

Mission Impossible: Doing a Part Time PhD, (or Getting 200% out of 20%) – Is it Really Worth it?

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Caroline combines motherhood with her post as a Teaching Fellow and part-time PhD studies

At the beginning of the year 2000, I read my horoscope for the forthcoming twelve months. It was predicted that I would be working on an important project, to which I would 'give 200%'. While, in general, I don't take the stars too much to heart, there was a ring of truth in these words. I thought immediately of my PhD. I am someone who takes commitment very seriously. I have always worked hard. The problem for me, however, as for all part-time students, is that I am currently combining several important projects, each of which seems to require 200% of my time and energy.

The Balancing Act

Where do I start? Well, firstly, I have an infant daughter (the main priority), to whom I try and give 200 percent. I combine motherhood with my work as a Teaching Fellow. Although my (part-time) paid work is undoubtedly interesting and fulfilling, there is always pressure to 'give greater' than the 60% for which I am contracted. This is in some respects self-imposed because, like all my colleagues, I try to provide as much support as possible to the students, who are themselves working under considerable pressure. Like me, most of them stand firmly in the middle of a balancing act between children, classes and careers.

My weekdays are shared between my daughter, my paid work and my PhD, to which I devote every Thursday. It does not take a genius to work out that this equates to only 20% of the working week, (leaving me 180% short if I need to give it 200%.) I am in my second year of study and have quite a way to go before completion. A '*how to juggle everything successfully and do a part-time PhD before breakfast...*' account would sound smug as I still have a long stretch ahead before I can trudge to the finish-line. However, I've had my ups and downs and learned some serious lessons along the way. These are worth sharing.

The Beginnings

When I registered as a PhD student, I was perhaps more complacent than I might have been about combining study with work and motherhood. I had already completed a part-time MBA, and gained a Distinction. I assumed that this would be an advantage – and in many ways it has proved to be an ideal foundation. Starting with the confidence that success brings, I discovered that the discipline imposed by the MBA deadlines had become a habit, and the concept of late-night study so familiar that it was almost routine. The MBA had

honed my writing and research skills, and drastically improved my reading speeds. The more you read, the more quickly you digest the required information. In spite of my somewhat disciplinarian training, there have been still been aspects of PhD study for which I was not prepared in the slightest.

The Differences of a PhD

Doing a PhD is completely different from working through a taught degree programme. Defined 'stepping stones' are laid out in the latter for you to follow and you can skip through your journey with relative focus and direction. However, the flexibility of a PhD can be advantageous for part-time students. Those who combine study with families and careers will know that there are times when life throws out problems. Part-time students have the invaluable option to put their research 'on hold', returning at a later (and indeed quieter) date without having missed important course work and feeling behind in comparison with their colleagues.

However, tackling a major piece of research, for which you are solely responsible, is undeniably intimidating. On beginning my PhD, I felt daunted by the sheer scale of the work I was undertaking. Questions zipped through my mind: Where should I begin? How would I know when I had done enough? Would I ever settle on a suitable research question? My first three months as a PhD student were spent reading everything in sight. I had to decide upon that question. Anxiety brewed as the time slipped by – what good was the ability to read quickly, when I hadn't a clue what I was reading *for*? I had ideas, but I was torn between them. What I really craved to do was some original research on combining motherhood with career.

The Big Question

However, more self contained, straightforward (and less controversial) topics were on offer and my mind was awash with the intricacies of each. Phillips and Pugh (1994) in '*How to Get A PhD*' state that Einstein did not formulate the theory of relativity in his PhD, but made '*a sensible contribution to Brownian motion theory*'. This advice left me despondent. The self contained topics, which may have been sensible, remained totally uninspiring. It was at this point that I had an influential meeting with a senior, female academic. She argued that, particularly for the part-time students, it is important to choose a subject that 'burns you up' in order to 'keep you going'. In the end, I chose this route. And, I have no regrets (though there has been a price to pay).

Choosing something significant has meant that my research is like a good novel – impossible to put down. Throughout the past twelve months, when dropping with tiredness after my daytime responsibilities, I have gathered the energy to return to my office. Even at night, I can move forward with my PhD.

Part-Time Problems

On reflection, I can't help but to wonder whether the challenges of starting out would have been less daunting had I chosen to study full-time. Most full time graduate students, even PhDs (especially those funded by ESRC), are obliged to undertake taught courses during their first year. These commitments take up a big chunk of time. Some students resent them. But major advantages can be gained from attending research training programmes. A good deal of practical, 'how to do research' material is offered to full time students in a neat package. Part-timers, on the other hand, often have no choice but to plough through the relevant texts by themselves. Elements they do not understand can remain blurry until their next supervision meeting. More importantly, those students who *are* able to attend research-training courses have a ready-made circle of colleagues, all struggling with the same concepts at the same time.

Supervision

Courses are designed so students can discuss their own work within the context of the general research topic. Therefore, making sure you choose a good supervisor is absolutely crucial. I am jointly supervised by two academics who both provide excellent support. We meet regularly (about once a month) and both are prepared to talk to me outside the official sessions if I need advice.

I have, however, learned that no matter how closely you work with your supervisors, there is no substitute for establishing a network of other students – even setting up regular meetings from time to time, if you can find people who are near enough geographically. In this respect, I obviously have an advantage as I am both a student and an employee within the same establishment, but even so, I was well into my first year of study before

a) I realised the benefits

b) That other students welcome the opportunity to discuss their research and the problems of doing a part-time PhD.

Recently, I joined a 'PhD Pressure Group' established by women doing part-time PhDs. I have also become friends with two women who have just finished their (full-time) doctorates. Both have offered support, encouragement and advice. I also have the authority of those who have done it.

The Lows

Having experienced a mostly happy and successful first year, I suffered my first serious low during the second. It was other students, in addition to my supervisors, who encouraged me to resolve the situation and get back on track. My low was the most recent in a series of similar encounters, all of which relate to my choice of a controversial, contemporary subject.

Here's what happened.

So far, I have presented my work in public on three occasions audiences have responded emotionally, and occasionally with aggression. My first presentation consisted of a formal progress talk to a group of twenty other interdisciplinary PhD students My presentation was the last of four, all of which had been followed by polite and constructive debate. My turn came, and it was as though, to quote one of the participants, I had 'lit the blue touch paper'. Two male students began shouting. The women in the room began shouting at them. Questioning the legitimacy of pieces of research about women's issues, they argued: "Why should there be a department of Women's Studies anyway?" This angered the women. One said "I feel sorry for you because you cannot undergo the experience of bearing children and you hate that." The PhD itself became irrelevant. Arguments ensued about whether career women should have babies at all, and whether Women's Studies is a legitimate subject.

On the second occasion, the reaction was similar. I was in Bradford, speaking to a group of fifteen new academics from all over UK. One male lecturer responded with the (serious) comment that mothers of small children ought not to work because they should be at home, breast-feeding. The validity of the research was questioned again by a female academic – she felt excluded, due to having no children of her own. While this may have been a legitimate point, I did wonder whether her feelings would have been so strong had the PhD been about rocket science. Another man compiled a list of words that he claimed were used in the presentation. He criticised them, because they were too 'emotive. I had read from a typescript and was able to compare his list of 'emotive' words against my notes. They were not there. I can only surmise that the man *himself* felt so emotional about the subject, that he imagined the existence of words I had never used.

I was shaken after these experiences, but I carried on with my PhD in private and put off presenting the work in public again until recently. The PhD is now more advanced with an initial 30,000 words written, and a pilot study of interviews with mothers and fathers successfully completed.

In October 1999, I presented some preliminary findings to a small group of senior academics, one of whom 'went off at the deep end'. This individual, whom I shall call Professor Smith, let it be known that he did not believe that women over 35 should give birth at all, and explained that he felt personally 'violated' by the area of concern. At one point in the discussion, Professor Smith actually asked whether I was pregnant myself. Although the others present were constructive and encouraging, Professor Smith's response to the PhD really 'got me down' and for the first time since I started, I stopped working on it altogether, and seriously wondered whether to give it up. My despondency was caused by the fact that as a part-time student, I am already trying to give 200% to each of a variety of commitments, without the added complication of attempting a PhD under such difficult circumstances.

Personal Sacrifices

As those who are doing this particular form of study will know, the price of doing a part-time higher degree bears a heavy personal cost. Since 1995, I have spent many nights burning the midnight oil, when I know I have to be up next morning to get my daughter ready for nursery and do a day's work. I have sacrificed all the hobbies I once enjoyed, and I no longer paint, read novels or take part in amateur dramatics. Although I try not to let study encroach on weekends, there have been Sundays when I have guiltily left my family to their own devices, while I spent a day in my office, working on the PhD. I have fought to balance my research with my paid work (which also involves evening working) as well as with (most importantly) ensuring that my daughter does not suffer as a result of my wish to study. After the most recent incident, I did find myself seriously asking the question: "*Is this worth it? Is the personal cost of doing a PhD part-time really worth it, if this is how people are going to behave?*"

The Extreme

Since I am writing this, you will guess that I decided to continue. I have considered why my research topic causes such extreme reactions. Evidence in the literature suggests that this may be because my PhD, although it does not claim to *be* a paradigm shift, probably *reflects* several, which is what makes it so contentious. The first paradigm shift may lie in the very fact that I am a woman doing a higher degree. In discussing the problems facing women PhD students, Phillips and Pugh describe academia as a traditionally male environment, which can '*allow prejudice to be manifested*' (1994:119). The second paradigm shift is the concept that women's issues have a place in what is generally recognised as 'knowledge' in the academic sense. As Tanton (1994:12–13) points out: '*The content of what is taught (in higher education) is still (apart from in Women's Studies) largely as a result of male research on male subjects....*' The third paradigm, that of the research itself, represents a major social change. The benefits or otherwise of combining motherhood and profession are debated in many arenas. Significantly, despite equal opportunities legislation, a current policy document issued by the Institute of Directors states that '*It is a biological fact that it is women who give birth to children and are best equipped to look after them in the early years.*' (Malthouse 1997).

On the Up

Undoubtedly, a rational analysis of why my research is seen as so contentious within the public arena, has helped provide an explanation for what happened. However it must be also said that it was fellow students, as well as my supervisors, who motivated me to respond positively when I asked the question: 'Is this really worth it?'. The student networks that I have formed over the past six months were a significant influence in giving me the confidence and determination to keep going when the disadvantages of continuing threatened to outweigh the benefits. I am pleased that this is the case because on reflection, I am still convinced that my topic is an important one, which *is* worth researching – even if it is controversial.

And Finally

It might be worth summing up the factors that have helped me get this far. For me, at least, it was important to choose a subject which mattered and which I believed to be important. So long as I get there in the end, it is possible that my work might make a contribution to improving the situation for career mothers. A good working relationship, and regular meetings with supervisors is central to a part-time PhD student, as is establishing networks with other students who know how you feel and who are experiencing the same pressures as you (if they can do it, so can you.) For those readers who are worried about how and where to find other students, a request for help to supervisors, or departmental administrators might prove fruitful. Finally, although this is easy to say, since I am not in a low at the moment and I cannot, like the astrologers, predict what the future may bring – my own and others' experiences suggest that the lows of doing a part-time PhD are inevitable, but temporary. They do pass, and despite the pressures we all feel when trying to deliver Mission Impossible, and give 200% to each of our commitments – work, family and the research, my view is that yes, *it is worth it after all*.

In Brief

- Juggling the various demands of my life was the main part-time difficulty.
- I maintained my enthusiasm by selecting a highly interesting and emotive topic.
- The value of peer networks can never be underestimated.
- 'Highs' and 'lows' can be intensified through part time study.

Postscript

I succeeded in gaining my PhD and graduated in December 2002. I have written a book based on the research findings: *Hard Labour, The Sociology of Parenthood*, which will be published with Open University Press in December 2004.

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

Frank Wareing

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.

These chapters were 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