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GRADBritain

A MAGAZINE FOR AND BY POSTGRADUATE
RESEARCHERS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM



Explore your world

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The results are in! Last issue we invited you to fill out an online survey to let us know what you think about the magazine. Broadly, the impression was very positive, with readers saying that we've got the balance right between the serious and the silly. There were some good suggestions that we're trying out in this issue which are worth mentioning; people felt that some of the articles were too short and would like to see a few extended features; this issue we've got a 2-page feature from Dr Paul Redmond discussing generation theory from baby boomers through to today's "Generation Y".

Most of you said you prefer to keep GRADBritain online rather than having paper copies but mentioned it might be helpful to make posters or leaflets to send out to universities to raise awareness; we'll be working on this for Issue 4 in early 2008. "Dr Flo" was our most popular feature, with 85% of you saying you either liked it or loved it! From this issue onwards you can send in your own issues by email (drflo@grad.ac.uk). Remember you can also send letters to the editor to the usual address if you'd like to comment on anything you've read in the magazine or to suggest a feature for the next issue.

This issue's themes are 'travel' and 'finishing the PhD'. Under 'finishing the PhD' we've got "viva limbo" (page 8), gaining perspective on the final stage of writing up in the "departure lounge" (page 9), and some advice from someone who has survived life after the PhD (page 11). Under 'travel' we've got data collection in Russia (page 12) and lab placements in the US (page 13). We continue to be blessed with an excess of great articles, far too many to publish here, so we've come up with a novel solution.

We've created a group called "GRADBritain" on Facebook which we hope you'll come and join. In addition to being a place to chat about PhD life in general, we'll also be posting up articles that were interesting but didn't quite make the current issue. This way we hope we will continue to encourage people to share their experiences, offer each other advice, and provide a bit of light relief to the PhD experience. See you there.



Have you learnt when to say "no"? Whilst it's important to be seen to be helpful and enthusiastic, remember that sometimes, particularly in your final year, you need to prioritise completing your PhD on time rather than doing favours for other people. Learning when to say "no" will also signal to people that your time is valuable!

I stand corrected

- Bradley Smith (UCL) examines the red pen marks

When the email containing my PhD corrections first came through I had neither the energy nor courage to assess the damage. Post-viva syndrome was in full effect as I was getting over a serious bout of manfluenza. Recollections from the viva (now a world away in the distant past) suggested I had a few corrections due to spelling errors and minor lapses in style, but there were no burning issues in terms of scientific approach; sadly I was denied the hal-
lowed “no corrections” stamp of approval bestowed on the privileged few. So, I flexed my fingers, double clicked the file and found myself scanning through endless pages of pedantic changes.

My first experience in critical feedback was drafting an article on soybean genetics when I was a young laboratory technician many years ago. My boss at the time was notoriously overactive with his red pen. On a couple of occasions he returned a PhD chapter to a nervous student with “This is crap” written across the top of the page. Luckily my first piece of writing only displayed a bold bright red statement titled “START AGAIN AND THINK ABOUT IT THIS TIME”. What a relief that was. But I suppose it was a valuable baptism of fire into the world of academia. My genetics thesis wasn’t a complete masterpiece (are they ever?); but it seemed to do the trick viva-wise.

Motivation to face my PhD corrections arrived via an ingenious method; Jeremy Paxman therapy! A couple of hours witnessing this ferocious man’s cross-examination of students and politicians on University Challenge and Newsnight soon put my fear into perspective; at least I didn’t have this man examining my thesis! It’s never easy receiving critical feedback, but looking again through the corrections I came to accept that the criticism was justified and was purely an exercise in acceptance. “Getting over it”, making the changes and intellectually moving on took a real weight off my shoulders and freed up my mind to deal with the next challenge.

In fact, I would argue that undertaking a PhD is an exercise in learning to accept criticism. Without critical examination of our work the thesis will be half-baked and weak. Constructive criticism can only add backbone to the research and present a well-reasoned story. Defending and justifying our research decisions is also good practice for the future, whether it’s scrutiny from colleagues or comments from journal reviewers.

After finally updating my thesis with the corrections I could see the improvement immediately. The criticism was worth it. I’m grateful though that the heading to my corrections email didn’t say “This is crap”.

Top Ten: Nerdy chat-up lines



1. If you won't let me buy you a drink, at least let me fix your laptop.
2. Your name is Leslie? Look, I can spell your name on my calculator!
3. I can tell you're 36-25-36, which by the way are all perfect squares.
4. What's a girl like you doing in a place like this when there's a Farscape marathon on right now?
5. I'm attracted to you so strongly, scientists will have to develop a fifth fundamental force.
6. I don't mean to disturb you, but Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle says I already did that by observing you.
7. Did it hurt when you fell out of heaven? Because if so, $p=mv$ and your velocity would be incredible!
8. If I was an enzyme, I'd be DNA helicase so I could unzip your genes.
9. Let's rearrange the periodic table so I can be on top of U.
10. I wish I were a derivative so I could lie tangent to your curves.

Are two heads better than one?

- Zoe Hodges (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine) on managing your supervisors

When I was allocated two supervisors at the start of my PhD career, I thought I was in for a treat. Not only do I get clinical expertise but can also pick the brains of a social scientist. Or so I thought...

Little did I know how tricky it would be to handle what seems to be a relatively common situation for doctoral students. In my first year, I often sung my supervisor Anne's praises to my fellow students. She was creative, inspiring and passionate about my subject. Whenever I saw her, I left believing that my thesis topic was indeed the best thing since sliced bread.

Conversely, my second supervisor Bob seemed so uninterested in my topic that for the first six months he had difficulty remembering what it was. In addition, he seemed reticent to be actively involved. My two supervisors had worked together frequently in the past, but this meant they used my joint supervisions as an opportunity to catch up with one another. In addition, Bob deferred to Anne on decisions, rarely drawing upon his own expertise and judgement.

As a result, I depended almost entirely on Anne for support and guidance. This appeared to work well until I failed a key assessment in my second year, which knocked my confidence considerably. I subsequently realised that Bob's expertise could have helped me in those areas where Anne had failed to advise me.

This prompted me to reflect on how I might organise my relationship with my supervisors in such a way that I could gain from the strengths of each one. I had learnt over the course of the first 18 months of my project that Bob employed a systematic and methodical approach to academic research whilst Anne's strengths lay in her creativity and ability to inspire. In addition, Bob's skills were predominantly quantitative in nature whereas Anne's expertise centred on the



qualitative. Recognising these strengths (and their related weaknesses) was the first step towards a better working relationship with my supervisors.

During the first half of my PhD, I involved both supervisors in every component of my research project. Recently, I experimented with a new approach. My project divides quite neatly into four components, two of which require a more systematic approach and two of which require more creativity. It became apparent that the best approach was to ask my supervisors to each 'lead' on two components of my project, playing a secondary role

for the other two components. This decision marked a turning point: not only has it meant that Bob has taken on the responsibility and involvement that I wanted, but Anne has also had some respite so that when she is involved, she is more focused!

Having two supervisors now feels like a huge privilege rather than an obstacle to overcome. Of course, even if you have one supervisor officially, this does not prevent you from drawing on the expertise of other academics in your department or further afield where necessary. In fact, I think this should be the norm rather than an exception.

Capitalising on the knowledge and skills of more experienced academics is surely an intelligent strategy that will extend far beyond your doctorate.

Top tips for effective co-supervision

1. Tune into your supervisors' strengths and weaknesses.
2. Communicate with your supervisors explicitly about how you want to handle co-supervision.
3. Consider asking each supervisor to 'lead' on a different component(s) of your project whilst ensuring that they remain in touch with the bigger picture.
4. E-mail or meet with one supervisor at a time to keep their roles distinct.
5. Clearly express what you want to gain from each supervision or e-mail.

Dear Dr Flo...

I am a research student in Mathematics from China. I have been here for 6 months but am unhappy with my PhD. I don't understand my supervisor's attitude towards me and my research - he doesn't actually "teach" me anything at all and seems to want me to argue with him. Is this normal in England? In China we would never challenge anything that they say, yet I have been told by my fellow PhD students that things are very different here in the UK. This is causing me a lot of confusion and I would appreciate some clarification.

Beijing Researcher

Dear Beijing Researcher,

The UK PhD is almost unique in the world, in that it depends on the relationship between the supervisor and the student and it is therefore very important that the confusion you are experiencing with your supervisor's approach is addressed.

When you first started I hope that you were able to attend a special induction day for international students which should have addressed some of the common issues that international students encounter such as accommodation, financial concerns and so on. It may have also addressed aspects such as the processes and paperwork required to get things done. Unfortunately, it is much harder to address the "unwritten rules" of UK academic culture and these can cause confusion for international students.

The UK academic culture is built on the concepts of challenge and argument. The premise is that the boundaries of knowledge can only be pushed forwards if what has been asserted previously can be challenged. The "thesis" that you produce is an argument, and represents your own opinion. Your supervisor is therefore trying to encourage you to challenge the literature that you are reading and the results of previous research in order to get you to develop your own original ideas. This is what pushes the boundaries of knowledge forwards and is what will get you your PhD.

This is probably a very different "teaching" approach from the one you are used to in China, but in the UK it is not considered disrespectful in any way to disagree (politely!) with your supervisor. In fact, it is considered to be an essential component of the learning process at postgraduate level and is to be encouraged. You will find that you will develop your own ideas and direction for your research project if you enter into this spirit of argument and debate. Your supervisor will provide a useful "sounding board" for your thoughts and, at the beginning of the PhD process, will be more knowledgeable in your field than you are and therefore able to help you with the direction you might need to take. You must, however, be prepared for this situation to change over time and gradually you will become more knowledgeable in your area than your supervisor and become more independent.

This sounds quite daunting whilst you are in the early stages of your PhD, but it is a natural evolution. The end goal is for you to become an independent researcher and your supervisor will be guiding you towards this by encouraging you to argue and debate with him and ultimately, direct your own research and develop your own ideas and theories.

It is also important for you to realise that although you may feel alone in struggling with the UK PhD culture, it actually feels quite alien to many UK students as well! It may be helpful for you to talk to your fellow research students and share your concerns with them. Can you find out if they meet socially? If so, I would encourage you to join them on a regular basis and talk with them about any issues that you are having. The research student community can be very supportive and will help you deal with any feelings of isolation that you may have as well as giving you an idea of what is considered to be "normal" in the UK academic culture.

Good luck with your PhD! I do hope that you will look back on your time here in the UK as having provided you with an important opportunity in your career.

Dr Flo



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

Life at the Top... by Professor Geoffrey Thickett

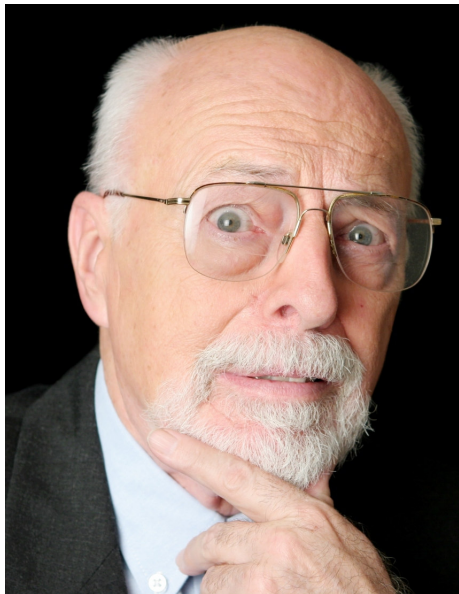
No-one likes a smart-arse. Especially other smart-arses...

Thomas Walker is too precocious by half. At just 19 he is the youngest student in Bookback history to become an MPhil. He sped his way through school with a preposterous number of A*'s, passed all his undergraduate courses with distinctions, and now he's here, visiting me on a daily basis. He is so enthusiastic about studying that so far he has been waiting at my door at 9am every day this week. I can't ignore him because I have to go to the staff loos down the hall to brush my teeth in the morning (I'm still paying the cleaner hush money but it's not that expensive really).

Thomas is so well-read on his own research subject, everyone else's research subject, and most annoyingly my research subject, that in order to stay one step ahead I'm having to spend the greater part of every night revising. I was considered quite a swot in my day, but Thomas puts me to shame. This morning he wanted to discuss "the meaning of a cardinal number in relation to Wittgenstein's Tractatus". Now although I OUGHT to be familiar with the whole of the Tractatus, the truth of the matter is that I was never very comfortable with the numerical element. So I started my day feeling like a stupid old man and Thomas went away with a smirk on his spotty young face. The other professors have complained because the morale of their students has taken a plunge.

Virtually every student who has spent any time with Thomas feels that they are dullards by comparison and bound to fail in any academic pursuit. Two students have already dropped out citing "inferiority complex" on their occupational health forms.

Well, at least my other students seem to be doing quite well so far this term. Lucy De Dragon Amore drifted in this morning in layers of shredding lace, looking like Miss Haversham.



"Hi Geoff" she said, and fluttered her eyelashes at me. "Uh oh" I thought, she wants something... "You know there is that funding available for students to use for carrying out field studies?" I couldn't think how she could possibly have found a suitable field study to tie in with 'Faeries in Victorian Literature'...

"Well I'd like to apply so I can spend a week at Cottingley looking for the real deal" she exclaimed.

It took a while for the request to sink in. The Real Deal??!! She wants to spend a week looking for fairies at the place where those girls took their hoax photographs in Edwardian times. I'm not sure whether we can really support that kind of research in the English faculty, but she says it is vital to her thesis, and I do so hate it when she sits there and cries at me if I upset her, so we shall see.

I was congratulating myself on having gotten through a Lucy tutorial with no outbursts of tears, but then Mavis Bunion ruined it all by calling Lucy a 'young hussy' as she bumped into her (on purpose) in the corridor outside my office. Mavis, having previously treated me like a teenage underling, has now inexplicably decided that I am rather attractive. She brings me bottles of single malt (which I cannot bring myself to turn down), and comes to tutorials reeking of lavender water and painted up with rouge, lipstick and eye shadow. Really it's quite upsetting. The worst of it is that she sees all my other female students as competition. The woman is mad. Would a few emotionally stable students with sensible research topics be too much to ask?

Prof. Geoffrey Thickett
Head of Department
Bookback College

(with help from Kiri Bloom)

Generation Y: Graduates demanding more

- Paul Redmond (head of the University of Liverpool's Careers & Employability Service) on the "Y'ers"

No one will deny that Amy Winehouse has had her problems in recent months, but look beyond the tabloid headlines and in many ways the tattooed chanteuse can still be seen as a symbol of her generation – which in recent years has acquired the label 'Generation Y'.

One of the defining characteristics of Generation Y is their eclectic and ambiguous tastes, their unique and at times unconventional capacity to combine the old with the new. This certainly applies to Miss Winehouse, whose retro-R&B breakthrough album owed much of its success to the fact that it was marketed via iTunes and MySpace (in other words, to other members of Generation Y). Then there is her outspokenness; her willingness to say what she thinks, when she feels like it. She's also highly, if at times ironically, brand aware. Amy's not the first performer to grasp that in today's YouTube marketplace, it's not what you say that matters; but how you look when you say it. Like other Gen Y'ers, she's not exactly renowned for her time management skills – but more of that later.

For graduate recruiters, Generation Theory is this year's most discussed concept. Numerous organisations are already using it to help them assess the effectiveness of their marketing and recruitment programmes. Others have held 'generation' conferences and commissioned papers.

At the heart of the furore is a growing awareness that times have changed; that today's students and graduates are somehow different; and that traditional communication channels between recruiters and prospective applicants are no longer working quite as effectively as they once did. And the phrase on everyone's lips is 'Generation Y'. So who are these people?



The theory of 'generations' has been around since at least the early 1990s. Briefly, it views society as consisting of successive 'generations', the three most recent of which are the 'Boomers' (1943-1963), 'Generation X' (1964-1981) and 'Generation Y' (1982-2000). Accordingly, each generation has its own unique 'character' – a character shaped by key economic, social and cultural forces which prevailed during its formative years. The idea is that only by understanding these forces can you really decipher what gives a generation its own unique outlook on the world.

Admittedly, this idea is not in itself new. Napoleon is reputed to have said, 'to understand a man, one must know what was happening in the world when he was twenty'.

Perhaps one reason why generation theory is catching on is because when it comes to Generation Y, there are so many of them to deal with. In the US alone, they encompass more than 70 million people and are almost three times the size of Generation X. Nevertheless – and this is a crucial point - most Y'ers grew up in small, micro-sized families. This gave them a head start in terms of self-confidence, but it also meant that they had lots of parental attention lavished on them. The 1980s were the 'the decade of the child' which meant that many Y'ers grew up feeling special and cherished (remember all those 'Baby on Board' signs?)

They also grew up affluent. Not only did Y'ers have more disposable income than previous generations, they were able to spend more time in full-time education. This might explain why Generation Y is good at keeping its options open. According to Business Week, Y'ers tend to avoid commitments, be they to employers, institutions, even partners (marriages among Gen Y are at an all-time low). Instead, when they need support, they go shopping.

Continued on page 7...

Not surprisingly, Generation Y is supremely brand-conscious. This is the first generation that tattoos brands on to their bodies, perhaps because brands have been such a constant feature of the Generation Y experience. By the age of four, as Eric Schlosser, author of 'Fast Food Nation' claims, Generation Y was able to recognise one symbol above all others: the 'golden arches' of McDonalds'.

Characteristics of Baby Boomers (1943 - 1963)

- Largest generation in history
- 35% of the workforce
- Post-war optimism & values
- Hard work + loyalty = rewards
- Status & cultural capital
- Property owners
- Respect authority & titles
- Socially liberal
- Politically conservative

But it is in the workplace that Generation Y is attracting most attention. When it comes to assessing Y'ers' effectiveness at work, the jury is out. The *Financial Times* has famously labelled Y'ers "every employer's nightmare"; while *Fortune* magazine claims they are destined to be the most high-performing in history. As Eric Chester writes in *Employing Generation Y*, "although they are better educated, more techno-savvy, and quicker to adapt than those that came before them, they refuse to blindly conform to traditional standards and time-honoured institutions. Instead, they boldly ask, Why?"

Perhaps it has something to do with inter-generational communication styles.

Characteristics of Gen X (1964 - 1981)

- Live in the present
- Always experimenting
- "More to life than work"
- Family is central
- Informality at work
- Challenge authority
- Sceptical of idealists
- Loyal to profession
- Want work-life balance

Research indicates that at work, Generation Y communicates differently than the other generations, which gives them a distinctive role and presence in organisations. Mostly this stems from their familiarity with new technology (combined with their increased levels of disposable income). According to KPMG, Generation Y rarely uses email; instead the preferred media are social networking sites such as Facebook, My Space and Bebo.

But this can pose problems, particularly for managers. Studies show that Gen Y doesn't respond particularly well to formality – particularly office hierarchies. "Because we've always done it like that," is never going to motivate many Generation Y recruits.

As digital natives, Generation Y are the ultimate multi-taskers: the problem comes when you try to get them to approach work in a lateral sense, i.e. completing one task after another. One City manager told me earlier this year how highly paid traders in her firm would regularly spend several hours each day 'plorking' (a computer-based blending of work and play) between different websites and technologies.

It wasn't that they weren't hitting their targets; it was how they were approaching their work.

Unlike Generation X, Gen Y has also been found to have a far higher level of awareness about corporate social responsibilities and the environment. One survey last year found that 72 per cent of final year students said they would have to feel happy with an employer's ethical record before agreeing to work for them. And Y'ers are serious about this; one graduate said, "If we don't like a job, we can quit, because the worst thing that can happen is that we move back home. There's no stigma".

All of this presents recruiters with a significant challenge. Get it right – provide the sort of culture, incentives, contacts and development opportunities that Generation Y responds to - and you get to attract and keep the brightest graduates. Get it wrong and the chances are they'll walk. It seems that Alexis de Tocqueville was right. Every generation really is a new people.

If you would like to learn more about Generation Theory and how it could help you in your career, email:

paul.redmond@liverpool.ac.uk

Characteristics of Gen Y (1982 - 2000)

- Techno - savvy
- Civic minded
- Self confident
- Optimistic
- Educated
- Bored by routine
- Success-driven
- Lifestyle centred
- Goal orientated
- Entrepreneurial

Stuck in viva limbo

- Sally Sargeant (Nottingham) finds herself in postgraduate pergatory

That was it. No more drafting, no more waking up at six in the morning wondering whether particular words were hyphenated or not. I had officially submitted my PhD thesis. Friends congratulated me; they all enthused that I must be “so relieved”. I found myself nodding my head in agreement. But as time passed, I felt more uneasy. Why was this?

Obviously I was nervous about my impending viva, but there was more to it than that. It was the way everything had gone so quiet. The silence was deafening. In spite of working full time, there was a void in my life – not a huge one, but a void nonetheless. I became aware that there was little or no support for students who had submitted and were “in limbo” – at least at my institution. There were many assumptions that I was running around, free of the joys of writing up, when in reality it was a very anxious time for me.

It’s inevitable that what is a milestone for us is a routine administrative duty for staff in university offices that process each submission. What is an individual struggle of academic and personal endeavour becomes one of dozens of theses awaiting examination. I was taken aback by the postgraduate secretary exclaiming, “Ooh, everyone’s handing in now, we’re so busy!” In that context, it felt like one was suddenly transposed from the originality of a unique PhD project, to being on a quasi-clerical conveyor belt.

However this isn’t just about feeling anti-climatic about the handing-in process. It’s also about the uncertainty that is part of this waiting game: of trying to exist in a world of new work, new skills, and being a fully-fledged scientist, whilst keeping one foot in the world of the student by preparing for your viva.



I personally struggled to cope during this “in-between” period. This was partly due to worrying about matters that were beyond my control; trying to keep my PhD subject in my head whilst doing my unrelated job. I seriously pondered whether I could go through with the viva. While this may seem extreme, there were certain issues that confounded my anxieties.

This mainly centred upon the fact that no-one effectively tells you the ins and outs of the PhD process after you’ve handed the thing in. Submission is the primary goal, after which the student is sent on their way. For me there was no real explanation of what would happen next.

How long would the process take? Who would I next receive any correspondence from, and when? Would a copy of my thesis be returned to me for reference? Could I contact my external examiner? Could I take anything else into the viva with me as well as my thesis?

PGRs at the post-submission stage can easily be forgotten, and may need their department/university to continue acknowledging them in some way. Students don’t simply disappear once they’ve submitted, only to magically pop up again for the examination. They are carrying their thesis subjects and related anxieties with them during that period. Institutions should ensure that visibility is maintained for both sides in the run up to a viva. It is a time when students probably need the most support.

I waited about four months between submitting and having my viva, and passed with minor corrections. However, I firmly believe that more could and should be done to make the waiting period easier for students. A helpful way forward would be to develop a set of resources that specifically address the post-submission stage, maybe even setting up a forum of some kind, or devising some anxiety coping strategies. The post-submission stage needs to be officially recognised by institutions as part of the PhD process in some way, if not now, certainly for future cohorts of students.

The PhD Departure Lounge

- Rebecca Chilvers (UCL) with pointers on gaining perspective

My flight is departing and I'm not on it. Over the last year I have watched friends and foes brandish their blue volume with triumph whilst glugging champagne and planning all sorts of adventurous exploits into the unknown. The initial shared joy has been increasingly morphing into a panic that I might never finish the race. Psychologists will tell you there is little to be gained from constantly comparing yourself to others, but watching them complete their own doctorates tells me they are poor at taking their own medicine.

We are born with a natural tendency to compare and contrast, and spend our undergraduate days answering essay questions that actively encourage it. It was easy to deflate a feeling of success after finals by finding out that someone who you thought did less work / wasn't as clever as you / never came to lectures, did much better than you. A PhD elicits some rather more sophisticated anxieties and jealousies, so complex they might one day fall into the hands of a mathematical modeller.

The fact that someone who started their PhD at the same time as you has somehow managed to write the whole thing whilst you still languish in data collection can be quite un motivating. If all you can muster to motivate yourself is the old public school approach of "must try harder", it can make you feel inadequate and stupid.

And if your concern spins into a type of 'learned helplessness' then it can stop you working altogether, which unfortunately will not help you produce a thesis. So what can you do surrounded by other people's success? If you can't stop fretting about other people, it's probably best to temporarily remove yourself from the lab and work at home.



My cats, clever as they are, do not appear to be writing a thesis (although they do occasionally 'type' as they walk all over my keyboard) and their unconditional moral support does wonders for my self esteem. You will find you can think more clearly too without the incessant noise of the telephone and office gossip. Slip a Bach CD into your stereo, make yourself a pot of coffee and you will become as sharp as a razor. Secondly, find someone to talk to who isn't in academia. You are doing an amazing thing, which is easy to forget when you are surrounded by amazing people all day everyday. Gaining your perspective back can make your goals more realistic and firmly focused on you, not anyone else.

If no one is on hand nearby, call your parents. They tend to be a safe bet in the 'proud and encouraging' category. They have no concerns regarding publication impact factors, the order of authors on a paper or how you're going to analyze the shed load of data you have on your desk. They just think it's great you're going to be a doctor and will probably tell their hairdresser.

Thirdly, make a plan of what you're going to do between now and your completion date month by month. If you can see the end in sight and if it looks possible, catastrophic thinking has a harder job of taking over. Try to strike a balance between pushing yourself and realism. You can't write your results chapters in a week, but it won't take you a month to format your references either.

Lastly, don't forget what you see is not what you get with everyone else. Their writing up may have looked easy, indeed they may have showed no signs of stress at all, but this is almost never true. They, like me, have sat with a bottle of wine and wondered when it was all just going to end. Others are gripped by new anxieties about the end of their funding; this is preparation for the grant-related anxiety which will be a prominent feature of your academic life!

But as Tennessee Williams said "there's a time for departure even when there's no certain place to go"

Why not work for: Yourself?

- Fiona Denney (King's) on going your own way

Consult with the enterprise wing of your university to get some advice on whether your idea is marketable, how it should be protected and what options there are for you; you will still need to honour your commitments; make arrangements with your line manager and check it's OK in your contract.

So you have an invention or discovery, you've consulted your enterprise unit, and they've guided you in how to set up your own business, but what happens if you just have a "buzz" instead? Well, there certainly are people around who have ditched their PhDs and become successful entrepreneurs overnight, but they tend to make the newspaper headlines for a good reason – they are unusual. Staying in academia can provide you with enough flexibility to be able to do some work for yourself, building it up slowly, to enable you to develop a solid client base with a monthly income (albeit a small one on a PhD stipend but it does pay the rent!) before taking the plunge and becoming completely self-employed.

Some people have continued to combine both an academic career and freelance work for a number of years before the decision to disembark from the establishment becomes too pressing. Often there is a tipping point when the demands of your freelance work are such that they can no longer be combined with your "day job" without it killing you. My father combined a successful career as a

Reader in Organic Chemistry for 30 years with a consultancy on forensic science before taking early retirement from academia to launch his consultancy full-time about 15 years ago. He has no regrets about the years he spent in academia combining the two because it enabled him to have the security of a monthly income to provide for his family, as well as building up his client base and professional reputation before he was finally able to do what he enjoyed doing.

So now that we've had a look at how to get there, what are the advantages and disadvantages of working for yourself? In addition to the main disadvantage of not having the security of a regular monthly income, there is little structured career progression. Your "promotion" is dependent on enhancing your professional reputation and being successful more than having annual appraisals.

On the positive side, working for yourself does not chain you to proscribed numbers of days annual leave, fixed working hours or office/lab facilities that are enforced upon you by other people. You can avoid all office politics, and you have the freedom to decline any work that involves interacting with unpleasant people. It is entirely up to you which jobs you accept or decline and, if it was the right decision for you, you have the feeling most of the time that you are doing what you were "intended" to do in life. Isn't that what's most important?



Working for yourself is an option that is only rarely considered by PhD students, for the good reason that most people embark on research because they want an academic career and this rarely incorporates an option to become self-employed. As the UK GRAD publication "What Do PhD's Do?" reveals, however, less than 50% of PhD students stay in academia after they have completed and you certainly need to be considering all other options from the word "go".

So what kind of "working for yourself" might be open to you? One option is becoming an entrepreneur by developing a business out of a discovery identified through your research. There are a number of courses run in this area for PhD students and post-docs because universities are very keen to capitalise on what is known as "intellectual property". It provides an important source of revenue for them, but it may also provide support for you to set up your own company and become self-employed. This tends to be better developed in the sciences but there are also initiatives such as [LCACE](#) which provide opportunities for those in the arts and humanities.



Life after the PhD

- Kate Bradley (Kent) with advice on your next steps

Be aware that it is quite normal for it to take time to get your first permanent post, and this doesn't make you a 'failure'. Be patient – keep going. The first couple of years after your PhD are an incredibly important time. The PhD prepares you for a research career, and whilst it is essential for most academic jobs, you still need to keep thinking about developing your skills as an all-rounder: the ability to design and convene courses, to manage students at all levels, to bring in research grant money, and to work well with colleagues. This can all be achieved through the experiences you have immediately after your PhD.

Get active. Organise meetings, go to conferences and seminars, and keep giving papers. Learn to embrace annual leave as 'study leave', and learn the delights of ordering British Library materials online from your desk at work! Keep writing articles, follow the advice of your examiners and also start thinking about turning your thesis into a book (or whatever is common practice in your discipline).

Get creative. Postdoctoral fellowships and research assistantships are all well and good, but don't be disheartened if you don't get these straightaway. Part-time teaching is just as important – visiting lectureships have more responsibilities than teaching assistantships, and this is where you can learn to design and convene courses, just the experience universities are after.

Get an interview. Take the application process seriously. Research each post you apply for carefully – who researches what in the department? What are the department's priorities? If it is a research-led institution, do you have any fabulous ideas for research projects that they would love to have under their roof? If they are teaching-led, have you any innovative teaching practices under your belt? Think creatively about what skills you have from your studies and other experiences and use these to tailor your applications to the requirements of the department. If you aren't successful, swallow your pride and ask for feedback.

Your thesis *will* be worth it in the end. Just keep your attention fixed on what you want to achieve in the long run, and in the meantime, take things as they come. Finally, make sure you set aside plenty of time to go for drinks with early career researchers in the same boat!

Stuff wot' undergradz say

"Primates are distinguished from other mammals by virtue of their disposable thumbs"

"After 1933 the control of the press and radio in communicating Nazi ideas was very important. Hitler managed to make friends with Alfred Hitchcock who was head of all radio stations...."

(please keep sending these in. They brighten up our day.)

I am a recent survivor of the postdoc years: I've just been appointed to a lectureship, a little over a year after passing my viva. But before you start making voodoo dolls, life wasn't all beer and skittles in the intervening year. After my viva in early 2006 I held a visiting lectureship at Roehampton which I did alongside a loathed part-time job as an archivist. In 2006/7 I also held visiting lectureships at Hertfordshire and Kent, before starting an ESRC postdoctoral fellowship at the Institute of Historical Research. It is stressful going from one short term contract to another, and squeezing in writing articles whilst working full-time is not fun. But it is worth it in the end.

Get realistic. First of all, enjoy the satisfaction of finally submitting your thesis and revelling in putting 'Dr' on all ID and paperwork. Trust me, after years of dealing with surly bank staff, there's nothing quite like enjoying the way they suck up to you after the magic "Dr" appears on your account details. Especially if you are just as overdrawn as you were as a PhD student, but they think you are "stealth wealth"... After all that fun, the most important thing is to pay the rent and to eat.

Travelling through time

- Robert Dale (Queen Mary's) on making the most of journey time



A recent research trip to Saint Petersburg in the Russian Federation prompted me to think about how I spend my 'travelling time', whether it's on a flight to a conference or just the daily commute, we all try to pass the time reading a book, flicking through the newspaper, scribbling down notes or sleeping. But is there a better use to be made of this time? During my research trip I made the rail journey each week from the Finland Station to Vyborg, a town 90 miles north-west of Saint Petersburg. By Russian standards the outward journey was comfortable.

Sitting waiting for the train to depart I closed my eyes in hope of spending the two hour journey in a deep slumber. As the 08:10 to Helsinki pulls away from the neighbouring platform the Russian national anthem blares from platform speakers. Not a good start. Sleep proves impossible. An uninterrupted stream of businessmen slam the doors at the end of the carriage,

on their way to find somewhere to get the first of many nicotine fixes. A procession of excited primary-school children, on a trip to see Vyborg's imposing castle, text each other on their mobiles as they make their way to the buffet car for ice-cream (at 08:30 in the morning!!). Incessant catering announcements attempt to entice the rest of us into a cup of coffee or sandwich.

By 10:15 we are pulling into Vyborg. A brisk twenty minute walk is all that remains between me and my destination; the State Archive of Leningrad Region (a building so cold that even in May the head archivist sits in a bulky padded jacket). The time flies as I sit reading the brittle and feint typewritten sheets. Before long its time to head back home.

The return journey is by suburban train. It takes nearly three and a half hours; halting at isolated platforms amidst clearings in the birch forest where nobody ever seems to get off or on. The Elektrichka, as these battered trains are known, are painfully slow and extremely uncomfortable. The carriages are spacious, but the seating amounts to little more than wooden benches bolted to the metal floor. However, despite all the discomforts the Elektrichka are an institution. Once again I optimistically attempt to get some sleep. However, these trains double as a market. Middle aged women and men weighed down by unfeasibly large bags pass back and forth

through the carriages with a bewildering array of products: ice-cream, crisps, soft-drinks, beer, nuts, dried squid, puzzle-magazines, TV guides, timetables, rain coats, umbrellas, phone directories on CD-Rom, screwdriver sets, mosquito repellent, torches and plasters. Again, sleep is out of the question.

I open the newspaper that I bought at the station, *Arguments and Facts*. After a few minutes of reading the sport pages, the lady opposite asks if she could look at an article that looked interesting. She proceeds to rip out the gardening pages, health care pages and the crossword. Little remains of the newspaper. Unexpectedly the gentleman next to me starts a conversation; after I've spoken a few words its obvious that I am a foreigner. This leads to a 2-hour discussion of economics, Bush and Blair (but not Putin!), the Ukraine, our occupations, then of course football and beer.

My weekly journey to Vyborg was by no means typical of the average research students' travel. However, it did teach me something. Sleeping, reading and writing were not only extremely difficult, but perhaps the wrong ways of spending my time. When I return in October I resolve to start more conversations. The language practice will be most helpful and I might even learn something about my research topic. Making an effort to ensure 'travelling time' is more sociable would surely enliven all of our travel.

We're not in Southampton anymore Toto.

- Mike Strickland (Southampton) on a research secondment at Kansas University

Tired of sitting in the same old office staring at a computer all day? Why not travel halfway around the world for a few months – to stare at a computer somewhere else!? I'm sitting writing this in Detroit airport, heading home after a 3-month summer placement with the bio-mechanics lab at Kansas University. It's been an interesting experience and I wanted to share some of what I've learned, so other PGRs considering an overseas secondment have a feel for what it's like (and maybe learn from my mistakes!).

Why am I doing this? A secondment isn't a holiday; there must be a good justification, with benefits for you, your home institution, and the host institution. Do you have complimentary specialist knowledge or capabilities to exchange? Are there specific projects you want to collaborate on? All this must be established before any other planning begins.

Who's picking up the tab?

Secondments are expensive – budget how much you'll need and consider where the money might come from. Look into travel grants if they're available in your field – available funding will vary depending on your discipline. Perhaps you can string the secondment and a conference together, and so save some travel time & expense?

Be prepared! Don't forget the practicalities – everything you'd normally do when going on a holiday is just as important here.

Make sure you have travel insurance for the trip – I had a nasty run-in with the side of a swimming pool which would have cost several thousand dollars had I not been insured. The longer you're away, the more likely these unforeseen eventualities become. Think about visas or work permits (keep a letter of invitation from the host in-hand; might save some hassle at the immigration desk!). Make sure you've got access to everything you'll need while you're away. Does the institution have access to the journals you need? Will you need a student card for library access, or computer accounts? This needs to be considered well in advance; get the applications in process before you travel, if possible.

Spending time overseas might slow your PhD progress – will any milestones need to be adjusted, and what are the implications if your PhD does slip behind schedule? Consider the practicalities of day-to-day life, as well. Remember to pack those creature comforts like emergency tea-bag rations! What about climate? When is a good season to travel, to avoid extreme weather? (note to self: NEVER visit Kansas in the summer again; 40°C isn't nice!)

Workload: You're on a working trip, not holidaying; don't expect to have time to go see all the sights! Plan ahead how much time you'll need for work, and when you'll have an opportunity to go exploring. Be warned: with

e-mail, the internet and remote-networking, you might find that work from home manages to follow you, just as you're getting new work on-placement - you really don't want a double-workload! I fell into this trap; be sure you negotiate with your supervisors, to agree what you will and will not have time to work on during the secondment.

Keeping Sane: PhDs are notoriously bad for your mental health – couple this with being away from home, friends and family, and the pressure of additional deadlines and projects at your host institution, and a secondment could be quite stressful! Do your best to keep in touch with people back home; get to know people at your host institution, and give yourself something to look forward to when you get back (I'm off for a nice weekend break to the Isle of Wight for some well-earned R&R!)

And Beyond... Getting home isn't the end of the story. Now it's time to capitalize on the experience. Have your experiences changed the direction of your PhD thesis? Are there publications and conference abstracts to be written? Have you come up with new ideas together for future collaborations? It's been hard work, and there were times I would have liked to just go home – but I'm glad I've had this opportunity. So, my advice: if you've got the opportunity for a secondment overseas, take the plunge – but look before you leap!



The final word...

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For the 25% of us PGRs working in the arts and humanities disciplines, the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) is the life blood of our subject area, injecting valuable funds into research projects and PhD studentships.

The AHRC is one of the six UK research councils that invest money into academic research. With an annual budget of over £90 million, it awards 700 research grants each year and dishes out over 1500 postgraduate scholarships (MA and PhD). In addition, it administers an annual budget of £10 million which funds museums, galleries and other collections.

In February this year, the Dept of Trade and Industry announced a £68 million cut in the Science budget for all the UK research councils, resulting in a £5.3m budget cut. Unfortunately the AHRC was forced to implement these cuts with immediate effect, which has meant a scaling down of its research leave scheme for academic staff and a deferral of key research grants and training funds. The budget cut has also meant the end of the Arts and Humanities Data Service which provides access and curates the digital output of the discipline's research; it will cease to exist

from March 2008. Despite this cut in the budget, the AHRC maintains that they are determined to prioritise postgraduate funding and to helping early career researchers. However it is hard to see how such a significant reduction in the AHRC budget (and all the research councils) will not have a detrimental affect on the careers of current postgraduate and post-doctoral researchers.

The AHRC is also seeking to fundamentally change the way in which postgraduate funding is allocated. From 2009, the current annual open competition will be replaced with something called the Block Grant Mechanism which will mean that each university department will be granted a fixed number of AHRC postgraduate awards for 5 years. It is hoped that this system will allow institutions to establish a long term strategy for their postgraduate research.

However there is a concern that such an operation will mean that the individual PGR will no longer be the driver of their own research project (a unique feature of an arts and humanities degree unlike the sciences). The plan is to retain an open competition although this will be scaled down to only 25% of awards granted. In addition, there will be an increasing number of Collaborative Doctoral Awards, which are joint PhD funding schemes which link HEI's with non-academic institutions.

It's not all bad news; the AHRC are at present looking to develop their resources for post-doctoral researchers.

Secondly, there is a move towards 'collaborative' projects in various forms, be they international or interdisciplinary collaboration, or alternatively, collaboration with the world outside of academia. A 2006 survey also found that 94% of AHRC funded PGRs were in full time employment. Crucially, of those working in either public or non profit sectors 72% stated that 'doing a PhD had been an invaluable experience' and had been crucial for their careers. This survey reveals the wide varying career paths taken by PGRs and will no doubt inform AHRC policy on preparing them for careers outside academia.

Next issue will feature an interview with the chief executive with the AHRC, Professor Philip Esler; if you have any questions you'd like us to put to him please get in touch.

The end bit...

GRADBritain is seeking contributions from postgraduate researchers, postdocs, and those with an interest in the development of early career researchers. We pay £50 for articles we use.

See our author guidelines at www.grad.ac.uk/gradbritain/ Please also send in juicy quotes from undergraduates. Issue 4 will be published in Spring 2008. Next deadline is Friday February 1st 2008.

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