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How to finish a PhD early; or how the avalanche swept me along

Dr Christina Phillips October 2017

My PhD studies began in October 2014 and should have finished by end September 2017, but I successfully defended my thesis in July 2017 with only minor corrections required. So, how did this happen?

I must start by saying, I do not have a magic formula and that you may find some of this advice difficult (like 8:30 - 5:30 working days!). Also, I feel it is important to emphasise the value of having the right supervisor.

First of all, what do I think contributed to my early finish? (I say early, but although I finished early, my minor-corrected PhD has been stuck in the administration wheel and I won't be awarded until it is on time... However, I have been able to move on so, to all intents and purposes I have finished.)

My relationship with my supervisor is healthy - occasionally confrontational but in a friendly way which allows for critical debate. He has been and always will be my friend without us getting unprofessionally close. This is invaluable as I have always felt he was there for me and had confidence in my abilities. He boosted my confidence by sending me off to the right conferences, by only reviewing my abstracts and presentations for the first couple then showing me his confidence by not requiring a full review. We had regular meetings with other researchers where we would all present our work, building a collegiate supportive atmosphere. If he didn't know my area that well, he would try to find the right papers to help me out. He even sent me a list of ten published papers in my first year just to get me started. Most of all he gave me deadlines, listened when I needed a sounding board and always answered my emails.

He encouraged my innovative viewpoint and helped me to be confident that it really was the right way to go. This saved a lot of time. I have seen some of my fellow students struggle with supervisors who micromanaged their work even when it was good, causing them to lose confidence and feel that it was never good enough. They were held back from conferences and everything had to be checked before they could move on. This can have a stifling effect and doesn't serve to produce an innovative self-reliant PhD student, it can also produce rather narrow research. More importantly for this account it takes up time and energy which should be invested in the research and in learning how to self-critique.

Now that I have covered the really critical bit, what about the rest? Considering this was an industrial PhD where I was also working one day per week and doing many teaching hours (6-8 per week in one term), how did I do it?

First of all, I had been embedded in the company for 1½ years before the start of the PhD as part of a shorter KTP (Knowledge Transfer Partnership). In that time, I learned Operations Management and Operations Research within a real-world environment, it was like an MRes on steroids! I do not think I could have finished early if I had not had this experience in the company or with this level of learning.

Another factor was working hours, because I was in the company I worked the company hours ... and some. They were on 8:30 to 16:30, and at the University I would often work until 18:00 so that I had a packed working day but was able to have my evenings and most of my weekends.

If I had a deadline, even though it was not going to stop my PhD if it wasn't done, I did it, no matter what. My supervisor protected me from the constraints of the in-house PhD system, which required regular production of word counted parts of the PhD. Although this system provided structure and encouraged writing skills its rigidity would have been difficult for me to achieve under the circumstances (being in industry). This avoided any loss of confidence or buckling under pressure on my part. By year 2 I was setting my own deadlines and it worked, really well.

Another factor which helped was my family; my son is not small anymore, and was studying for his own exams over this time. My partner started an MRes in my second year so we were a studious family, who to a large extent understood each other's pain and acted accordingly.

During my final write up my boss at the company (also my industrial supervisor) let me take holiday from my contract so that I could go away and just write. My family also understood the need for me to be away so that I could just write, and I did for two weeks solid, total immersion in my subject. I also took no holidays for the first part of 2017 and worked occasional weekends. I had started writing early and this meant I had bits and pieces which I could edit and put together, which I then built upon for the final draft. Our doctoral school liked you to produce a literature review and methodology by the end of year one, which I found difficult, but I did start writing papers in the second year. My initial literature review did not get used at all in the final thesis. I also had a paper, which was already under review, so was able to include this unedited. It was in effect a three paper PhD which, in the end, came out at four papers.

As I wrote the whole beast up ideas started to coalesce even more and some strong research themes emerged. A process of growing and shedding occurred and I was careful to not allow myself to be too wedded to old ideas which had now grown into something stronger. The confidence and research knowledge I had gained helped me to know which the better and stronger themes were, so I focussed on those. In many ways knowing what to drop and what to carry was important to enable a quick clean finish.

Finally, my industrial supervisor was also a positive influence. He taught me how to focus on the bottom line (for me good research ideas) and to not get bogged down in unnecessary detail. He taught me good management practice and this fed into my ability to create a good strong PhD thesis which was a pleasure to defend. I was lucky to have wise people around me, who boosted my confidence, protected my self-esteem and steered me away from trying to do too much. Being a little older and weathered myself, as well as all of the above, helped me to sift out the good ideas at a rapid rate.

For the writing process, I quote the advice of an old hand 'better to get it writ than not to write at all...' in other words 'just do it'!

My two supervisors' comments below:

1. from my academic supervisor, Professor Kostas Nicolopoulos

It does not happen every day that a student finishes a PhD in 2 ½ years and gets a fulltime job as Assistant Professor a month later in a Russell group HEI in UK...

Christina did it, and credit is all up for her. I do push my students to submit early – if possible before the 3 years' threshold - and teach them that "the enemy of good...is better". Most students are not comfortable with this, and do not go for it but Christina was full on board. This pragmatic and at the same time creative approach to research, a big personal drive, running the extra mile and been ready to confront me and stand by her ideas if needed be, is an explosive mix that guarantees success at such pace assuming that support and understanding is all around.

Christina will achieve great things in the years to come and I will proudly observe and support and remind:" I told you so!"



2. from my industrial supervisor:

Doing a PhD should be approached in the same way as running a project:

Be clear what the deliverables are, then

- Understand the breakdown of the tasks needed to create the deliverables. Included in the tasks would be research time.
- Put a plan together, showing the estimated time for each task and the dependencies i.e. some tasks can be done in parallel, but there will be some which have to complete before the next can start. And build in contingency time to allow for unplanned events
- Track yourself to the timeline, if you over run on one task you will need to find somewhere in the plan where you can recover the lost time.
- Having somebody you need to report to on your progress will help you make sure you stay on track

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