

## Clare's diary of a part-time PhD

**'So when are you starting your PhD? You'll never get a senior research job without one.'**

### 1 The question

I had studied for part time Masters over 3 years whilst working in a full time research job. I completed it in 2004 and swore that I would never put myself through the experience again. Part time study had been exceptionally difficult and had consumed more evenings and weekends than I can bear to think about. It had been particularly difficult as I was young and surrounded by friends who always wanted to go out. As I already had a research job I did not consider that undertaking a PhD was going to be of much extra use or benefit to my career. Indeed, I was adamant that my experience that I had gained over the 4 years in the job was equivalent to someone who had completed a doctorate.

But in the Masters viva the external examiner commented on the quality of my work and asked when I was starting my PhD. I was surprised, particularly by the assumption that doing a PhD was the logical next step for someone who had only just about finished a Masters. I explained that I was not considering doctoral study then or in the future. I was exhausted. The sheer thought of more work was far too onerous. I needed to go out, have fun and reclaim my free time.

The examiner was particularly surprised, stating frankly that I would never get a senior research job without a PhD. Who wanted a senior research job anyway?! Over the following months, whilst trying to forget the remark, it continued to haunt me. It was even worse whenever I saw the internal examiner, who would ask in passing, 'so when are you starting your PhD?'

**Q1 Discuss the issues that arise for potential doctoral candidates**

**Q2 How would you advise Clare at this stage?**

## **2 The answer**

‘So when are you starting your PhD....?’

Fourteen months later I gave in to the thought of doctoral study. I was in the same job and still enjoyed it. I was on a good salary and was accustomed to the lifestyle that I enjoyed. I was used to working on numerous projects at once, juggling my time amongst them. I could not comprehend working full time on one study. There was only one thing for it – to do a PhD PART TIME. I never thought I’d hear myself saying it, but there I was, in a moment of enlightenment, sat on a London bus thinking, I am going to do a PhD! Not only am I going to do a PhD, but I am going to do it PART TIME! And that was it, my decision was made. It felt like a weight had been lifted from me - ‘so when are you starting your PhD?’ Now! The only issue was then deciding what I was going to study....

**Q1 What factors should be taken into account now that Clare is committed to applying for a part-time doctoral programme**

**Q2 How should she go about deciding what and where to study?**

### **3 Admission**

The important thing for me with my PhD was to tie it into my area of work (drug and alcohol addiction) as much as possible. This way I knew that I would be able to spend some work time on the study and I would also have the full support and backing of my manager, an expert in the field.

It took a while to decide what the study would be, toying with various ideas. I had the support of my Masters supervisor, who had also been keen on me embarking on a PhD. He was an expert on my chosen research methods, rather than being an expert in the field and was based in the Sociology Department. After numerous discussions between us all I put a rather hasty proposal together in order to make the application deadline for entry that year. I somehow felt that I had already wasted enough time and I just had to get on with it and get started, before I changed my mind. I decided to study what happened to people's drug and alcohol addiction when they go to prison.

I was introduced to the second PhD supervisor from the same department in a very strange way. I had thought I was meeting them to see if I liked them and if they were going to be a suitable supervisor, but in fact the opposite was the case. I was heavily cross-examined and questioned on my hastily put together proposal and at times really felt quite belittled by their comments and apparent disregard for my work. I left the room almost in tears, but managed to wait until I had got home to vent my upset. Was all this stress really worth it?

**Q1 Discuss Clare's choice of topic and supervisor(s)**

**Q2 What makes a good admissions procedure?**

#### **4 Induction**

I was surprised that, after the viva-like experience when meeting the second supervisor, the department gave me the go ahead and approved my proposal for research study. I chose the Sociology Department due to my existing relationship with my Masters supervisor. However, I did question this as I did not have a sociology background and I was not one hundred per cent convinced of the sociological nature of the work.

I registered (and paid for) the PhD in November 2005 and work began straight away. I was new to PhD study and what it entailed. However, having registered late I also had missed a number of the training courses aimed at new PhD students. Oh well, who needs those anyway? Surely attending training sessions on time management and project management and the like is a waste of time. After all, I had been working in research for nearly 5 years and had organised and managed numerous projects. I was overwhelmed by my own eagerness to get on and start my PhD. I just wanted to get on and do it.

**Q1 Comment on Clare's departmental location and induction**

**Q2 What part should training courses play in her PhD?**

## **5 Year one**

So I started. In my initial meetings with my supervisors we discussed that I wanted to try and complete the PhD as quickly as possible. Whilst the University has some regulations on this, I wanted to work on it whilst I was at my most motivated and whilst I was allowed to spend a day each week of work time on the study. The other motivation behind trying to complete the study in under 7 years was that of finance – as a self funding part time student, any time saved has a real cost benefit, as the fees were in the region of £1500 a year.

The first year went well. Particular highs were being awarded a bursary for half of the fees, and also the award of a small fieldwork grant. I also applied and I was granted ethical approval for the study towards the end of the year I started the fieldwork.

As the year went on I struggled with some aspects of studying part time. Just exactly when does part time mean you work? It was a challenge to fit the work around my paid employment and my social life. I also struggled in not really being an active or recognised member of my department, and so did not have a peer group who I could discuss things with or relate to. In fact, I felt particularly isolated and my non academic friends did not quite understand what I was doing.

I found it very easy during these low periods to lose motivation. If it wasn't for the regular meetings with my supervisors, and their continued interest and belief, I'm certain that I would've given up. Other low points of the first year included being unsuccessful in a funding application and the main supervisor taking 6 months sabbatical towards the end of the first year. It had been a tough year, and this just capped it all, especially as he left for sabbatical at the same time as I started my fieldwork (he was the main supervisor because he was an expert in the methods). Great! However, I was surprised how much I had already got through, I was even more surprised that I was still doing it, was determined to not let this affect me or my work any more than it had to. So I gave myself a few weeks off before registering for my second year.

- Q1 Discuss Clare's first year and any special issues that have arisen**
- Q2 Have you any suggestions as to how she should prepare for her second year?**

## 6 Year Two

The second year started strangely. Firstly, there was the issue with my lead supervisor having now gone on 6 months sabbatical. Then I discovered that I did not appear as a registered PhD student in the departmental information or on the departmental website. I couldn't help wondering if this was because I was studying part time, with little departmental contact.

Whatever the reason, coupled with the first supervisor's sabbatical, it was a real blow to my confidence and subsequent motivation. I felt like I did not exist, and felt particularly cheated as I was paying myself through the studies with little to show for it apart from an increasing stress level! My second supervisor (the one who was still there) was particularly unhappy about all of this and spoke to administrative and academic staff. They raised it at the next departmental meeting to check what had happened and to ensure it would not be so poorly managed in the future. It appeared that 'an administrative' error had occurred, which had gone unnoticed as I was not a regular face in the Department. The 'oversight' was later amended.

I also opened up to my supervisor and discussed how I felt as a result of the lead supervisor going on sabbatical. Whilst they said that they were happy with my work and the progress I had made, they understood my concerns. We therefore arranged to meet more regularly whilst the lead supervisor was away and place extra focus on the areas that the lead supervisor would've led on, so as not to neglect them.

These issues cleared up, I began focusing on the work again (rather than worrying about what was happening and if it was worth continuing) and things improved. I had made a good start with a literature review and so began concentrating on the fieldwork stage. Fieldwork progressed well during the few months, and the regular meetings with my second supervisor were a great support. I had expected to have email contact with my lead supervisor, although this did not really take off, so I gave up and stuck to liaising closely with my other supervisor.

I started realizing quite what undertaking a part time PhD whilst working full time actually entailed. My PhD time was being spent reading, writing, conducting fieldwork, applying for grants and general admin. This was already exceeding the day a week that my work had allowed. It began necessary to spend more of what was my 'free time' to work on the PhD and began spending evenings and weekends reading and writing.

It felt like I had begun to 'own' the work much more and take more responsibility for what I was doing. The PhD became more of a feature of conversations with friends and family than it had been in the first year, probably as both they and I realized the scale of the undertaking. I also felt more supported during the second year as a former work colleague started a full time PhD. Whilst they were registered in a different department, they were at the same University. It was great to have someone to talk to who was going through the PhD process too and discuss ideas and issues.

Like the first year, there were highs and lows. The major highs were the fact that it really felt that I was *doing* a PhD, maybe because the fieldwork had started, but also linked to my greater ownership of it. However, it was still tough, particularly financially as a couple of funding applications that I had spent a lot of time on were unsuccessful. I was awarded a further small amount of money towards more fieldwork costs, so at least this went some way to helping with the indirect costs.

**Q1 Identify the issues that are now facing Clare and discuss how they could have been handled**

**Q2 Have you any suggestions for her at this stage?**

## 7 Supervision

As the second year progressed, talk of the upgrade began to dominate supervision meetings (as I had to upgrade in between 18 and 24 months through the study). I felt quite daunted by this, as knew that this would determine my fate in terms of whether my studies would continue. Preparing the report for the upgrade meeting began to control my time, both in work and at home. Any time that I could spare I would be reading, writing and preparing the main report and appendices in time for the summer upgrade.

The biggest high of the second year came when I found out that I had been selected for interview for a prestigious scholarship from a charitable organization. In truth, I considered the application that I had submitted months before as a real long shot, so much so that I had actually forgotten about it. I was therefore more than surprised to have been given an interview. I was ecstatic to find out a month later that I had been successful and was awarded a scholarship. This meant so many things. I felt the financial weight of self-funding the studies lift from my shoulders. Further, knowing that others believed what I was doing was worthy enough of such an award gave my confidence and motivation a real boost. I also felt that I was somehow flying the flag for part time students. It was a great feeling, particularly after having experienced some of the low points earlier in the year.

In and amongst working and preparing for the upgrade meeting my lead supervisor announced in April plans for a second period of study leave lasting four months over the summer and into the autumn term. In my opinion, this had already happened once too many times before. This was not welcome news and really made me question the commitment of the lead supervisor to me and my studies.

To my surprise, my relationship with my second supervisor had really developed over the course of the doctoral work. In fact, my relationship with the second supervisor was now far better than the relationship that I had with my lead supervisor. I opened up to both supervisors to allay my concerns regarding the second period of study leave. I questioned the departmental responsibility and what was going to be done in terms of supervision arrangements whilst the lead supervisor was away. I felt well within my rights when I suggested a stand in supervisor.

The lead supervisor was more than surprised. I could tell that he felt somewhat shocked by this, although it was apparent that he didn't see what was wrong in his imminent departure. He assured me that it would be different from the last time when he was on sabbatical - promising regular email contact and also telephone calls. I still felt uneasy about the situation and my second supervisor knew this. We decided to see what happened, but I was not holding my breath.

**Q1 Discuss the arrangements for Clare's supervision. What alternatives could have been considered?**



**Q2 Have you any comment on her decision?**

## **8 Conference attendance**

During the year I also presented the progress of my work at two postgraduate conferences, one in my own department. Whilst used to giving research presentations I was rather concerned about nominating myself to give a presentation – as it would be the first time that I had spoken to an audience about my doctoral work. I was anxious that other postgraduates would see flaws in my work or question what I was doing. However, I knew that there could be a lot of benefits of doing this, and would only prove to benefit my research in the long run – so I thought I would give it a go.

Whilst my supervisors were pleased when I told them that I had decided to do the presentations and were supportive, neither of them attended either of the presentation sessions – so I really was left to fend for myself. Luckily however, I found both experiences particularly useful – there were a few interesting questions asked and the process of writing and delivering a presentation helped crystallize some of my ideas. Importantly, as nobody hounded me about the work or questioned the quality of it, the presentations actually gave me more confidence in what I was doing. I even had some follow up emails from a newly registered doctoral student working in a similar area but at a different university. We have since met each other on numerous occasions and kept in touch over email, asking questions, helping out with obtaining articles, but most importantly, providing each other with mutual support. It made me realize how important it is to share experiences with other PhD students and how much of my time up to then had been devoid of peer support, which I believe was largely due to my part time status.

Work for the upgrade has continued into the summer, although the date for it was pushed back to mid September due to the lead supervisor being away up until then.

As the upgrade report progressed I had some slight disagreements with my supervisors who both wanted it to be heavily based on Sociological theory. I found this difficult and challenging given my lack of Sociological knowledge and training. I again began to question my choice of Department and wondered if I had been foolish to choose this Department primarily based on my relationship with my Masters supervisor, a relationship that I had increasingly begun to question.

The upgrade report went from draft to draft and grew in size. By July, it was already lengthier than my Masters dissertation. This acted as another reminder of how much work I had already done on the PhD, but also of the amount of work that was still to do, and of the scale of the undertaking of doing a PhD.

**Q1 Comment on Clare's decision to present her work at conferences**

**Q2 What makes an effective upgrade procedure?**

## **9 The upgrade**

The upgrade proved difficult to organize as finding a time that all 5 of us could make was impossible. September had been chosen for the upgrade as the lead supervisor was in the country, albeit for a week, prior to taking yet another 3 months of study leave. Nevertheless, it was still impossible to find a date that all parties could make during that week. Only the second supervisor was therefore present at the upgrade.

The upgrade meeting itself went well. Whilst I was nervous, especially as I did not know the postgraduate tutor or the internal examiner, I found myself actually enjoying talking about my work and answering their questions about it. The outcome was positive, with good feedback from the panel and I was upgraded from my provisional status. I was even told that I was one of the strongest PhD students in the department! I found this particularly surprising and somewhat ironic, given the fact that I had been omitted from the departmental information earlier in the year. I was also allowed me to discuss with the panel any concerns that I had.

I raised two. Firstly, about the lack of active involvement and apparent concern from the lead supervisor. This was linked to the second concern – which was how the Department had (not) responded to the lead supervisor taking so much study leave and more generally how they had dealt with me as a part time student. The postgraduate tutor took the concerns seriously and suggestions were made to help me integrate in the department – adding me to mailing lists and study groups. We decided that the second supervisor could formally become the lead supervisor and the possibility of a stand in supervisor with the methods expertise would be investigated.

I couldn't help feeling that I had been pushed from pillar to post by the department on numerous occasions, but now felt like they were starting to take my concerns more seriously. About time!

**Q1 Comment on the upgrade procedure**

**Q2 How should the make up of supervisory teams be reviewed?**

## 10 Year Three

I felt relieved following the upgrade experience and was particularly motivated to continue with the work knowing that I was no longer classed as a provisional student, but was more formally recognised as a PhD student. Towards the start of the year I also received the first scholarship cheque, which felt good and made the registration process less painful than the previous two years. Progress with the work continued for the first few months and everything seemed to be going smoothly....

However, as we know no path to a PhD ever seems to run smoothly and one day I found myself in yet another dilemma needing to contact John Wakeford for advice. Perhaps I should've seen it coming, but I hadn't and nothing really had prepared me for the news, which came as a lot of a shock. My original lead supervisor (still on sabbatical) emailed me to tell me that he was leaving the University. Not only was he leaving the University, but he was moving country – to a different continent and thus could no longer continue with my supervision. The first email for months and that was what he had to say!! Great, this really was the icing on the cake! Even though he was the lead supervisor, I didn't feel that I had missed out by not having him about as he had been crap and spent more time out of the country on sabbatical. Whilst he'd been away there was little or no communication. I had been unhappy with his lack of input or apparent concern, and to me, this just proved it.

I phoned the second supervisor who was equally as shocked at the news. However, they didn't seem to think that the lead supervisor leaving was a problem and couldn't really understand why I was so bothered about it as we had effectively been working without him anyway. I soon came round to thinking that the lead supervisor leaving could actually be beneficial as both John Wakeford and the second supervisor (now promoted to be my lead supervisor) assured me that it was the responsibility of the department to provide me with suitably qualified supervision. So in that respect, it wasn't my problem. I knew that it would be both unfortunate and unlikely that I would end up with another supervisor who wasn't in the country but would benefit from a new supervisor who was more keen, concerned and supportive.

I now wondered how to go about getting another second supervisor and who to get. My supervisor suggested a couple of people in the department with an interest in my methods. However, as no one in the department was knowledgeable in the area that I am researching (other than slight knowledge by the existing supervisor), I considered looking elsewhere within the University to see if there was anyone else suitable.

Whilst this initially caused a bit of a stir, (I think because of the obvious financial implications for the department). I did identify three academics within the university who are knowledgeable in the area and who specialise in my methods. But, following a departmental meeting with the postgraduate tutor, it was agreed that my replacement supervisor should come from my current department so as to keep the sociological focus of the work. However, it was agreed that the work could benefit from informal input from someone with

more specialist knowledge in the area and thus the other academics would be approached to gauge their interest in acting as a third, yet more informal, supervisor.

Whilst the change in supervision arrangements took some time to resolve, progress with the research continued. I completed my fieldwork, which felt like a real achievement and gave me a boost during periods of frustration or uncertainty. I was half way up the PhD mountain and I was determined to carry on to the top. If anything, all the setbacks and the problems that I had experienced did not deter me from continuing with the doctorate. Rather, they inspired me to continue on the journey and I became even more determined to succeed and complete it.

As if that wasn't enough, a further significant event occurred during the third year of the part time study – I got a new job. And not just any new job – a senior research job!! I couldn't believe it – I got a senior research job without having completing the PhD. I wished that I could tell the external examiner from my Masters viva! Admittedly, the new position was not within academia, but nevertheless the opportunity was fantastic.

I knew I had to take it, despite it meaning leaving a job that I enjoyed and that I had been in for seven years. Not only that, it meant leaving a job and an employer who was very supportive towards the PhD and moving somewhere where working towards and having a PhD was much less important. It meant moving cities, relocating and leaving friends - but I knew that it brought many benefits and would professionally be an important career move. I knew that in accepting the job, I would have much less 'work' time to spend on the PhD and my goal of completing it earlier than the stipulated 5 years would be pushed without devoting yet more of my 'free' time to the studies. However I also knew that that was a sacrifice that I had to take.

**Q1 Comment on the reluctance of Clare's Department to agree to using a supervisor from another department**

**Q2 What effect do team members predict Clare's move to her new job will have on her progress?**

## **11 One year later**

After the move, things were quite unsettled for some time. Whilst the new work had been great in allowing me to have a day per week off work for doing my PhD, this was not as easy in practice as had been expected. The London hours were longer than I was used to and was working in a much more demanding research culture than I was used to. It would've been wrong to describe the learning curve as steep, but the ways of working, colleagues and politics of a new organisation took a bit of acclimatising to and it was all much more tiring than I had anticipated. It took a while to get into the routine of having one day per week for the PhD, as I found myself using some of this time to sort myself out following the move.

Eventually, the routine of one day a week became a bit more settled, although I found that I spent more of this time preparing a paper that I submitted to a peer reviewed journal and preparing for 2 conferences where I had had papers accepted to present. This was pleasing and knowing that people were interested in my work provided me with a boost, but I soon found myself getting frustrated that I spent so much of my PhD time working on these areas. It wasn't that they were unrelated, but it was not writing the thesis, which I knew is where I should be targeting my energies. I partly realised that what I was doing was a form of procrastination. I felt unable to start writing the thesis as where would I start with one day a week? I was overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task in hand. I decided that focussing on the conferences and paper was important, but that after they were over, I was determined to spend the PhD time on writing the thesis.

**Q1 Discuss the pros and cons of making conference presentations and submitting papers to journals during a doctorate**

## **12 Routines and progress**

I had a few meetings in the diary with my supervisor when they were in London on scheduled meetings, although the meetings got cancelled and so the meetings never materialised. It wasn't until 6 months after the move that I did meet up with them, and by that time a face to face meeting rather than email discussions was much needed. 4 months after the move I had settled into the routine of one day a week working on the PhD. I decided to plan the first few chapters of the thesis and focus on writing those. By breaking down the task at hand it felt more manageable. After writing those, I could then plan the next few chapters, and so on, making it feel less daunting.

Good news came that the journal article had been accepted, due to be published later in the year. It is now almost a year since the last update, and since moving to London. Over that time it has really instilled in me the level of discipline needed for a PhD, particularly one part time when there are so many conflicting priorities. The importance of planning the writing and allowing enough time in a chunk became important, otherwise, I was finding it hard to maintain continuity. I also made important decisions to hold off presenting at any further conferences and writing any more papers for the time being, in order to focus my energies on the small matter of working towards the 100,000-word thesis.

A year after the move the planning of the thesis led to a document outlining an initial 8 chapters. I had written some of the material over the year but progress was slow – having made a start on 5 of the chapters – the introduction, research rationale, methodology, participant description and some findings, having written a first draft of all these. It was pleasing to see that I had achieved something – particularly as I printed it out to read through. Still I knew that the big literature review was yet to be tackled and other more theoretically challenging chapters needed writing, so I was careful to remember that there was still a lot to do.

### **Q1 Discuss Clare's progress and strategies**

### **13 Writing the first draft**

During my day a week I concentrated on writing the chapters according to the plans and outlines that I had, though I was amazed how quickly the days went. Some days I spent more time reminding myself where I had got to the last time I wrote, that I didn't actually write much new material. Some chapters were easier than others, and those with more discrete sections were more manageable to write in this piecemeal fashion, whereas those that were more analytical and discursive were harder to tackle and write bit by bit. The benefit of having chapter plans was really obvious at this stage and being able to update those during the writing kept me on track and provided direction for the next time I wrote.

It was clear that what would be most helpful was having more than a day at a time to write so I did things to enable this to happen, including taking a number of days in one go and booking annual leave in order to write the thesis. Taking this time and getting away from work and my usual home life to a quieter place where I could concentrate solely on the writing was also key, and I spent time staying with family and friends in order to make progress that seemed much harder when I was at my own home. Sometimes when I was feeling tired or unable to continue on one section I found that dipping in and out of other sections or chapters maintained writing momentum and was a good diversionary tactic.

I felt very tired from the full time work and the part time PhD, so another thing that helped when writing was giving myself a deadline for a rough first draft, which I would send to my supervisors. Working towards this date was key for me to get a sense of where the thesis was heading, how the chapter and thesis plans were holding up and would be crucial to get the supervisors feedback. I wrote all of the chapters as separate word documents but was quite amazed when I put them all together and printed them out to read as a whole. This was quite a nice feeling as it made me realise how much I had done. Yes, there was still more to do, but this was a significant turning point as I realised that I had gone too far to turn back or quit and that I would have to definitely finish the thesis. This was pivotal as one of the things that had kept me going during the PhD was, ironically, knowing that I could stop at any time and give it up. Yet now there was no stopping and quitting and I was definitely in it until the end. For one of the first times this shift in feeling made me realise the enormity of what I had taken on and slightly instilled a sense of fear in me!

### **Q1 Share approaches to time management and writing commitments**



## **14 Contact with supervisors**

During the remaining years of the PhD, I travelled to supervisions at my University about 3 times a year. I instigated these meetings as my supervisors were very busy and I sometimes felt guilty for taking up their time but I am pleased that I had these meetings as talking things through rather than relying on emails was really helpful. As the writing continued, my contact with my supervisors changed. Whilst on the one hand it generally lessened, there was increased email contact as drafts were written and sent to them and as the thesis hand in date drew near.

My supervisors' comments on the rough first draft were helpful and we decided a couple more chapters were still needed alongside the literature review in order to provide a fuller picture. From the supervisors' comments I planned the next stages of the writing, to cover new chapters and amendments to existing chapters. The importance of this time planning seemed even more key now than it had at any earlier stages of the PhD, when at the start I had 7 years of part time study stretched out in front of me. I spent a lot of time reading, punctuating, revising and formatting the first draft, ensuring that it was as perfect as possible and that it all conformed to the University standards and regulations. This however was not necessary at such an early stage and spending time doing this had been wasted. This was a valuable lesson as I soon realised that I had to become less perfectionist when working on drafts if I was to finish the thesis.

### **Q1 Any thoughts on editing drafts?**

## **15 Redundancy?**

I had continued to work full time but felt that I needed a more significant amount of time for the 'final push' to finish the thesis. Around this time my workplace were downsizing and were offering the option of voluntary redundancy. This sounded like an attractive option for me to concentrate on the thesis, so I took voluntary redundancy knowing that the redundancy money would cover the time that I needed to finish writing and pulling the thesis together to its conclusion. Looking back, I'm not sure that I would have managed without this as the final stages seem to go on forever, even with this dedicated time. I could have never expected that reading, proofing, making changes and formatting according to the very specific University regulations would take as long as it did. I also found that the University procedures and guidelines that I had followed for the rough first draft had changed and had been updated. It was at this stage that I felt confident in letting others read my work. Having lay people to proof read chapters and the thesis was invaluable as they picked up on things that I and supervisors had not – anything from spelling and grammatical mistakes to points about consistency. Their distance from the subject area was important in order to check how understandable the thesis was and which areas required more explanation and interpretation.

## **Q1 Comment on Clare's decision**

## **16 Submission**

There was quite a lot of bureaucracy and administration involved in preparing the thesis submission. For example, I had exceeded the usual maximum page count and so this involved seeking special approval from the University in order that this was allowed. When I was ready to hand the thesis in to the University there were more administrative guidelines to follow, including forms and strict criteria about the printed thesis format so I travelled to my University armed with everything that I needed to be able to do this. The cost of printing and binding copies of the thesis was quite staggering, but price and a few printing problems aside, I successfully handed the thesis in – over one year earlier than the absolute deadline given by the University. It was a relief to have handed in the thesis, yet at the same time it was a bit of an anti climax as I knew that defending the thesis at the oral examination was still to come and so there was still more work to do. Still I enjoyed knowing that I was able to have some time away from it after having spent the last six months working intensively on it and having it permanently at the back of my mind for the last six years. A month off was needed, and as it was summer, I very much enjoyed this time, guilt free for the first time in what seemed like an eternity!

**Q1 How much time should a candidate allow for submission?**

## **17 Examiners**

Before submitting the thesis and during the final writing, it became important to consider who would examine the thesis and choose examiners. Identifying who these people would be early on was helpful to direct the writing. Due to the academics at my university with expertise in the PhD methods and the subject area, the internal examiner was easy to identify but deciding the external examiner was more tricky as there were a number of potentials. From the knowledge that I had of the scholars in the area, I drew up a shortlist of about 15 potentials and circulated the list to my supervisors. We then met to discuss each potential examiner in turn and what we thought they could offer and crucially, what they would be most interested in the thesis and what they would be able to bring to the exam. My supervisors advised me to avoid choosing anyone 'too expert' to act as the external examiner for fear that they might dominate the examination. We also considered the expertise of the internal examiner and tried to complement their skills by choosing an external who was not too similar, but rather had a slightly different discipline and expertise. The supervisors then contacted the chosen examiners to check that they were prepared to act as examiners and once they had agreed, this information was passed onto the University authorities.

**Q1 How should examiners be chosen?**

**Q2 What criteria should be borne in mind?**

## 18 Viva

From handing in the thesis, it took a while to organise the viva date. Whilst I had enjoyed the time in between handing in and the viva being arranged, I felt restless as I didn't feel that I could plan anything whilst I was waiting for the viva date. Four months after submission I had the oral examination. Leading up to the viva I felt nervous as I had not read the thesis for a long time and worried that I had forgotten what I had written! I also initially felt overwhelmed by the thought of the viva and was uncertain how to prepare for it. I had spoken to a few people who had had PhD vivas and their accounts varied largely, often by different departments and universities. I also found a lot of varied information on the internet about other people's experiences of oral viva examinations, including horror stories which really scared me!

Preparation for the viva was key and a few things helped me to prepare. Firstly, I read the University oral examination guidance for examiners in terms of what they should judge on and the different possible viva outcomes. Having this understanding from the point of view of the examiners was crucial and gave me a start in planning the viva preparation. For example, it was clear from the documents that the thesis's original contribution to knowledge was key, so I prepared for being asked about this. Other preparation involved reading my thesis from the point of view of the examiners and annotating it. This helped me to pull out areas which I thought were unclear, needed more explanation or where I thought the examiners may ask questions about and I prepared potential questions and answers on these specific areas. I also prepared a lot of set answers to some typical questions generic to any project and to my field and my chosen method. Another key thing which helped me prepare for the viva was asking my supervisors to each prepare what they thought the examiners would ask about and what they believed were the thesis weaknesses. Asking them to highlight these and how they thought I should approach the defence of them was invaluable. By the time of the viva I was in a new job and so I took a week off to prepare and revise. I am certain that it was my extensive preparation that helped me feel ready for the viva.

On the day of the viva I met with one of my supervisors before the exam and this was nice to see a friendly face and give me some last minute advice and encouragement as I was feeling very nervous. I then went into the exam, unaccompanied by my supervisor. After defending the thesis in the viva for about an hour and a half, I was sent out of the exam to leave the examiners to discuss and determine the outcome and I went back to see my supervisor. This debrief was helpful although it was a nerve wracking twenty minute break until I was called back into see the examiners, this time along with my supervisor for moral support and listening ability! They told me that the defence had been successful and I was to be awarded a PhD subject to minor corrections. I was overjoyed, so much so that it was hard to concentrate as they went through the corrections that were required, so I was thankful for my supervisor being there and taking notes! I enjoyed the viva experience although doubt that this would have been the same if I hadn't spent a lot of time reading my thesis and preparing for the exam. In fact, quite a lot of the generic questions that I had prepared were asked and answering these was

easy and gave me confidence in my work and what I had done. The viva experience showed me how all examiners and academics view things differently as the areas my supervisors would have asked me more about were (thankfully) not raised at all by the examiners. The relief and high that I felt after the viva lasted a few days afterwards and I was so pleased that the hard work was almost over and had all been worth it!

It took me some time after the viva to start with the revisions as they seemed to be not too extensive and in the time immediately after the exam I moved house and went on a celebratory holiday. However, on reflection I think that I should have started the revisions sooner as putting them off made it harder to start doing them and remember what I had discussed in the viva. Nevertheless, I completed them within time and submitted the revised thesis back to the university. Beyond the viva, I have been able to think more about writing publications and conference presentations from the thesis in order to disseminate my work. I have also found it very easy to have a life without feeling guilty for not working, much to the delight of my family and friends!

- Q1 How should a candidate prepare for a viva?**
- Q2 What are the essential features of a viva?**

## 19 Final reflection

So I had done it, I had both done the PhD and got a senior research job that I was told that I would never get without one. In fact, I am now on my second senior research job and was appointed to this before the PhD was finished and awarded. So I guess on reflection, it wasn't so necessary for the senior research job, although this would almost definitely be different if I wanted a senior research job at a uni or if I wanted to take an academic career forward.

Whilst I know that this is not something that I want to do at the present time, at least I have this option should this be something I wish to pursue in the future. The recession certainly has made things tough in terms of research funding and job opportunities so I can only hope that the combination of my research experience, substantiated and proved through the successful award of a PhD helps my employability in dark economic times.

I still can't believe I have done it and reading back through this diary has been particularly beneficial to see how far I have come. I have proved to everyone, but most of all to myself that I could do it, and have done it! Doing a PhD part time was definitely an experience, and I consider my greatest achievement, although it feels more like I deserve a PhD in perseverance than anything else as it was definitely very testing in so many ways and at some many different times.

I felt that it is possible to do a PhD part time, but from my experience there are some key things that facilitated this happening, not just an interest in the topic, but understanding from others around me including friends, family, colleagues and employers as without their support, interest and commitment to my studies as well, I doubt that my interest in the topic would have been sufficient on its own.

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### Team task

**On the acetate provided suggest guidelines for**

- 1. Candidates**
  - 2. Supervisors**
  - 3. Departments/schools/institutions**
- engaged in part-time postgraduate research degree programmes**