

A PhD in just over a year and a half...

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If you saw the title of this chapter on the front page of the *Times Higher* would you think it was the latest marketing ploy put forward by the Director of Postgraduate Studies at Borchester University? Perhaps you would assume it heralded the discovery by QAA auditors of lurid details concerning a dubious franchise scheme in Ruritania by Ambridge University College. Well no, it could simply be describing something altogether more routine and generally accepted by the Harris Report on postgraduate study, the Dearing Inquiry and the funding councils. Almost certainly it has been embodied in a QAA code of practice somewhere. It is, of course, the 'standard' part-time PhD.

This year many other enthusiasts like me will have registered for part-time postgraduate study leading to a PhD. Each will be confronting the time pressures of fitting a unique and demanding educational and academic experience into all the other responsibilities they have to partners, children, in-laws, work and leisure activities (leisure activities? - come on, is this supposed to be a serious article?). As part-time research students they could be hoping to complete their theses by 2004 – six calendar years of sustained effort, but how much actual research and writing time? Obviously, the figure will differ from student to student, but by the definition of being part-time students, that period will be less than the six calendar years of their fee-paying registration.

The Part-time Calculation

OK, so my chapter heading was meant to get your attention, but perhaps it is not quite such an off-the-wall concept as it might seem at first sight. My by-line is actually based on a rather daunting calculation I made in embarking on my own part-time research in medieval landscape history. I consider myself lucky to be working part-time at the university at which I am studying, having my own office and ready access to the library, Web and GIS computing resources I need to undertake the project. Because of my partner's encouraging attitude I have been able to take a part-time appointment and use some of the remaining time for research. In some ways therefore my calculation was based, if not on a best-case scenario, then at least on the advantages set out above. Since beginning the research, my respect for those people I know who are undertaking part-time research while working full time outside a university environment has grown immensely.

The Research Day and Time Factors

As a self-funding student, the calculation I am referring to concerns how much time I can dedicate to research over the period that I am able to sustain the financial cost of the

enterprise (about £8,000 in total over six years, based on 1999 fees). The unit of time currency I used in my calculation was 'the research day'. I haven't found any exchange rates against the Euro for this listed by the Bank of England, and rather like the medieval mark it should be treated as unit of account rather than hard currency. I defined my research day as a dedicated period of about 8-10 hours that I could guarantee to allocate to research activity. I decided that taking account of other responsibilities (work, family and home, cats and horse) and including time at the weekend, I could allocate 1 1/2 research days per week to my PhD. Advice from my supervisors and the departmental postgraduate tutor indicated that I would need to decide on a working pattern as early as possible and be prepared to modify it as appropriate. I was told that some part-time researchers work in bursts of concentrated effort, others on a more regular basis, so many hours per week. I settled on the latter approach.

My planning figures attempted to avoid what in Phillips' and Pugh's supervisory experience was student enthusiasm that '...revealed itself in the form of over-ambitious estimates of what they could accomplish during the first year.' The calculation was simple: assume 50 potential working weeks in the year (quite generous actually), multiply first by 1 1/2 and then by 6. The result, 450 research days . . . or less than a year and a half. To this I added some 'bonus time' at weekends and in holiday periods (say, another 150 research days) for fieldwork and assumed that I would be doing some relevant reading most evenings in my first full-time-equivalent year. All this did not include any training courses, conferences and induction seminars that my supervisors recommended or that the department provided. The final result still worked out as just over a year and a half. Hence my chapter heading.

Two major questions presented themselves after this: was I going to be determined, motivated and organised enough to stick to my time estimate; and was the amount of time I thought I had, going to be enough to meet the requirements of the different components of my research? Not very encouragingly, the honest answers at this stage are, respectively, 'I hope so' and 'I hope so'. The competing demands on a limited resource contained in the second question include secondary source reading for the literature review, skill training and development, the evolution of a methodology, the identification of some theoretical foundations for the research, initial fieldwork and the preparation of a formal research proposal for purposes of review and upgrading. Here, at least, there are some clear advantages to part-time study. What you cannot timetable in from this year's faculty or university training programmes are likely to be available again next year (such naivety). I opted for an introductory course on Geographical Information Systems this year, but need to attend an undergraduate course on Latin palaeography run by one of my supervisors next year.

What emerged from my attempt to answer the two questions above was, in the words of Basil Fawlty, 'the bleedin obvious'. In order to make the best use of available time, part-time

researchers need to integrate a range of experiences (both work-based and academic). They need to look for beneficial links between apparently disparate activities (writing short chapters for books and preparing for research tutorials for example, or realising that it is possible to exercise a horse and do some fieldwork at the same time). And they need to stimulate latent abilities (in my case, more effective multi-tasking). Only then will they stand a chance of squeezing the most out of whatever time they have available.

Part-Time Needs

However, it quickly occurred to me that this enabling, holistic, integrative ability is not an exclusive part-time research requirement. It is just as relevant to full-time researchers. I began to realise that there was an implicit assumption in my approach: that part-time research postgraduates were somehow special cases (head cases, perhaps, special cases, well maybe not). There seem to be two interwoven strands in trying to identify the particular support needs of part-time researchers. One strand concerns those issues that stem from the nature of the research process itself, whether full or part-time (e.g. intellectual capacity, skill development, academic writing ability, time management, etc.). Another strand concerns those areas in which part-time researchers face either different problems from full-time researchers, or more chronic forms of common problems. I would suggest there are four such areas: accessing resources and facilities; research training; sustaining motivation and enthusiasm; and financing the process.

The accessibility of resources and facilities is a particular problem for part-time researchers. My experience so far has been positive in this context. Practical workshops on GIS techniques were run twice each week for a term, providing alternate times of access and easing the pressure on computer laboratory space, though this doubled the staff teaching commitment. Ironically, however, this approach was designed into a popular undergraduate course that postgraduates could benefit from. The provision of a dedicated postgraduate computer room in the department that is accessible at weekends has helped with revision of techniques and practical applications. Postgraduate tutorial timings are usually arranged around lunch periods and this certainly helps in managing work and study. Central resources cannot necessarily be as flexible. Weekend library facilities could still be improved for part-time students (notably in terms of service provision for borrowing) though only at increased staff cost. On-line ordering, book renewal, bibliographic services and web access are certainly service enhancements that are appreciated by part-time students.

Research training for part-time postgraduates can be seen as just a sub-set of the accessibility issues discussed above and it would seem to be a common issue for all postgraduates. However, the timing, format and support materials for skills training courses and modules can be particularly critical for part-time students. The factors that have to be taken into consideration include the relevance and quality of the training, given the limited amount of time available to part-timers; the availability and timing of the training in relation to its

application; and the prioritisation of learning needs within the research process. Part-time students may take longer to attain a given skill level and may have to compromise in developing two skills sequentially, though both may ideally be needed simultaneously. In my case, for example, it would have been better to have developed the GIS and Latin palaeographic skills together rather than sequentially. However, talking to other part-time postgraduates has revealed several creative and self-help alternatives to meeting learning needs involving peer-group tutoring and the identification of self-help manuals.

The Part-Time Marathon

Almost by definition, part-time research students are likely to be highly motivated – initially. I found it a boost to my confidence that I had got myself organised enough to put together a research application that was accepted and that I was actually embarking on a project I had been hoping to start for some years. I don't think I am being too cynical in wondering whether intellectual curiosity, interest in the subject matter and personal achievement – the initial motivating forces for my research – will be enough to sustain my enthusiasm when I hit the inevitable blockages along the way. Once again, the greater length of time over which part-time researchers have to sustain their commitment and motivation is a key factor. Self-comparison with full-time postgraduates working in the same field may not be helpful. Interestingly, I have already been comparing my progress unfavourably with that of a full-time colleague researching in a cognate area. Cognitively, I know that I shouldn't be at the same point for several more months, but affectively, I cannot help getting anxious. I am trying to tackle this issue by keeping a research diary to catalogue actual progress against planned objectives.

The financial cost of my research is likely to become a more critical issue later in the process. Initially, the confidence boost of beginning the research has mitigated the very real financial cost it represents. I can see that the longer it goes on, the greater will be the personal and financial investment made in the project. The relative lack of funding options for part-time research students is an issue here.

So what have I learned about the process of part-time research in the short time I have been registered so far?

Afterword

I have found that part-time research for a Doctorate is like no other educational experience - because draws on such a wide range of skills and experience. It is intellectually and academically challenging, inspiringly motivating in its fundamental concept of creating knowledge and dauntingly forbidding as a journey towards independent academic judgement and self-reliance. A more mundane description would be as a self-imposed sentence of unremitting hard work for five or six years. It is already becoming part of my life – pervading most aspects of it and impinging on personal time and space. There is a clear

need to re-appraise priorities and review accepted patterns of work and home life. What do I hope to get out of it? In one sense it is a self-rewarding journey of discovery – I don't have any (well, not many) delusions about starting on an academic career at the age I will be when (if) I complete it. However, the financial investment and the effort put into it will mean that I will be keen to use the qualification as means of opening up employment opportunities within Higher Education.

If you are thinking of applying to start a PhD as a mature, part-time research student, my final piece of advice is to take as much time as you can before you apply (6 months or more) to think out what you actually want to do, how you want to do it and how much it is going to cost. Then start to assemble some resources (office space at home, an on-line computer etc.) and try to do some serious reading around the topic area that interests you. Finally, try to talk to some other people who have already proved their terminal madness by registering for part-time research.

GOOD LUCK.

This chapter was taken from *How I got my postgraduate degree part time*, edited by Nicole Greenfield, with permission from author and publisher – School of Independent Studies, Lancaster University. Unfortunately this title is now out of print