



GRADBritain

A magazine for and by postgraduate researchers in the United Kingdom

Spring is here....

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GRADBritain hitting the headlines! For those who didn't see it, last edition's comment and response piece on plagiarism was featured in the education supplement of the *Independent* in January which is testament to the quality of articles that we receive from our readers, so keep them coming...

In the spring edition we have an array of articles on themes ranging from the importance of managing your web-presence to the thorny issue of sexual harassment in academia, as well as all our regular features Dr Flo, Geoffrey Thicket and Rough Guide..... Happy Reading!

Young Researchers in Europe Conference

In November last year GRADBritain was lucky enough to attend the 'Young Researchers in Europe' conference hosted by the French Presidency of the European Union. The conference brought together 400 delegates from higher education to discuss the ways in which different European countries are working towards providing researchers with social recognition, equitable employment and training and career development opportunities. The series of panels generated in-depth discussion about priority lines of action for the European partnership for researchers. One major suggestion was the setting up of academic partnerships for a more open and attractive European Area for Research, with the objective of increasing the mobility of researchers across Europe.

The conference was enlightening and gave an insight into the 'behind the scenes' progress in making research a more rewarding career choice in terms of prospects and security. To find out more go to <http://www.yre2008.eu/>

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Stuff that might interest you...

New online information on equality and diversity

Check out the Vitae website which offers advice and support for disabled researchers, part-time and international researchers, carers, parent and mature postgraduate researchers as well as information on undertaking a doctorate at a distance.

<http://www.vitae.ac.uk/1263/Help-and-support.html>

Dual responsibilities

Gia Aradottir (Imperial) on a difficult balancing act....

There must be a few of us out there; single parents doing a PhD. When I started my PhD, over two years ago, I thought it couldn't be any different from doing a 'normal' job and taking care of a child. The truth is that I wasn't prepared for the arrival of the knot in the stomach, the endless feeling of guilt that comes from being in education. This represents itself mainly in thinking that a) you should still be in the lab when you're at home, or b) that you should be at home with your child when you are in the office.

I can't say I didn't know what I was getting into. I was warned by more than one person that it was going to be very hard. I have to admit that I didn't really believe them, but as it happens they were right. Working on a PhD with a small child is quite a challenge, but hopefully not impossible. Now in my third year I still enjoy the work very much, although at times I wonder if I know more about the life and work of 'Postman Pat' and the people of Greendale, than I do about my chosen subject on the interaction between aphid pests and their host plants.

People often ask how I cope, and I bravely reply that it's not that hard really, that I just carry on working after my son has gone to bed. This is true, but it is also true that my work/life/sleep balance could be better, and that sleep usually loses out. I have finally realised that the intention to read papers in the evening after my son has gone to sleep is very honourable, but often not very productive. My brain is not

very alert after a full day's work. The trials of coming home and getting a three year old to eat his dinner, have a bath and go to sleep don't help either. Now I do something more practical, take spreadsheets home to work on, or use the evenings to draft some text, which requires less concentration.

On the other hand, having my son might be a blessing in disguise. I can't get completely lost in my PhD. An energetic three year old is not at all interested in the mechanisms behind host selection in insects, and keeps me firmly grounded in the 'real' world. He thinks my work consists of collecting insects, looking at trees and playing games on the computer. He's not entirely wrong either!

Being a single parent also has its advantages. I don't have to negotiate with anyone about how I spend my time, so if I feel like snuggling up on the sofa with my laptop and a cup of tea six evenings out of seven, no one will complain.

What also helps enormously is having sympathetic supervisors. Mine have both been excellent and very supportive. As the three year deadline looms, I wonder how I'm going to manage to finish my experiments and write up before the funding comes to an end. I'll get there somehow, the question is just how close to – and on which side of, the deadline it will be.



Top Ten:

Differences between arts and science students....

1. Who ever heard of a lab scientist doing a PhD part time?
2. Writing up: dry summary of revolutionary research findings or an eloquent defence of argument to conceal your lack of research.
3. Exploratory hypothesis are met with scepticism and a raised eyebrow by science supervisors.
4. Adjectives in the sciences also trigger the raised eyebrow and a prompt enrolment on a 'writing in the sciences' course.
5. Occupational hazards: singeing your hair on a bunsen burner or that annoying paper cut?
6. Facial hair: Einstein's tash or Aristotle's wisdom beard?
7. Attire: tweed jacket and suave cravat versus fetching white coat and lab goggles?
8. Arts students mock the very idea of 'poster session' of your research.
9. Scientists are happily content that their research has a social purpose and have the funding to prove it.
10. Arts students worry that their research is of little worth or value, such fears reinforced by the lack of funding.

Postgraduate group therapy

Gillian Urquhart (Edinburgh) offers her personal reflections on her GRADSchool experience....

Completing a PhD can be a soul destroying process. Like many, I am undertaking a PhD on a project I find fascinating and am surrounded by a supportive group of academics. Yet, this is often not enough to quash recurring feelings that my efforts are in vain, that my research has no purpose and that my time would be better spent finding a job 'in the real world'.

I was in the middle of experiencing one of these bouts when someone suggested that I register for a Vitae GRADSchool. I took the plunge, with the view that if a career in research was not necessarily for me, perhaps it would help me explore other options available. I also wanted to discover whether there was any meaning in all this 'transferable skills' talk that employers and research councils promote so fervently.

The first thing I discovered at GRADSchool was not that the PhD had equipped me with a set of wide ranging and valuable skills (that was the second thing). It was that I was not alone in feeling scared and uncertain about my post-PhD career. The workshop began with a talk on how to promote the skills that you have acquired as a PhD student to potential employers. We were also asked to think about the skills we wish to develop and our objectives for the week. In order for us to do this we were split into groups and given a carrier bag containing coloured paper, glue, some lollypop sticks, tin foil and various other Blue Peter style goodies. 'You have 20 minutes to be creative and then give us a

shopping channel advert to sell us what you've made. GO!' What we made was irrelevant (although there were some fantastic gadgets produced), the purpose was to demonstrate our creative skills.

This 'icebreaker' exercise was just the start. For the challenges we were subsequently set were far more interesting not to mention extremely demanding. Every task, from filling up a punctured pipe with ice cold water (tip – bring waterproof trousers) to pitching novel ideas about e-commerce to a client, was both physically and mentally challenging. (*The Apprentice* is small fry compared to a GRADSchool!) There was never enough time to discuss the proposal, fill in the paperwork, write the presentation before we were back in front of tutor and peers alike, trying to sound like we were confident in our pitch! Personally I found this extremely stressful, but as such I learnt a lot about myself; how I react in a pressured environment, the things that I am good at, and stuff I am not so good at and need to work on.

If you attend a GRADSchool, you will become extremely familiar with the words 'feedback' and 'review'. Phrases such as 'personal reflection' and sentences that start with 'I feel' suddenly become part of your everyday vocabulary; indeed it may take several days to get out of the habit of engaging your flatmates in 'group review' sessions over the dinner table. Every day concluded with a group therapy session to assess

how our team and as individuals we were developing. This for me was by far the most educational and useful aspect of the week. It is one thing to be aware of what I think I am good at, but to be told by my peers that I am effective at something completely unexpected is obviously a huge confidence boost. Likewise, it is equally valuable to be told what I am not so good at, so that I can do something about it.

One final and very important component of the GRADSchool is of course the tutors. In no other environment is a PhD student exposed to such a diverse range of expertise and advice. It is vital to use this source of knowledge and help. I had potentially life changing conversations with two inspirational people. I say 'potentially,' because alone they are just words of advice. It is now up to me to act on these words over the coming weeks, months and years. So I would strongly encourage every disillusioned or confused PhD student (and even the happy ones, there must be some out there!) to attend a GRADSchool. Yes, you will be challenged, you will be exhausted, you will meet a range of scientists with comedy beards, but ultimately you will be more confident in the abilities you have and the choices you make.



Unruly conduct

Katy Lawrence* addresses the serious issue of sexual harassment in Britain's universities....

Picture this scenario: A young female MA student reaches the end of her first term. Convinced that she wants to do a PhD, she embarks on the funding application circus. She soon realises that she is a strange name among the familiar darlings her department have fostered from undergraduate to Masters level. And the further she goes along the process, the more she realises she has no ally whom will fight for her in those all-so decisive faculty meetings, where AHRC rankings are fought for and futures unmade. She fails to even make the faculty's top ten and is placed in funding Siberia.

Disillusioned and frustrated she decides to arrange a meeting with her personal tutor. An aged professor and stalwart of the Faculty he might be able to offer some insight while protecting her confidentiality. I shall now leave our young MA student poised at his door, waiting for him to respond to her knock.

Dear reader, if you were this young woman, would you upon entering his office close the door behind you or leave it open? In the US this is a point of law, but here the answer is singular: We would shut it, for fear of letting in a draft or distracting noise. And that's exactly what the student did. What followed over the next hour was nothing short of sexual harassment that in any other workplace or industry would be considered utterly unacceptable and reprehensible with serious professional implications for the man. Here are the x-rated bits: the man, in his sixties, was

incredibly sympathetic to his student, he bemoaned the internal politics involved in the graduate funding system. He advised her to forget it all and only think about the subject she loved. He took an interest in her thesis topic on a female writer whom he had known personally. He knew for a fact that this author loved sadomasochistic sex, particularly to be beaten by lovers with physical deformities, in fact she liked nothing more than to believe they were raping her. Hardly surprising he went on, as all women really fantasize about being raped, especially by their own fathers. He asked the student if this was one of her own personal fantasies. He then stuck his hand deep into his pocket and simulated a sexual act, and said: 'If you look, you want it, but if you don't look, you still want it, right? That's how women work.' Perhaps our student should have walked out at this point. But she didn't. She stayed, hid her blushes and giggles, and consoled herself with the thought that this distinguished academic was hardly a real sexual threat. Also at the back her mind was that it would not help her funding cause any further to offend a senior member of the faculty. She thanked the man for his help and left.

This man's behaviour was totally unacceptable by anyone's standards. But her case is not that unusual. How many female graduate students do you know that are having 'intense' relationships with their older male tutors?

I know plenty. The dynamic is an age-old one that usually holds mutual benefit. The student gets to hero worship and be flattered by the attention, the professor gets the ego boost of being revered and having something young and pretty to look at. What merits acceptable and unacceptable behaviour is remarkably blurred in academia. Supervisions are often held over wine, at any hour, and in the tutors' homes- in what other sphere of life is this common professional practice? Any other business would have it written in black and white, and most employees would know exactly their rights. But no such structures exist in academia. The inadequacy of guidelines in this area are bleakly illustrated in how this particular case ended.

The young woman, after having been advised by her friends to 'say something', found herself totally lost as to what action to take. Ironically, the obvious person to tell would have been her 'personal tutor'! Once she decided not to stay at that particular institution, she contacted the Dean and told him everything. The Dean expressed his regret, informing her that this wasn't the first time a complaint had been made against the professor. He told her that he would make a point of not assigning any 'pretty young things' to this professor. The moral of this story is that until strict regulations are put in place, this vicious cycle of abuse will unfortunately continue.

Dear Dr Flo...

Dear Dr Flo

I started a full-time PhD in history about 14 months ago and am beginning to wonder why! I applied to study with a very eminent researcher in my field and was initially very excited about my research project and mentor. When I started I had aspirations of becoming a fully fledged academic but currently I feel really cheated and de-motivated. I have only seen this professor once since I started, so far all of my meetings have been conducted with the second supervisor. I am her first PhD student and she doesn't really seem to have much confidence in guiding my project. She is also very absorbed with her own research and our meetings are losing frequency – I now haven't seen her for nearly two months. I am beginning to feel that no-one here is bothered about me or my research project at all. Yours in hope.

Dear Y-I-H,

There are a number of issues in your letter to me which need addressing: issues with supervision, motivation problems and the question of whether you would really rather be doing something other than your PhD.

Firstly, your supervision. Sadly, it is not an uncommon situation to sign up with one professor and find you are actually being supervised by another. I think there are a number of things you can do here. Firstly, you need to take charge of organising supervisory meetings yourself. As you rightly indicate, it is YOUR research project and not your supervisor's. You need to take responsibility for getting dates of meetings into your diary and your supervisor's. Secondly, you can request that you meet with both of your supervisors on a regular basis. I would suggest that you try to meet with your second supervisor (the one you currently see) on a fortnightly basis and ask that at least once a term (or once a month if you can) you meet with them both and see how that goes.

I would also advise you to find out if your university runs skills training courses for PhD students – most do these days. It would be very useful for you to attend some project management training to help you take charge

more of your research project. This will also help with some of the de-motivated feelings and enable you to meet fellow researchers who may be in a similar position.

De-motivation in the second year of the (full-time) PhD is a common problem. The 'newness' and excitement of starting the project has worn off and problems start to emerge. Deadlines start to loom but at the same time it feels as though you have several mountains to climb before you reach the stage of submitting your thesis.

There are several things you can do here to help the situation and yourself: firstly, tell your supervisor how you feel and be honest with her if you are struggling. This might waken her up a bit and she may become a bit more pro-active and involved with your research project.

Secondly, take a few moments to write down why you wanted to do a PhD and keep that piece of paper to hand and refer to it whenever you feel de-motivated. It will help to focus your mind and help to restore your confidence and enthusiasm for your project.

As a last word, I would like to say that I have addressed this de-motivation issue as a common problem that happens to a lot of

PhD students. If it is more serious than this and starts to affect your mental health (it can be a symptom of clinical depression) then you need to seek professional help from your GP and/or the counselling service at your university, but do keep your supervisor informed at all times. Good luck!

Dr Flo

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



One cup or two?

Christina Brindley (Manchester Metropolitan Uni) on the addictive pleasures of that mocha-choca latte....

It's 11am at the John Rylands University Library. Coffee break time! I mosey down to the 'Library Lounge' - a coffee bar, vending machines and a seating area with black leather sofas and multi-coloured stools - and join the lengthy queue. Finally I reach the counter. 'Morning,' I chirrup in anticipation. 'Could I have a latte please?' A grimace passes across the normally smiling face. 'I'm really sorry,' she stammers guiltily. 'But the coffee machine's broken. We've only got tea.' Panicky Chinese whispers relay the devastating news down the line. 'The coffee machine's broken! They've only got tea!' A riot almost breaks out as student after student reluctantly agrees to accept tea.

All of which got me to thinking: just what is the daily caffeine intake of the average PhD student? Think about it. How often do you encounter a postgraduate who doesn't drink coffee? Okay, so it does happen. A friend of mine is a die-hard tea devotee, but most postgrads are unable to function without their daily fix of americano or cappuccino. Personally, I seem incapable of writing coherently about Elizabethan Catholicism without my extra-large Simpsons mug filled with steaming coffee and my own eclectic mix of music blasting from the PC - think Sinatra meets Rammstein. Whether they like it instant or percolated, black or white, espresso or even decaff, what unites most of us postgraduates is our penchant for the humble coffee bean.

But have you ever thought how much this addiction to the bean costs us? Financially, I would be substantially more solvent if I stopped buying coffees everywhere. The cost of a half decent coffee is galling and we've all unwillingly shelled out extortionate amounts for a fix, be it on a Virgin Pendolino or at the British Library. A mere two coffees a day at £2.50 each comes in at a staggering £150 per month! How many of us factor the 'coffee expense' into our monthly budget?

I recently discovered that there were no fewer than five different coffee loyalty cards in my purse. Five! I find myself ranking universities, libraries and archives according to the quality of their coffee provision or their proximity to a Cafè Nero or Starbucks.

Although I kid myself that I need to buy hot drinks to keep me going in the British weather, I could make the effort to bring a thermos and put up with the taste of plastic. Shamefully, not even the ethical and environmental costs of many convenience coffees can deter me from a hit either. Too much caffeine can also have a detrimental effect on your health: insomnia, shakiness, headaches and, ironically, tiredness. I was once berated by a friend for introducing her to the blackstuff. A coffee virgin before she met me, within a year she was downing multiple cups of Douwe Egberts every day.



The collective sigh of relief when 'refreshments' are wheeled into a workshop is just one expression of how insidious a problem caffeine-addiction is within academia.

In my experience the quality of coffee (usually bad) is often a key conversation topic at any conference. I've also noticed that many international PGRs are particularly irritated by the poor quality of coffee in the UK.

As for me, I'm trying to give up coffee at the moment. I only drink tea when I'm at home. Yes tea. This leads to great excitement at every outing: excursions mean coffee! I'm not sure how long I will last. I've tried to give up coffee numerous times before; soon succumbing to sleep deprivation or the imminent submission of work. I have a feeling that postgraduate study and caffeine consumption will remain inextricably linked for as long as my career in academia continues. So, if coffee-addiction and the occasional bout of insomnia is the price I have to pay to continue with my research, then vive le café!

The role of academia in the arts

Markee Rambo Hood (Glasgow) on the reasoning behind all our theorising.....

When I completed my Bachelors degree in Theatre I saw no point in furthering my education in the field and yet here I am completing my Masters in Theatre. Many times I've asked myself what role academia plays within the arts. How does one critically dissect the experience or emotion that one goes through when viewing a painting or listening to a symphony? And the bigger question is WHY does one feel the need to critically dissect these emotions?

Music existed well before music theory, ballet and theatre before Aristotle's Poetic's. Yet still these constructs were developed. The arts have a powerful sway over human emotion and thus something so powerful must have an explanation. Many times an artist will say that he or she was purely inspired to create his or her piece of work. That there was no critical thought process or pre-planning. And many spectators revel in his or her reactions to a piece of art, without so much as wanting to cipher how that emotion was contrived by the artist. Why is it that academia must construct and deconstruct this process? Why not allow it just to be?

As I received yet another set of cryptic guidelines for my upcoming Theatre exam, at the same time loathing my friend and her brief note cards for her Science exam, an epiphany struck. The reason that academics are compelled to construct parameters and guidelines around the arts is because it is human nature to explain the unexplained.



Academia aims to demystify the artistic process as well as the reaction of the spectator. It is highly likely that so-called 'inspiration' is a construction of critical planning that the artist had just been unaware of. A montage of pre-existing works of art regurgitated into what the artist viewed as original. There are only so many musical notes, so many words, so many movements, and so many colours that can be arranged in one sequence or another until they will start repeating themselves. Without constructs there would be chaos, and without constructs there would be nothing for the revolutionist to revolt against. Academia gives us these constructs. Critical evaluation which is the essence of academic practise allows us to look at a painting and examine what is successful and what is unsuccessful about it. This then allows future artists to learn from previous artists' mistakes and to improve upon them. It gives us a vocabulary to describe the indescribable.

Instead of simply saying that the

opera *Wozzeck* by composer Alban Berg was disturbing, an academic would say that 'the atonality of the interludes worked well, especially at the point where Berg employed dissonant seconds. Since the frequencies of the notes were so close to each other in the spectrum it was quite disturbing to my ears – which in turn disturbed my emotions.'

So perhaps I've gone through a process of enlightenment since I completed my Bachelors degree when I had vowed never to enter the world of academia again. Or perhaps I have fallen victim to my own human nature with my desire to construct a reason to that which I find unreasonable, either way I've come to the conclusion that academia plays a vital role within the arts. It promotes an artistic awareness that not only encourages the participants to learn from both past and present, but also ensures that the future of the arts will not only flourish but will continue to produce work that engages and challenges the spectator. Although inspiration is a common method of production, for many artists it does involve a certain amount of ignorance and lack of control when it comes to the actual construction of a piece of work. But by deconstructing past and present work, academia helps to inform the artist of what his or her inspirations may be based on so that the work produced is more consciously aware and can therefore evoke a deeper impact on its audience.

www.phd-student-looking for a job.com.

Ian Kidd (Durham) on the advantages of building up your 'net rep'....

In this 'virtual age' we live in, it's said that if you're not online, you don't exist. This doesn't just apply to social networking sites like Facebook and Myspace, but also to other aspects of 'life electronic' such as having an email address and, increasingly these days, having a website. This is especially the case for postgraduates and academics. It's not enough to have a generic presence on a social networking site. These days, aspiring postgraduates increasingly feel the need to maintain webpages of their own. Prospective employers and potential collaborators, after all, aren't interested in the 'Facebook' stuff- your favourite quotes or pictures of you drunk and wild on your best mate's stag do. Employers wish to know about your research interests, teaching experience and published papers. And so what better way for a postgraduate to advertise themselves through a website where they can present all aspects of their CV in one place? A well-designed and maintained website is, after all, a job advertisement, online CV, and public presence all in one!

Some postgraduates, I know from experience, find the idea of a personal academic website rather superfluous. 'By all means', they say, 'have webpages for your tutorial groups, but there's no need for anything more than that'.

Online teaching resources are of course one use of a website, and they will save on basic administrative queries from

students, regarding the times, dates, and topics of tutorials, say. But websites offer much more than that; they are also a permanently and globally accessible public face for your academic life. An academic with a website has a visibility and presence that one without, lacks. All too often I meet a postgraduate at a conference, Google them afterwards, yet find nothing—no website at all. Sometimes, however, I find their website, with a complete sketch of their interests, teaching, and works-in-progress online. Not only do websites give you a feel for someone's academic activities, but they are also a unique opportunity to engage fellow academics in your work. It's not often that someone will say to you, 'So, please tell me about your research interests, future projects, and details of your teaching and experience so far?' A website, by contrast, lets you do all of this; the only difference is, someone came looking for you, and found a website telling them all they wanted to know. This sort of investment in your 'public image' can pay off: one's chances of making contacts and attracting potential collaborators increases enormously if you 'exist' on the web.

These thoughts were partly inspired by a recently launched website, www.academia.edu.

This website acts as an 'academic' Facebook' for all in the profession, from postgraduates to professors, providing a one-stop advertisement for your academic profile. The site allows the uploading of papers, a database of research interests, and an online 'academic community', with lists of contacts with related expertise. I joined, and soon found fellow postgraduates in a dozen other departments with interests in 'philosophical anthropology'. The classification of the disciplines is a little artificial, but that's a problem common to all departments, faculties, and library databases everywhere. The point here is that there is a website, which many fellow philosophers visit and have presences on, where my own work can be found and considered. And even if nothing comes of it, one has at least one point of contact in an increasingly crowded postgraduate community.

So postgraduates who don't yet have websites of their own would be well advised to follow Peter Kay's advice and 'get on t'internet'. A half-decent website takes very little time to build and maintain, and crucially provides a point of call for anyone who might take the time to look you up. The investment required is minimal, and the payoffs are potentially enormous.



Eternal return?

Tim Jones (UEA) on his brave decision to abandon one PhD and start another....

I'm not sure exactly how many students decide they've had it with academia, quit their PhDs and eventually decide to reapply, but I hope it will be interesting for other postgraduates to read about my own PhD journey. I studied English Literature for my BA and specialised in fiction for my MA. This was soon followed by a PhD project on the depiction of African-American slavery in modern fiction. The proposal was accepted and I was grateful to be designated an enthusiastic pair of advisors. Within six months, however, I was missing deadlines, doing no research whatsoever and refusing to attend UEA's compulsory training seminars.

When my tutors reminded me of a PhD's magnitude, I brushed off their concern with a nonchalance that was probably infuriating. Firstly I was diagnosed with Anxiety Disorder which I allowed to completely derail my progress. This illness meant that I found sitting down for lengthy periods of time impossible. I was not in the right frame of mind to devote myself to a PhD and soon realised that without counselling this would not change.

Secondly, I believe that my PhD topic was a poor choice. After spending four years in the Literature and Creative Writing Dept, I had changed to American Studies. The differences between their approaches are subtle but significant. My advisors were encouraging me to do background reading with which

an American Studies postgraduate would be familiar, yet I'd never encountered. Had I been in a more optimistic frame of mind, I may have enjoyed the challenge, but combined with my anxiety issues, the workload appeared unbearable. I would advise against starting a PhD in an unfamiliar department, unless you are well aware of the extra reading that will be involved in getting up to speed with the basic areas of theory in which that department is grounded.

After I had conquered the worst of my Anxiety Disorder I decided to reapply. I returned to my MA dissertation, which had analysed the fiction of Milan Kundera. Developing a PhD proposal during the first semester of my MA had been a mistake. Had I looked harder into what exactly a PhD would require and worked on extending my MA dissertation rather than attempting a new topic, I perhaps would have felt more comfortable.

Reapplying with my new proposal was fairly daunting, but performing so badly in my first PhD had proved a useful experience. I spent a couple of months studying around the topic before I handed anything in, to check that I could now actually sit down and study. The enjoyment this gave me convinced me I was making the right decision. I imagined that my new supervisors would probably have heard about my previous experience and would be sceptical about taking me on. This in fact had the benefit of

forcing me to produce a strong proposal.

My current advisor wished to interview me face-to-face before accepting me. Fortunately, I can talk effortlessly for hours about Kundera, so breezed the interview. Had I had such a meeting before my first PhD, I believe the vast gaps in my knowledge regarding American Studies would have been glaringly obvious within minutes. My current advisor seems to think I'm an excellent student, but this is because I know what bad habits to avoid and am belatedly following advice given by my previous advisors. Should my current PhD get published, I promise to slip in an acknowledgement.

For any readers considering jumping back in, I advise reflecting on the reasons that prompted your initial departure and considering whether these are still in play. If your circumstances have changed, there's no reason why a return to university can't be an entirely sensible decision. Consider why your first PhD failed to maintain your interest. Spend some time in the library as a practice run, to ensure that the actual activity of the PhD is something you enjoy. Don't worry that your friends will consider you indecisive or that you might have wasted valuable years – exploring alternative options and returning to academia has the benefit of impressing upon you just how greatly nothing else will satisfy, giving a new focus and surety to your work.

Life at the top by Prof. Geoffrey Thicket

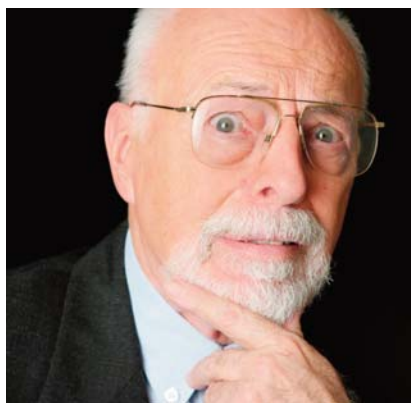
To RAE or not to RAE?

I had the most embarrassing meeting with the Principal of the University this morning. I had rather a sore head after a late night out at the pub with my old friend Chuffy. He challenged me to a 'drinking tour' of every whiskey the pub had to offer. I only managed to get half way through Scotland, and hadn't started on the Irish selection before I passed out....

I woke up under my desk this morning (I'm not entirely sure how I got there) and hit my head trying to answer the damn telephone. After I had located it (behind the sofa, under the tea cosy) I picked it up only to have a stupid woman shriek down the phone 'you're late, you're late!' The Principal's mad old Secretary Mary seems to think her boss is second only in importance to the Pope! She informed me that I was already half an hour late for a meeting with the Principal – although I really don't remember arranging the meeting in the first place.

It turned out that the Principal had hauled me in for a pep talk about the latest RAE figures. I wish the University would just leave me alone to teach the students and do my work. They are constantly sending me piles of forms and news bulletins in the internal mail, which I never open- I tend to throw them in the corner and forget about them. Last week the pile got so high there was a minor avalanche in the middle of a tutorial. Mavis Bunion-Smyth's horrid little geriatric dog wet itself with shock.

I get so muddled up with all those emails and meetings about RAE's, ABD's, TALL's, QWLs etc that I just nodded and smiled for the first half-hour of his rant and tried desperately to remember what RAE stands for. Luckily he eventually spelt it out – Research Assessment Exercise. The university did very well, apart from one 'blip' in the



figures – and I was that blip. 'What were you thinking, Geoffrey, by submitting such rubbish? I mean, the thing was dated 1973!'

Well, when it comes down to it they should have known – the last useful piece of research I published was during the last century, and I have been re-writing sections and presenting 'new' versions of it ever since. Anyway, the Principal is only cross because he had a bet on with a friend at Oxford and I caused him to lose rather a large wad of cash. He decided to punish me by demanding that I publish something by the end of the year. I'm trying to think of a subject that might allow me to unite my interests in Kant, Chaucer, and Houdini.

I'm just too busy supervising my students to do my own research. I've recently taken on a demanding extra role within the University. I am coaching the University Challenge team! Each week they are coming to my office for an intensive session on general knowledge. I thought the encyclopaedia might be a way to start - so far they know an awful lot about Zoology, Zoroastrianism and Z notation, but very little else. (I decided to make them read it starting from Z, to make things more interesting).

I've also got another new student – who somehow talked the University into letting him start in the middle of the academic year. He's apparently someone very famous from Hollywood. Lawrence Cady has a strong American accent I can barely understand, is about 38, and is a very strange orange colour with disturbingly bright teeth. He was in a lot of films in the 1980s (so I'm told) and seems to think that he can waltz in, write something sub-standard and pick up a PhD. 'Hiya Ducktor Geoff!' he says when he comes in for tutorials. 'So, how ya doin?' The man is an idiot. Last week Lawrence got his agent to call me (from Los Angeles) because he was 'unhappy' with a comment I'd made on his latest chapter. Silly man will find that I am not easily impressed by muscles and glamour.

Prof. Geoffrey Thicket,
RHUC (O) L

(with help from Kiri Bloom)

The importance of being human

Tamsin Smith (Aberdeen) on cultivating your non-PhD self.....

Sitting in my university bedroom after the third night in a row of drinking wine, eating ice-cream and generally being the personification of Bridget Jones, I began to ponder and reflect on my school days. Oh how I used to relish my activity-filled evenings, the perfect antidote to the hum-drum desk bound dreariness of the school day. Between tap dance, karate, swimming and horse riding there was never a dull moment and the weeks would pass by in a haze of activity. I even managed to keep the momentum going through my undergraduate degree, although the activities had changed somewhat. Tap dancing was replaced with army service and horse riding with rugby, and yet these new interests, together with a respectable social calendar, meant that the three years rushed by.

Now I find myself as a PhD student struggling to maintain any sort of commitment to my hobbies. It's just all too easy to prioritise spending an evening re-writing an abstract or scheduling field work during my weekends. The question is: Should I feel guilty for wanting to put all of my efforts into my research at the moment? My new karate club just recently reprimanded me for missing sessions due to field work. At the end of the day I'm the one who is suffering, not my poor dejected sports clubs!

Reducing the amount of time I have for recreation is increasing my stress levels and my fuse has definitely shortened. I honestly believe that the activities we do shape who we are as human beings. By not carrying out these activities, in favour of working on my thesis, I feel that I am losing part of who I am.

Given this, in recent months I have tried to rediscover my leisure time and explore new hobbies and ways of enjoying myself away from the pressures of my PhD. I have managed to throw myself back into voluntary service which has the added benefit of bolstering up my non-academic CV. I have also made a promise to myself to devote two evenings a week to non-PhD activities.

Even if I can't totally commit to a club full time, playing in the odd match or participating in a meeting gives me the opportunity to chat with different people and do something completely unrelated to my research.

Engaging in extra-curricular activities, particularly physically based ones, can be crucial to maintaining a healthy lifestyle and optimistic outlook during your PhD. This is especially important during your final six months, when the pressure to be chained to your desk can be overwhelming and when the only physical activity you are likely to engage in is pushing the plunger down on the cafetiere.

Whether it's running triathlons, music, knitting or volunteering, just get out there and do it! I'm not trying to tell you to prioritise hobbies over work. Far from it.

But if you completely abandon your 'you time' your work will inevitably suffer as a consequence.

Talk to your students union (they do actually have postgraduate provisions too!) or get involved in the local community, or do both. Don't become the stereotypical academic hermit; enjoy your time as a PhD student. It is possible to work hard AND play hard.





A Rough Guide to....the RAE

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The RAE is an independent assessment of the quality of research within the UK's universities. Submissions from each subject area are ranked by a peer review panel with the rankings determining the allocation of some research funding. It is conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Hefce), and the equivalent bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Over a thousand academics in 67 different subjects have spent the last year wading through research papers and offering a judgement on the quality of their peers' work, ranking the research from 4* (world leading) to 0 (sub-standard). These judgments lead to a 'quality profile', giving an indication where the universities' research strengths lie. The assessment provides an accepted quality yardstick and a means of promoting UK research. This all sounds very laudable, but there are hidden complexities to the RAE.

The raw results of this exercise are confusing and hard to understand. Luckily, the media turns the data into league tables that are easily digestible. Yet

these tables do not always offer an accurate reflection. Indeed universities have become adept at manipulating the results. The proportion of staff that universities submit remains unknown, with some universities excluding academics they fear will score poorly by labelling them as 'research-inactive'. Some universities before the RAE submission date also engaged in something similar to the football transfer market which involved the 'buying up' of prolific researchers to enhance their results. Another problem is that departments nominally teaching the same subject may be reviewed by different assessment panels making direct comparison impossible.

The Russell group of large research-intensive universities, are fighting to hang on to their share. At present, 29 institutions receive over 80% of the Hefce's research funding. The 2008 RAE revealed a wider spread of top researchers than before with over half of quality research dispersed amongst 150 of 159 universities. As a result of the 2008 RAE, the monies will be spread across small departments in non-research intensive universities, which in a

limited budget is going to have an impact on the major players, with the Russell group possibly losing £140m a year in research funding. However, it is expected that Hefce will stick to its commitment to fund recognised research excellence wherever it is located.

The result of this competitive process is that it has given birth to an army of university bureaucrats whose sole purpose is to manage RAE scores. Some say that the RAE has had a disastrous impact on universities, leading to the closure of departments, job losses, discriminatory practices, widespread demoralisation of staff, the narrowing of research opportunities and the undermining of the relationship between teaching and research.

This will be the last RAE. Its replacement, the 'research excellence framework' (REF), is planned for 2013. It will take into account the amount of research published, its intellectual impact, and the 'research environment' including the number of grants and students. It will undoubtedly have its own pro's and cons and once again raise the thorny issue of how best to quantify and assess academic research.

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 8 will be published on 1 July 2009. Next deadline is 1 June 2009.

* Please note that the asterisk indicates a pseudonym.

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