting some time off. 'But you don't understand', she responds, 'that will be time-wasted, I won't be able to enjoy myself and will end up feeling more stressed'. Fine. So instead I arrange a night out with my mates. 'Why are you leaving me to cope with this by myself' she whines. 'Go on, go out, have fun while I sit here wallowing in misery.' In such circumstances, I feel powerless and dejected. It is as though I have lost her to her PhD.

Having lived with her for the first two years of this journey, I am not looking forward to the next year but recently I have started to adopt some coping strategies which will hopefully make the next 12 months a bit easier for both her and I.

'Get some bloody perspective' I frequently cry. This may sound harsh, but it is true. It is a recognised method otherwise known as 'tough love'. The prerogative should be to finish the thesis, however it is worth reminding one's partner that they should not allow it to completely dominate their lives and those around them. Ultimately this is selfish behaviour. Moreover putting so much pressure on oneself is destructive and can lead to unnecessary stress which will detract from work.

Doing a PhD is an extremely self-indulgent and self-gratifying thing to do. I frequently remind my partner that her thesis will not bring about peace in the Middle East or a cure for AIDS. She needs to treat it for what it is- a means to an end. Harsh, but true.

Perhaps most importantly, my girlfriend and I have learnt the art of communication. Arguments take up an inordinate amount of the time and energy. Both her stress and my inability to actually listen and talk it through with her were proving a rather destructive force in our relationship. Rational communication on both sides has put a stop to this.

Finally, it is necessary to make plans to spend time together. PGRs obsessively plan their time down to the hour. So, yes it may sound unromantic, but scheduling a time when both of you do something together is crucial. Lack of funds might not stretch to dinner at Nobu, but what you do doesn't actually matter. The key is 'quality time spent together'- that age-old advice perennially dished out by agony aunts.

The next 12 months are going to be tough, but as I often say to her with a wink and wry smile: 'What doesn't break us, makes us stronger.'

So while you lot are busy with your work, spare a little thought for us PhD-widowers. Those that admittedly aren't doing the PhD, but feel the pain nonetheless. And for those of you are both a PGR and dating a PGR, best of luck!

What I wish I'd known from the start...

Alice Perry (Durham) offers some advice on getting the most out of the first year...

I am nearly done. After three years of hard slog, dedication and serious work, I am finally coming to the end. The beginning seems like another lifetime, indeed it was, in that time I have lived in three different flats, had two separate supervisors and been in three failing relationships. It is therefore an appropriate time on wish to reflect on my first year as a PGR, for me to consider the good and the not-so-good decisions I made, in the hope that GRADBritain readers can learn from my mistakes!

I hit the ground running and did a lot of research in my first year. I was enthusiastic, ready, willing and able to explore every avenue my research took me. Whilst this meant that I got a lot of work done, it also meant that I did a lot of unnecessary research. I spent inordinate amounts of time reading and taking notes of stuff that was only tangentially linked to my subject and knew would not go into the final thesis. So my advice would be, be strict with yourself, set the thesis boundaries at the start and stick to them. Your thesis is a specific study which answers key research questions not a general intellectual exploration of stuff that interests you.

I also spent a lot of my first year going to seminars and conferences, networking with both my peers and the broader academic community. It is amazing how easy networking becomes once you have a specialism. I remember finding it impossible to talk with senior academics when I was doing my masters; 'Hi, I'm, Alice and I'm

post-1750 British Imperial history, take an interest in me please!' yep, it didn't work at all. Remember your thesis ALWAYS gives you something to talk about, and whilst it shouldn't be the ONLY topic you talk about, it is important to realise that it is the thing that will make you interesting to other academics. (I'm sure there will be other things as well).

I also immersed myself in the PGR community in my department, university and in my discipline. I had been warned that the PhD experience could be a lonely one and was determined that this would be not be the case for me. I organised conferences, got involved in PGR politics and established a small network for my specialism. I found this support hugely beneficial both professionally and mentally. The ability to meet with your PGR friends once a fortnight down the pub is invaluable. What has been fantastic is that we have all kept in touch throughout the three years and have shared each other's viva celebrations. So my advice would be to talk, engage and socialise with your peer group. They offer an invaluable source of support.

Mid-way through my first year I presented my work at an academic conference. It was only a 20 minute paper and I found the whole experience terrifying. On reflection, disseminating my work early on in my PhD was a very good idea. It meant that I was forced to think about communicating my work early on, to write and think about how I wanted to interpret my work.

The downside to this however was that after that initial great experience, I caught the conference bug. I started signing up for every conference advertised not thinking strategically about how each paper would complement the particular aspect of the research I was then working on. So my advice would be to present your work early on, but choose your conferences carefully and try to make them fit with your plan for your thesis rather than the other way round!

Personally I wish I had been more systematic during my first year. While I achieved a lot, I did not think about cataloguing my bibliography, writing up my hand written notes or clearly referencing my material. Oh how I regret all this now when I am compiling my bibliography and footnotes! I also wish I had been much more definite about the boundaries of my project and the research I was going to conduct over the three years. It is important to be flexible and to go where the research takes you, however you need restrictions otherwise the PhD will go on and on. In other words, it is important in the first year to find out and know your research limits.

Finally one of the most important things I did in my first year was to take a long relaxing holiday during the summer months so that I was fully refreshed and ready for the challenges of the second year- which unfortunately is when the pressure is really on and the enthusiasm begins to wane!



A Rough Guide to..post-thesis

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Whether you are approaching the end of your PhD or starting out, you are all probably concerned with what you will do after it. If that is the case then the Vitae report on career destinations of doctoral graduates is perfect reading for you. Here is a brief overview of the report findings:

Arts and humanities

The majority of these doctorates go on to work in education or teaching sectors and less than 20% take on research roles. The career paths are by no means defined and predictable. One doctorate describes juggling thesis amendments, research posts and academic applications.

Biological sciences

The percentage of biological science graduates that go into research roles is the highest for any discipline (64%). Less than ten percent enter teaching professions and with half of these choosing lecturing roles.

Biomedical sciences

Biomedical sciences graduates are more likely to go on to health professional roles than any other discipline. A third enter research roles and less than 15% choose

educational and teaching professions.

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Physical sciences and engineering

Graduates from this discipline make up the largest discipline of UK doctoral graduates. Just under half of these stay in research positions, both in and outside of academia. 42% of new doctoral graduates from this discipline stay in the education sector, but were half as likely to enter teaching occupations (6%). 1/4 of graduates go on to be employed in manufacturing and finance, higher than any other discipline.

Social sciences

Under half of graduates from this area go into education and teaching and 34% enter higher education lecturing roles. Less than 15% go to work in research roles. One case study suggests that although there is an emphasis on career planning,

keeping an open mind is crucial.

The importance of the doctorate

The report highlights how the doctorate teaches you to 'be self aware of your strengths and weaknesses'. It emphasises how the doctorate can have a long-term and profound influence on character and confidence. It seems that the experience of over-coming the challenges of a PhD has a significant influence on confidence and self-belief, with several graduates saying that they felt better able to face the challenges in their later careers due to the skills developed during the PhD. Another theme was the value of transferable skills training. A number of case studies eluded towards a sense of regret that the skill development opportunities weren't fully taken advantage of. The report re-iterates what we already know: taking time away from the day-to-day PhD process to develop transferable skills is key when considering the bigger, post PhD picture.

To download 'What do researchers do? First destinations of doctoral graduates by subject' www.vitae.ac.uk/wdrd

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/. Issue 10 will be published 1 March 2010. Next deadline is 1 February 2010.

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