



# GRADBritain

A magazine for and by postgraduate researchers in the United Kingdom

## Bloomin' marvellous!

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A new coalition government with a commitment to cut 20 per cent of the higher education budget - doesn't bode well does it? But to be honest it's best not to dwell on things that you have no control over. Much better to read GRADBritain for we have some optimistic as well as informative articles in this issue that may relieve your fears. One addressing the budget crisis in universities, an article offering advice on alternative career options in the FE sector and a piece on whether your PhD is likely to make you smarter or dumber. We also have two contributions offering alternative perspectives on being international students, both here and in France, we also have an article on the merits of personal assessment, reflections on the supervisor-student relationship as well as our regular features Top Ten, Dr Flo and a PGR recounting her strange fieldwork trips.

## Apology

We apologise unreservedly to Daniel Mograbi of King's College, London, for the article entitled 'Transcontinental study' which was attributed to him and appeared in the Summer 2010 issue of GRADBritain released in July. This edition was subsequently removed. The article published contained material that was not written by the author, was not a true representation of the original article and did not represent the views or opinions of the author. The article also suggested that Mr Mograbi had completed his viva. We acknowledge that Mr Mograbi is currently working towards the completion of his doctorate and apologise for the errors contained in the article.

This issue replaces the original summer edition of GRADBritain and includes a new article by Mr Mograbi.

## CONTENTS

- 2 Going further
- 3 A PhD: does it make you smarter...
- 4 Transcontinental study...
- 5 Transcontinental study contd...
- 6 CUTS! What, where and how?
- 7 There to here and back...
- 8 A funny thing happened...
- 9 Dr Flo
- 10 Taking stock...
- 11 It takes two...
- 12 A rough guide...

## Stuff wot might interest you...

Vitae has launched 'The engaging researcher', the newest publication in the series of the researcher booklets. This publication highlights some of the many ways you can engage the public, offers practical tips for getting started and explores how public engagement can benefit you, your research and the public.



## Going further...

### Jonathan Mark Eaton (formerly of Queen's University Belfast) on a possible career option...

Economic downturn. Credit crunch. Recession. Whichever way you choose to describe the current state of the economy, it is clear that it will undoubtedly have a massive impact on higher education as we know it. The threat of redundancy is already stalking the corridors of academia. This is not an auspicious time to finish a PhD and search for an academic post. Some comfort can be drawn from the fact that we will eventually emerge from the current economic gloom. Perhaps the chance of academic employment rests on waiting the storm out.

In recent times, many PGRs have migrated into school teaching when academic posts have not been forthcoming. The prestigious nature of a PhD undoubtedly helps ease this transition. Yet teaching in a state school requires a PGCE, which involves a year of extra training before full employment. Although some financial support is available during this training, it does not match the level of postgraduate research funding and this route into teaching entails a significant drop in income for most PhD graduates.

There is an alternative route into teaching, namely the further education sector (FE), which typically provides educational courses for students aged 16-19. In contrast to state school teaching, it is permissible for teachers to train while they are on the job, often through evening classes. Additionally, posts in FE usually have the title of 'lecturer' rather than 'teacher' which looks more prestigious on an academic CV. FE colleges

often recruit on an hourly paid part-time basis, which allows time for personal research and writing, with the potential for progression on to permanent contracts.

There are differences between teaching in HE and FE. College lecturers are paid to teach, not to undertake research or write funding proposals. Lessons need to be rigorously planned and confined to the limits imposed by the relevant syllabus. Like schools, all FE colleges are subject to OFSTED inspections and lecturers can expect to have their teaching scrutinised and assessed at a level which is unknown in the HE sector.

Nevertheless, FE lecturing does have clear advantages as a possible career route after a PhD. Recently there has been a clear emphasis on the role and engagement of HEI's with local communities. Teaching at a FE college is one way of demonstrating this. On a personal level, I have found that engaging with students from non-traditional backgrounds has invigorated my passion for my subject. My interest has been re-awakened beyond the narrow field of my doctoral research. The teaching skills learnt in the FE sector are invaluable, from classroom management to my presentation skills. If you are looking for a means of developing your teaching credentials look no further than the FE sector.



## Top ten:

### Guide to teaching undergrads ...

1. Make sure your authority is not undermined before you've even opened your mouth- i.e. make sure your flies are done up etc.
2. You will begin the year studiously spending a day preparing for the lesson, by the second term preparation will be done on the bus enroute to the seminar.
3. Expect them to all have hangovers, just don't turn up with one yourself.
4. When one of the swots asks an awkward question to which you don't know the answer, you must reply 'what an interesting idea, why don't you go and find out and prepare a 15-minute presentation on it for class next week? They will never ask a question again.
5. Don't try and be 'down with the kids', teaching undergrads is a horrible wake-up call for PGRs who still think they are 'young' and 'hip'.
6. Mark their assignments with generosity and a sense of humour.... you will need it.
7. Don't fall for their flirtations or tears- it doesn't work for you and it shouldn't work for them.
8. Don't worry if they don't appear to be learning anything, the cramming will start at Easter.
9. They are the only ones who will call you 'Dr' before you've finished your doctorate.
10. Try and remember what being undergrad was like, just don't act like one yourself.

# PhD: does it make you smarter... or dumber?

Silvia Liverani (University of Bristol) and Chris Cantwell (Imperial College, London)

Dumber! ...at least according to the popular *Piled Higher and Deeper* comics writer Jorge Cham. In a strip originally published in March 2003 he explains how during the PhD students realise the number of things that they do not know, which makes them dumber...instead of just 'blissfully' ignorant.

Schwartz compounds this despair in an essay published in 2008 in the *Journal of Cell Science* ('The importance of stupidity in scientific research'): 'Science makes me feel stupid. [...] I have gotten used to it.' He acknowledges that you do feel smart when you get all the answers right in tests in school or at undergraduate level, but it all changes during the PhD.

Schwartz concludes that the only way to success is by accepting this 'dumbness' as part of the job. Therefore, 'the more comfortable we become with being stupid, the deeper we will wade into the unknown and the more likely we are to make big discoveries'. The author suggests 'productive stupidity', or ignorance by choice, as the way forward. Some people have analysed this process in other ways, i.e. the ability to ask stupid questions are the means through which you find and seek out intelligent answers.

Schwartz's essay certainly has an interesting perspective and one of its merits is to address the difficulty of doing research. Learning what other people discovered is very different from

making your own discoveries. Every PGR should keep this in mind while struggling with a hard problem and are feeling discouraged by their own 'supposed ignorance or stupidity', to put it in Schwartz's words.

However, there are two sides to every coin: does this feeling of ignorance imply the researcher is not smart? Does smartness require knowledge? It's true that it's easy to feel smart when you are the world expert in 'Your Thing' alone, but you feel some reprieve in that you can count the number of people with whom you can hold a comparatively intellectual conversation about 'Your Thing' on just one hand. These people are likely to be world-renowned in your topic. Ah... I can feel the sense of self-satisfaction you are getting whilst reading this....

According to WordNet, a large dictionary developed at Princeton University, 'smart' is defined as 'showing mental alertness and calculation and resourcefulness'. A PhD is, of course, about producing original research which certainly requires calculation and resourcefulness, with probably some mental alertness. It is the ability to succeed in the quest for discovery – our ability to confront the unknown effectively - which is a mark of our 'smartness' rather than our score on University Challenge. Rest assured you will finish your thesis with not only a 100,000 words document to your name,

but will have also gained essential skills in analysing a problem, researching the question and communicating the answer. It will make you think differently, apply your ideas more broadly and speak with authority and confidence, whatever the subject.

Ultimately, a research career (of which the PhD is the inaugural step) is not a path to riches, but a path of self-development suited only to those who relish the challenge of engaging the unknown.

Students, and academics in general we should say, convert their knowledge from a shallow breadth to a narrow depth, and only by going deeper and deeper can they fully acknowledge their ignorance. However, this is just another intellectual challenge and succeeding involves discipline, sacrifice, time, motivation and money. But most of all, 'sheer geekiness' is what is driving the academic world. As Jorge Cham writes in a comic strip published in October 2003, PhD students 'just think [their] stuff is really cool'!



# Transcontinental study...

## Suzi Richer (University of York) on being an international student in France...

Being 'jointly registered' sounded a bit like I had contracted an obscure disease and at times it felt like it. This was not something that I had originally intended, rather it was something that happened quite unexpectedly. The deciding factor for me was that I would get a PhD from two universities, which at the very least would set me apart from my peers. So when given the opportunity, I dived in, ill-prepared for what was in store.

The subject of my doctorate had been the southern French Alps and after finishing fieldwork one autumn, I went to look around some labs near Aix-en-Provence. At some point, while I was being shown around I was asked 'Would you like to come and work here?' I blurted out a 'Oui,' thinking that this was just a polite question that needed a corresponding answer.

Six weeks later, I found myself in a laden Ford Fiesta boarding a ferry to France. I was to be jointly registered between a British and French University. While this is generally uncommon in Britain, I quickly discovered it was almost the norm in France. It is a great way to build networks, use other universities' resources and gain a unique qualification that would look good on my CV. Needless to say, my supervisor was supportive of the idea.

On paper, this looked like a great deal; a year in the south of France with constant sunshine, lovely food, and wonderful lab facilities. Those aspects remained true, but there were issues which I should have considered before I went.

I was expected to speak a competent level of French (the working language of the labs). This was something I wanted to do as it felt so arrogant speaking English and to assume that people would understand me. However, trying to learn a new language (fast) while trying to get to grips with a PhD was tough to say the least. In the end, I had to give up French classes because I was falling behind on my lab work.

Some of the cultural differences also took some getting used to, especially when they affected how I worked. Lunchtime was a social affair. Everyone stopped and lunched together, and sometimes played boules among the pine trees. This meant goodbye to lunch at my desk checking email!

I work best with a varied routine, so in the UK I sometimes arrived at the department late or left early. In France, the PhD is like an 8 to 5 job. No one ever said anything, but I felt it was frowned upon if I arrived mid-morning or worse, worked from home some days.

Bureaucracy was another area I was completely unprepared for. I quickly had to master the glorious complexities of the French university system. France is not known as the land of red-tape bureaucracy for nothing! The amount of form-filling, the number of signatures involved and letters of support that needed to be obtained at the various stages of registration took up days of my time. Even now, I'm not entirely sure which department I



worked in as it seemed to be called something different on every form.

Then there was my cat who stayed in England (I did think about getting a pet passport). While I could talk to friends and family on the phone, I missed my cat more than I ever expected because I had no way to communicate with him. It sounds small, but when you are away from your normal (probably un-noticed) support systems, things can get you down very quickly..

Despite these issues, I would thoroughly recommend becoming jointly registered with another European university. The benefits far outweigh the negatives. I learnt to live and work in an entirely different way. I learnt another language. My confidence increased thrice-fold; suddenly doing anything in English (even conference presentations) seemed so much easier than having to do them in French! That's not even touching on the benefits to my research...

Would I do it again? Yes, but I would definitely talk to someone in a similar situation before jumping in. There is more to joint registration than just helping your research and career prospects. Nonetheless, it was an experience, that after some adjustment, I thoroughly enjoyed.

# Transcontinental study continued...

**Daniel Mograbi (King's College, London) gives his perspective on being an international student in the UK...**

When I opened the last GRADBritain edition, I was quite shocked to see that my article about the experience of being an overseas student included parts I had not written and was changed to the point of representing the opposite of my opinions. I felt that one of the most upsetting aspects was that parts of the edited article were very patronising and provided a recipe for a submissive and sheepish international student. Because of that, when in the process of retraction I was asked permission to reprint the unedited original article, I opted to write something new, more incisive and straight to the point.

The following points are in no way directions on what to do or how to behave, but rather advice, some of which is very personal and based on my own experience as an overseas student, which I would give to any friend starting the adventure of studying in the UK.

## **Be less critical about your language skills**

Since British universities have stringent language admission criteria, if you have been accepted for a PhD, your English is probably great. But it is important to accept that you are not going to be as proficient in English as you are in your mother tongue and that the toughest obstacle is self-criticism. Remember that sometimes words escape you even in your native language and that, more generally, words, in any language, often fail to describe experience in all its richness. Manage your expectations about your language proficiency and if you

ever find intolerance because of that, bear in mind that Britons have little knowledge about the experience of speaking a second language; according to a 2004 poll, less than 5% of British workers can count to 20 in a second language, and data from the European Commission suggests that the UK has one of the lowest proportions of bilingual citizens in the EU.

## **But try to improve**

Don't study English, read good Anglophone literature – Britain has produced brilliant writers in all genres and styles. There is more to be learned, in English and life, when reading “Paradise Lost”, rather than doing a grammar course. Choose a good newspaper, speak with intelligent people.

## **Be politically aware**

Knowing the political environment of a country is integral to your experience of the place and helps you understand the forces promoting or resisting change. Even if you cannot vote, learn about the policies of the different parties. Monitor where the BNP vote is increasing and try to understand why.

## **Be curious and open to new experiences.**

Meet other international students and learn about different cultures and lifestyles; you discover which aspects of your experience are shared by others and which are personal. Resist the temptation of socialising only with people from your country, the whole point of moving abroad is being exposed to diversity.



## **Know your rights**

Overseas students are very important for British universities, financially and otherwise. Make sure you have the same opportunities as other students and do not let anyone ignore your rights. Stand up for them.

## **Be proud, walk tall**

You come from a different background and have had unique experiences. Your perspective brings diversity to the table and leads to a more plural thinking. That is essential to academia. You are an asset to this country, not a burden.

## **Enjoy**

There will be frustrations, disappointments, a big cultural shock depending where you come from, a few nasty people (but you would find them anywhere) and, if you are really unlucky, awful editing. But this will all be part of your learning.

And along the way there will be fantastic people and unforgettable experiences.

# CUTS! What, where and how?

**Natasha Wynarczyk, (King's College, London, Students' Union) on the changing position of HEIs in testing times...**

The financial restructuring at King's College London, especially in the School of Arts and Humanities announced earlier this year was met with much dissatisfaction from both students and staff, as well as sending ripples of discomfort across the academic world. This led to the inevitable questioning of whether or not cuts were being made in the right areas and what the potential long term implications for the university were.

Such restructuring and closures are not confined to King's – after a minimum of ten percent cut to all higher education spending and a £449 million-pound budget cut, many other universities are also faced with departmental closures. Worryingly, it seems that Humanities subjects have been particularly targeted, with academics left wondering if universities are changing their focus away from the traditional Humanities subjects and instead are now wholly focused on Science or Business where funding seems more secure. Perhaps it is that universities are ceasing to value the Humanities irrespective of how high profile or academically worthy they are. The decision to phase out teaching at Middlesex's world-renowned Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, an international leader in Marxism and critical theory, is a worrying example of this.

Departmental closures will inevitably have a detrimental effect on the student experience; however, at King's we have

attempted to minimise this through various ways. One way that we have done this at King's Students' Union is by working with those departments targeted for closure to ensure that their degrees are not affected. For example, we have set up a highly successful transition student group.

Inevitably issues will arise nationwide if whole departments are forced to go, it will mean more students competing for fewer available quality Humanities courses. Postgraduates will also be scrambling over a reduced number of MA courses while PGRs will also be fighting over an ever-decreasing pot of research council funding.

Cuts in funding will also inevitably effect money for academic research, which some argue will lead to a decline in quality teaching. David Willetts, the Universities and Science Minister, has already referred to students as a 'burden on the taxpayer' and has indicated that in his opinion fees do need to go up. Student debt is already a major burden, with students expecting to leave university with roughly £24,000 worth of debt – how is it fair that a graduate could leave with that level of debt having done a course which has now closed and which could affect graduate employability?

The Russell Group have already pushed for the cap on fees to be lifted, a shift which would lead to an American-esque system where the best universities are the ones that cost the most.

The result of this could be a hierarchy of universities, not just in standards (which there is already) but in price. This is why we must ensure that universities across the country are committed to a policy of widening participation. Vince Cable, the new Business Secretary, has indicated that he believes that Labour's target-based approach to university numbers (a 50 per cent target) was not viable and that the expansion of undergraduate places has come at the expense of a quality university education. Yet a degree is something which should be available to everybody.



It is a right and should not be a privilege for the elitist few who can afford it. Denying thousands of capable students the chance to go to university and thereby potentially increasing the strain on the benefits system is not in the interest of the country, and removing the accessibility of higher education is just plain wrong.

# There to here, and back again...

**Paul Illingworth (University of Warwick) from learned to learner...**

It is not without thought that the title of this article evokes Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Indeed the journey I am taking has posed many obstacles and is likely to come up with others. Let me explain...

## **The learned**

I am in my fifties, in full time employment, a registered mental health nurse, I have held several senior management and academic posts. During the periods where I worked in academia I have supervised undergraduate and postgraduate research students, including being part of a supervision team for a PGR student. My qualifications include; a Certificate in Education, a Diploma, Bachelor and Master Degrees.

## **The learner**

Currently, I am registered as a part time PGR, researching inter-professional education of registered mental health nurses, social workers and probation officers relating to offenders with mental illness.

## **From there**

In the mid-1970s I began nurse training, spending over 5 years in general nursing, I then moved into psychiatric nurse training. Having enjoyed but probably not done enough study in my general nurse training, I immediately found this new nursing much more in keeping with my own philosophy. I enjoyed the theory and practice

and got down to studying – probably for the first time in my life. After qualifying I spent 18 months as a staff nurse then 2 years as a ward charge nurse before moving into community healthcare where I helped manage a mental health team.

Then I took the decision to undertake a certificate in education. I was successful in getting the Cert Ed. and the following year I also achieved my the BSc (Hons). I was now a nurse tutor and with the changes in workforce I was re-titled a lecturer and shortly afterwards, a senior lecturer. Another career move took me into strategic management for 3 years before returning the lecturing, this time in higher education. Almost 10 years later I took a 3 year career detour and worked as a civil servant working in curriculum development. I have recently returned back into higher education, this time in senior academic management, as a Head of School.

## **To here**

Now in my second year as a part-time doctoral student I'm finding the transition from senior manager to student problematic. In the academic environment, with its financial constraints, I am encouraging staff to be more effective and efficient while trying to maintain a high quality of student experience. These pressures mean that I am almost constantly thinking work. So when I sit at a computer to read articles or write for my doctoral studies, I instinctively log onto my work email.

The rationale being, if I don't there will be 100s to clear when I'm back in the office. My PhD rarely gets a look in, especially with all the other additional responsibilities that I have to fulfill in my job: meetings, staff appraisals, strategic visioning, supporting/developing staff and dealing with crises, to name a few. For four months, I have found it very difficult to focus on what I need to do for the PhD. It is a constant stop-start, start-stop. I'm not afraid to admit that the new job has been my priority. Re-generating my enthusiasm for my doctorate is proving difficult. Work pressures are making me consider whether I should or indeed could continue or whether I should change my subject to something which directly links to my job.

## **And back again**

Yet in the last couple of weeks I feel that I am back on top, learning to balance my priorities, switching off my work email and properly focusing on my PhD on specific allocated times. I'm focusing on what I want and need to do for the PhD. The benefits are obvious, although the journey will be hard. If I manage it all I will reach my mountain and finally gain the letters after my name, PhD. And for someone who left school all those years ago without an O'level or any other qualification to my name, that is one heck of a journey.

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

**In GB's new feature on the strange world of research, Caroline Landsbury (University of Glasgow) recounts an odd encounter with a drunk interviewee...**

When people asked me why I took on a Psychology PhD I always responded with the same answer: I like meeting interesting people and experiencing different environments... Although, when I started this PhD I didn't realise just how 'interesting' and 'different' my experiences would be.

I began my first year armed with my shiny new video recorder and assessment kit, desperate to recruit as many people as possible. I was prepared to go anywhere and meet anyone. As data collection began I enjoyed my day-to-day 'work'. I was normally met with a smiley face, a cup of tea and a tray of biscuits and a few hours later I would emerge with data in hand. Not a bad way to spend my days...

On occasions, participants that ran B&Bs offered for me to stay the night if I was travelling a long way. Their generosity of kindness and my desperate desire to keep travel expenses to a minimum meant that on a number of occasions I hesitantly agreed to the free night of accommodation. This was until one visit to North Wales...

The day hadn't started brilliantly...after a packed tube, six hour train journey and a 50 minute wait in the rain at the train station, I was grateful to arrive at my B&B location. The train journey had been freezing; I was hungry and glad to be in the warm. I was met by the lady

who had volunteered to take part in my study and welcomed in for tea. As she took my coat and showed me where I would be sleeping whilst balancing a large glass of whisky, her rosy cheeks told me it wasn't the first of the day. The offer of tea was replaced with something stronger and, while I declined, I wasn't shocked when she poured herself a large glass of whiskey and ushered me to take a seat at the kitchen table.

I soon realised that cleaning wasn't this lady's strong point. 'Country cosy' I reminded myself as I perched myself at the table (in the only seat not covered in crumbs and straw). However, as I sat and watched her pick up a plate off the floor, scrape away the remains of a left over Sunday roast that had been left for the dog, and proceed to display an array of sandwiches, I tried to consider a polite way of taking back my 'yes please, I am famished' answer to her kind offer of food.

The next two hours passed with a mixture of offers of alcohol, family album slide shows and local gossip. I can't remember what was more difficult, trying to stop her beloved dogs from slobbering all over my knees, deciphering the now slurred accent of my host or my relenting efforts at politely excusing myself for the night. I soon realised that I needn't have worried about the latter... somewhere in between the summer of 1974 and the latest scandal in the village, my host drifted off into a loud intoxicated snooze. Shattered and still hungry,

I took the opportunity to escape and settled in for the night under a leaky roof in small annex that made up the accommodation for the 'B&B'. So the floor hadn't been cleaned in a long time, I had to go outside to the bathroom (which unsurprisingly looked like a picture perfect example of Victorian living) but this was better than a continual seven hour drive, wasn't it?!

The next day wasn't much better. After sleeping under a leaky roof, being woken at 5am by a cockerel, a freezing cold shower and no working electricity points, my mood was less than great. Luckily my 'happy researcher' facade served me well and I managed to navigate my 75 year old hungover participant through various interviews. Famished and exhausted I slumped onto a train at 4pm and headed back to civilisation...

Isolated country stays and my intoxicated volunteers have made the whole experience of data collection much more interesting. You visit some amazing people along the way and so long as you have a sense of humour while you do it, it's great fun. The element of surprise has made things all the more exciting. I learnt from an early stage in my research process to always be armed with a packet of tissues, a bottle of water, snacks and some hand sanitizer! Risk assessment or not, you never quite know where you will end up....

## Dear Dr Flo...

I am in a very difficult situation and I don't know where to turn for help and advice. I'm a first year PGR student in immunology at a high profile university, working on a project run by a very well-respected academic. I'm really enjoying the work and research but my supervisor is very short-tempered and has yelled at me several times in the lab in front of other people. The first time it happened I was shocked but I thought it was a one-off, but it is happening on a regular basis and it is humiliating. He often yells at me for being stupid or using a piece of equipment that he was about to use. It's usually in front of other people in the lab and he's reduced me to tears on several occasions. I'm finding myself feeling panicked and anxious about the standard of work I'm doing. I'm terrified of complaining as it seems like it's an accepted norm at this university and it might mean that I wouldn't get my PhD. Please help! Feeling Desperate

Dear Feeling Desperate

I am sorry to hear that you are having a bad time. Put quite frankly, your supervisor is a bully and it is completely unacceptable for you to be on the receiving end of his aggressive behaviour. I understand your concerns about getting your PhD but this behaviour must not be allowed to continue as it is beginning to damage your mental health and your PhD. There are two different routes you can take but the first stage is the same in both cases. Firstly, you need to keep a record of the incidents – the date, time and place, what was said and the tone in which it was said and who else was present. This builds up a picture for other people to see that this isn't just an isolated incident but a bigger pattern of behaviour which has been going on for some time. If possible, record as much detail as you can accurately recall from the previous occurrences as well.

Secondly, you need to decide if you would like to pursue an informal or formal route first. All universities have formal policies regarding bullying and they will have a formal complaints procedure for you to follow. The disadvantage for PhD students of complaining formally is that they may not be able to stay with the same supervisor and they risk delaying or not completing their PhD. The majority of students that

I've counselled regarding these types of situation feel that it is too risky to follow a formal complaint in the first instance as they often fear reprisals from their supervisor and prefer to try to resolve the situation informally at least at first.

If you choose an informal route there are a number of things you can do. The first thing you might want to try could be to inform your second supervisor about the situation and to request a three-way meeting where you raise the issue with your primary supervisor and ask him to stop this behaviour. You can ask the second supervisor to act as a mediator if necessary and you have a witness to any agreement that your primary supervisor makes about their future actions.

You can also enlist the help of a department / faculty postgraduate co-ordinator if you have one. Most large universities have some kind of local support system in place for research students beyond that of the immediate supervisory team and this is an important place you can go for an informal discussion about your options. The co-ordinator may offer, with your permission, to talk to your supervisor about their behaviour and to ask them to stop yelling at you. If your supervisor doesn't then stop, you can request a change of supervisor via the co-ordinator – again

without having to use the formal university complaints system.

Whilst I feel it is more beneficial to the wider PhD student community in the long-term to complain formally about this unacceptable behaviour, I fully understand the concerns about reprisals and not being able to complete the PhD that most students in this situation have. I have seen many cases of this kind which have been settled informally and the individual student is able to complete satisfactorily – often with a change of supervisor and/or laboratory. It is however unfortunate that the more students choose to take the informal route, the more likely it is that academia will carry on sweeping this kind of behaviour under the carpet and not make an example of these individuals. Complaining formally is your entitlement in this situation and would be more likely to aid a culture-shift in your university but it would be more painful for you as an individual. If possible, find a confidential friend or someone in your Graduate School to talk these issues over with in confidence before you make a decision as to what route to take.

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](mailto:drflo@vitae.ac.uk)

# Taking stock – Why do we dislike personal reflection?

**Dr Nathan Ryder (University of Liverpool) on personal assessment...**

I went to the bank this morning to deposit a cheque. I planned to be on my way quite quickly. The cashier held me up for what felt like an eternity, trying to persuade me to go for an account review right there and then. I sighed inwardly and said that I would make an appointment soon with my account manager. I can't be doing with it! The next time I go in they'll be on my case again, and the next, until I give in.

Reviews. Progress reports. Reflection. I think that there is something in us that rebels instinctively against these concepts. A necessary evil at best, and more often just an evil, a drain on the time we have to work. What is it about these activities that causes us to have such reactions? PGRs are encouraged to have regular meetings with their supervisors. There are constant outputs, be they results from experiments, notes on articles written up or papers being produced for conferences. We know what we're doing so what's the point in writing about or reflecting on the things that we're doing?

During my PhD we were encouraged to make regular records in our online Personal Development Record. I'd do anything to put it off. In my office it was considered a bureaucratic box-ticking exercise to be avoided at all costs, even though it took at most thirty minutes a month.

At the same time, everyone that I knew had some kind of plan in place for their work. They had deadlines for when they wanted to finish a chapter or a paper, and would work towards those goals. But try and get them to talk about their day, their week, what progress they've made in the past month and they would clam up. Progress reports and reviews were not topics for conversation.

It seems to me that being asked to review or reflect puts us on the defensive. But how can we progress if we do not think about what we have done, and then think critically about what it is that we need to do? I mean that we should set aside time to think carefully about what we have achieved, the goals we have set for ourselves and the outputs that have come from them. Personal reflection is at least as important as the time that we put into setting out goals. It is something I wish I had invested more time in during my PhD.

Personal reflection and self review can help us to notice the things that eat up our time and get in the way of the goals we are trying to achieve. It can help when it comes to figuring out how much time we spend on the task at hand and how much is spent on procrastination. Reviewing progress allows us to keep track of when we achieve our goals. It helps us to identify where exactly we're making progress. More importantly, it can help us plan better for the future. This could be anywhere from the next day to the next year and beyond. Personal reflection can help us realise what we need to do in order to work more effectively. It helps to stop and think: what do I need to change to avoid making the same mistakes?



What can I learn to improve how I work? One thing I've found valuable is to spend a minute at the end of each day writing down what I've done. Then at the end of each week I look back for ten minutes and think about everything that I've achieved.

There are times when research can seem exhausting, we give so much to it and so little comes out. We neglect to look back over our working days in case we see evidence that we're not working hard, or not producing enough. Research only comes to be accepted when we submit it for review, and in the same way I believe that our personal development can only grow when we put ourselves under the spotlight and think: What am I doing? What am I achieving? What do I need in order to do more, or do better?

Take time to reflect, to review: I believe it's an attitude we have to embrace in order to become better in our chosen fields.

Just don't tell my account manager I said that.

# It takes two...

## Steven Whistles\* (University of Coventry) considers what PGRs should be expect from their supervisors...

I had been an engineer for a number of years, joining the profession soon after completing my bachelor's degree. I liked my job but couldn't see any future prospects unfolding, so when I was offered a PhD studentship, I readily accepted. Some of my friends had previously completed doctorates, but had followed the more travelled path of going straight into them from their undergraduate degrees. I wasn't sure what to expect but was certainly looking forward to finding out.

The first step on my adventure was my application interview. I arrived at the lab and was taken to the office of the group leader. Throughout the meeting, this man seemed distracted. Valid questions were asked and I attempted to answer but he kept glancing at his computer with anticipation. He must be waiting for some results or vital communication I thought. He could see the questioning look on my face, and obviously felt an explanation was necessary. 'Oh I'm trying to sell some concert tickets on eBay and there only 20 minutes left', and so the first seeds of doubt were sown.

I accepted the offer anyway, thinking that at least a career break would be useful and commenced my research. I had no specific research topic, but I was told to read widely round a subject area and see what direction my interests took me. Months passed, and nothing seemed to be happening. The

equipment in the lab - the familiar tools of my trade - remained unused. No tasks of learning were set, or instructions given. Scientific discussions of any kind were rare, and the lack of structure worried me. My friends agreed with me - they had research goals already set, and seemed to have clear questions that they were trying to answer. I spoke to my supervisor and was assured there was nothing to worry about, eventually tasks were set and a project title produced. Despite this, there still seemed to be a lack of direction and interest in my work and I was getting increasingly worried.

Meanwhile my attempts to engage with the academic staff proved fruitless. Drafts of my papers were not read and meetings were cancelled ten minutes before because something had come up. I spent my holidays assured that things would be different, and would come back to work motivated and ready for discovery, but I always manage to return to the inevitable academic brick-wall.

Then in the summer of my second year I had my PhD epiphany. It may sound obvious but it was an incredibly important discovery to realise that I alone was responsible for my own work, that I needed to take control and inform my supervisor of my goals and what I expected from him in return. In hindsight, I should have spoken to my supervisor a lot earlier than I did, but the fear of making things worse stopped me. I now know that was a mistake and ensured that my frustrations only

individual pursuit but you are entitled to expect help from your supervisors, yet you won't get it unless you speak out. I first approached my secondary supervisor who was incredibly sympathetic, and then together we sat down with my main supervisor and worked out a doable and realistic plan for the next year. I can't say that this has completely solved all my problems but it finally feels like I'm getting somewhere.

I know that the unproductivity of my first two years was partly my own fault for not pressing hard enough for attention. There is however another aspect to this which I have no control over - that is priorities. It's a sad but inevitable fact that PGRs can sometimes be at the bottom of the pile. I am aware of how pressured academics are for time, overburdened with academic, administrative and teaching responsibilities but it is so important that we do not get neglected.

My advice to any student faced with a similar feeling is to speak out and not to wallow in silence. Try your primary supervisor first and explain your situation. If nothing improves, seek advice from your secondary supervisor, postgraduate office or representative or the head of school if necessary. In a way, the PhD involves a contract between you and your supervisor, it is thus something that requires commitment from both sides. In the end, supervisors, and departments have a duty to look after you, but overall you have a duty to yourself and your future.



# A rough guide to finishing your thesis

**Lorna Taylor: Deputy Editor**  
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The clock is ticking...September is approaching and many PGRs have less than four months until their PhDs need to land on the grad school office desk. I am one of these and over the last few months I think I have come to certain necessary realisations about the PhD process. When the going gets tough and the final hurdle is in sight, keep going and keep the following pointers in mind.

## **One must stop before one has finished**

It sounds simple but before you can start finishing up you need to stop researching. There will be things you haven't been able to address and interviews you never managed to complete, but at some point you have to make the transition into writing up phase and accept the practical limitations of your research. You can discuss the time or funding limitations that may have restricted the depth of your analysis...it'll give you something to talk about in your discussion!

## **Be realistic: it's not a Nobel Prize**

Stopping isn't easy. Throughout the first two years of a PhD we all believe we are working towards an all-encompassing breakthrough thesis. This belief may be

enough to maintain the motivation to pass through the second year fatigue and well into the final year. However, 18 months on you need to take a deep breath and let go. The goal is to write a thesis not change the world. More to the point, you need a good thesis not a great one. While it's still important to be proud of your work and maintain high standards, there is a lot to be said for the relief that comes with realising the limits of a thesis. Few researchers made their names with their thesis findings and there will be time for changing the world after your dissertation has been completed and the world of publishing and academia await.

## **It's never too late to get help...**

You have decided to let go..hoorah! Let the writing up commence. Now there is a new wave of fear. This is the time when your ideas come together and you really have to prove you know your stuff. As the fear of criticism builds and 'imposter syndrome' reaches new heights it can be easy to avoid showing work to your supervisors and delaying the writing phase. Remember, the PhD is a learning process and at this point input from those with more experience is invaluable. Don't be afraid to voice concerns or ask questions..... to know the

road ahead is to ask those coming back.

## **Persistence and intelligence... and distraction**

You would not have got this far into the PhD if you did not have the intelligence to do it. All that is required now is a level of persistence and fresh thinking. Persistence will come from a realistic perspective (see above) and a focus on the end goal. While good habits have got you this far, the final habit has to be knowing and believing that you can do it, and when things get difficult, keep going with the end in mind.

Distraction is your main enemy in your mission to get your thesis completed. When the task in hand can seem challenging, everything else can seem like an appealing alternative. Cleaning, washing, exercising... If you work hard and focus you can make the most of your weekends and ensure that you can stay motivated during work time. Remember, a PhD is something you are doing, not who you are. Focus and dedication are key but sanity is fundamental. See you at the other end! oh and check out the VITAE weblink:

## **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.

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In articles marked with an asterix, authors have wished to remain anonymous.

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