

Candice's question (to a helpline)

January 2012

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Can anyone help? I am just coming up to transfer of my part time PhD and am very seriously concerned that I will not make it through. (sadly not just modesty!) I have found the first 2 years rather like walking around in the dark occasionally bumping into a glimmer of light, struggling with knowing what to do, how to read (as ridiculous as that sounds reading for a PhD is seemingly very different from any other reading I have ever done), where I am going and having a critical enough eye. I truly believe that there should be some sort of pre PhD introductory taster to let you know what you are in for! (though that would probably be impossible) I hope I do make it through. Have you any suggestions?

Many thanks

Candice

John responds and is encouraging, sends narrative written by a part-time student, 'Elaine's Timetable', but asks for more details

Hi John,

What a lovely message to receive, thank you very much! I fear there have been issues on both sides regarding how it came to this point, (some ostrich moments from me, an unwillingness to seem even more stupid than necessary etc) however I think the major issue is that I am just not "getting there" (whatever that means) quick enough. My transfer report is due 1st June. I have mainly completed (hopefully) and read the vast majority of my literature review however writing it up and synthesizing it with my topic is proving difficult for me.

My provisional title is

"understanding what contributes to an effective learning environment for social work student placements and how the practical prior experience of supervisors can influence this environment" with 3 underpinning questions:

1. What constitutes a positive learning environment? (lit review)
2. What factors/aspects contribute to this positive learning environment for social work students on placement? (lit and empirical evidence)
3. How might a supervisor selection policies influence this environment?

If you have time at some point I would be grateful for a conversation and some advice; I am in need of as much advice as I can get. Let me know when would be convenient for you. I can provide you with more details before if that would help.

By the way Elaine's diary gave interesting food for thought!

Best



Candice

Q: discuss how you would respond to Candice's questions

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Dear Candice

I think it will be best to go step by step, like a dialogue. So, to start, four simple but blunt questions to ask yourself, sharing your answers with me:

1. Do I sincerely want a doctorate?
2. Why do I want it?
3. When do I want it?
4. What am I prepared to invest in it?

In the light of your answers, I will take it up from there...

Q: comment on John's questions. Would you ask and others at this stage?

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Hi John

Thanks for your email; I hope you had a good weekend. Humm, having given your (difficult!) questions their due consideration this is what I think:

1. Yes I really do, if I stopped now I would be regretful and sad. However as a caveat I would say not at "any" cost, i.e. my health, marriage, son etc
2. Mainly to prove I can do it to myself, but also for career advancement. I used to say vanity in answer to this question as it gave me a bit of a thrill to think about being Dr Callister however to be honest reality has snuffed that reason out now as not being anywhere near a good enough one!
3. Within the part-time time frame allowed! My work has paid for the fees for the first 3 years (obviously assuming I get that far) but I am content for it to take longer than that. I would like to see it done in 5 years.
4. Humm this is the toughest question- I am willing to give it a good go, and put time to it. Additionally I have some study leave (a day a week) from work. However I am not willing to invest all my free time in it as I want to spend time with my family as well. My son is 5 and I don't want to miss out on him by working all weekend every weekend. So while the PhD is important to me, it is not the most important thing in my life.

I hope that helps....if you want more depth just let me know!

Many thanks for your time

Q: what issues arise in Candice's reply? How would you respond?

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Hi Candice,

Thanks. I want now for you to follow up two things:

1. how committed you are to the doctorate, compared with other things in your life. If most other commitments come first for one reason or another, there is no chance you will obtain a doctorate. It is a very large undertaking, involving you in a big commitment, particularly of time.
2. Is there room in your life to do this?

So, I have modified an exercise I do with new PhD students for you to complete, attached. You should allow for any leave already agreed but you must be realistic. Please complete it, possibly with the help of your partner. Do not be tempted to be optimistic. That is the commonest planning fallacy. If in doubt, start with looking at the past month and see how your time was actually spent. This should give you a guide for the future. And let me know how it goes and the outcome. Then we'll go on to next stage.

(See next page for attachment)

Q: discuss John's reply and his approach

Candice: doctoral time commitment

Your deadline date: ____:____:____ so the total days from today =

Then subtract

weekends (2 days each):	
	<i>Days remaining:</i>
less holidays (research council norm 6 weeks pa):	
	<i>Days remaining:</i>
For illness and accidents take off 5%:	
	<i>Days remaining:</i>
For family events, child care, visiting relatives, hospital and school visits, etc: (?? days pa?)	
	<i>Days remaining:</i>
Work/employment: days you are committed to your employment and related matters	
	<i>Days remaining:</i>
Other voluntary or paid work, exercise etc:	
	<i>Days remaining:</i>
Contingencies, things that happen (allow 20% of original total):	
	<i>Days remaining:</i>

I therefore have _____ days left to complete my PhD

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Hi John,

I have completed the exercise and am slightly terrified by the results! I have built in some options depending on how I choose to spend my time but am still shocked by the total of 113/243 days left to complete my PhD. If I worked one day each weekend I would have an additional 148 days- Total 261/391.

Best

C

Hi Candice,

I am sorry it is painful but it is the point of the exercise to encourage you to be clear now about your priorities and time rather than facing crises later on.

In fact I am surprised that you are only having 41 days holidays over what I assume is 3 years (ie 14 days a year including Christmas, New Year, Easter etc?). Check how many days you were not working and taking breaks in the last year. You have only taken off 5 working days for all the family commitments that arise - your son being off school, a relative in hospital needing a visit, a family wedding or funeral for instance? And you have only subtracted 2% for contingencies rather than the 20% I suggested (I have come to that figure on the basis of experience and advice from experts in project management). Some part time students have found that their time is already over committed and have no time at all to work on a doctorate at present.

But, however you calculate it, what you have demonstrated to yourself is that you will only have enough time to complete a doctorate (which you could take as a guess 500 days work if all goes well) if you drop some other things in your life, reduce work hours etc. So that is the next challenge: looking at your priorities, how can you find another 300 - 400 days to make a doctorate realistic? If it is not realistic at present, would you want to suspend your registration until some of your other obligations can be reduced so that you do have time?

What do you think?

Hi John,

You are right- holiday was a year. Now I have tripled that and amended to 20% for contingency (maths is not my strongest suit) I am in minus numbers without working some weekends and 3 days a week. On an annual basis without working weekends but doing 3 days a week on your calculation I have minus 4 days a year!

The way I see it is I would have to take all 7 available years, give up a day a weekend and some holiday, and work 3 days a week to be in with a shot of finding 400 days.... I could only suspend for a year here (and would need specific grounds for doing so) which would not really help me as in one year the situation would be the same, therefore that is not really an option.

It looks like I either make the changes I have outlined or I quit.....

Best

C

Q: discuss Candice's responses. What would you suggest now?

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Dear Candice,

I am sorry to be so blunt, but I have seen so many people driven to distraction by trying to the impossible and I wanted you to work out for yourself now what your priorities are, and - if it's the doctorate - to be realistic about life, work and study balance. As you say, you now have a choice...

I attach three more accounts of how others have coped successfully.

Hi John

Thank you for all your help and support; you have opened my eyes to the realities of my situation and encouraged me to really question my motivation. I had a meeting this morning with my supervisor (ironically the best we have had!) and having discussed it I have come to the conclusion that the PhD is perhaps not the best doctoral route for me, and in any case the time is not right for me to complete a programme of doctoral study. While I have very mixed feelings about this, I probably have a lot of people including yourself to thank for saving me a great deal of heartache over a long period of time.

Thanks for taking the time to go through things with me,

Best

Candice

Team task

A. Discuss the outcome and John's contribution.

B. What are the lessons here for

1. applicants for part-time doctoral programmes
2. supervisors, and
3. institutions?

Write your main points on the acetate provided
