

M....'s Testimonial

When managing a PhD; nothing goes according to our plans!

January 2012,

Dear Mr. John Wakeford,

I am writing this testimonial to provide you and your students with my PhD experience which I think is quite exceptional and should benefit as many PhD candidates as possible. At the end of testimonial I am providing some advice and ideas from my own experience from which every student will select according to her/his needs, personality and life prospects.

M

I started my PhD in October 2006 shortly after a very critical period where I have had many personal and family problems that affected me emotionally. My mother passed away in August 2006, and we had so many issues in my family back home. As a result, I had to travel about six times between the UK and my country in a period of less than 5 months. This was a disturbing period that has considerably affected my time management and focus at the start of my PhD.

Nevertheless, during this period I started my PhD with a great determination. I chose to work with two supervisors, one of which has always been my tutor during my undergraduate and the other one was one of the world' leading researchers in the field I chose. I and my supervisors were very positive that I will produce a very original and exceptional piece of work. In parallel to the PhD, I had a personal goal with my Fiancé to get married in three years. This meant that I had no excuse but to finish my PhD within three years, which was actually quite motivating and gave me the determination to meet this tight deadline.

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Unfortunately, this deadline was not met and many issues emerged unexpectedly in the course of the PhD period that made it extended beyond the predictable period.

My PhD project was both multidisciplinary and complex and like any joint industrial-academia project was not well defined from the start. I chose a hard topic on purpose as I was really motivated at the start and wanted to really make a contribution to the research community. I was supposed to get a code and a software from the industry (a company in the same city where I study and live) with whom we were supposed to collaborate and do research for.

After more than a year and a half of chasing them and waiting for a positive reply, we decided eventually to change the focus of the project after we had no other hope of getting the code. During this period I had to make many industrial visits, prepare for many presentations and workshops that took significant amount of time but did not contribute to my thesis. At least, the positive outcome of this was that I learnt and gasped many interpersonal skills; I made contacts with some industrial figures which were never useful or my PhD thesis!

Point 1: We should notice here that not only PhD work and milestones do not go according to plans, not everything we learn in throughout the PhD has to be research related. Personal development profile is one of the key building blocks that every PhD student should consider through his PhD and not only the PhD research itself!

The conceptual synthesis of my project was not wasted though. I did manage to have three papers published in prestigious international conferences in less than one year. This was quite exceptional and rewarding as most PhD students publish only when they have results.

Point 2: Another advice to give here is choosing your subject wisely so that you can be flexible in reformulating and changing the problem statement.

At this point, I had to make a significant reformulation in my research project which was quite disappointing but a relief in the same time. In parallel to this, I had both money problems and time management problems as my younger sister came to live with me and I was responsible for her for the first six months during her language course. This took so much time, energy and commitment to look after her and follow her progress closely.

At the end of my second year I have been feeling unwell continuously and thought that it was due to tiredness. It turned out that I suffer from serious health problems after a few months of medical tests, blood tests and x-rays. This has considerably affected my academic performance. I had a diagnosis of a chronic illness and it took several months to come up with the right diagnosis and several months to settle on the right treatment. Again even with the working treatment I had to suffer considerably with the symptoms and a new life style that the illness imposed on me. This health condition kept me away from research for more than 18 months; most of this period was spent in hospital and as results of this I had to suspend my PhD for 12 months.

Point 3: I must admit that even with this critical health situation, the stopped funding. I never lost trust in god and in myself but always believed that I will finish my PhD.

First, I realized that I could have this illness any time throughout my life, as the illness has and I had no other choice but to suspend my PhD for at least one academic year (initially) to follow a series of treatments. During this time I was not able to do any work, my scholarship was stopped unexpectedly and I had an additional challenge of being in a very critical financial situation.

I resumed my PhD work in January 2010. I had enough courage and support from one of my PhD supervisors and family to overcome the trauma of living with a disability of a chronic illness in my daily life and focus on my PhD work and my life projects. One of my PhD supervisors was not very supportive and did not care whether I am back on foot for my PhD or not.

Not only that I stopped for more than a year as prior to the suspension it took me about 6 months to diagnose the illness. I had a huge delay in my research and it took me so long to settle on the right treatment.

The major problem I have been struggling with after coming back from the suspension is that I have no more funding to support my daily expenses. My maintenance fees ended in July 2009 while my PhD was suspended. Since then, I have been living on loans, bank overdrafts and family and friends support which all have been exhausted. I have approached the student finance office and the welfare office many times in 2009 and in 2010 but could not get any help from my university. I did not get any support from my university, although I have been there as an international student for 7 years (I did 4 years of Engineering degree and three years of PhD including the suspension year). I had and I am still having financial difficulties to support my daily maintenance expenses.

Besides this, upon returning to my PhD after the suspension, my student visa for the three year PhD program has expired. I was struggling with the home office to renew my visa and one of the requirements to be able to renew the visa is to have sufficient funds in my bank account.

I had to have a lawyer to tackle my case with the home office and hence more expenses while I was not funded.

My funding was already stopped so I had no source of funding. This was an extra source of stress for me.

What affected me and destroyed me a lot, is the harassment, the bullying and nosiness of some colleagues and sad people around me who have been trying hard during the two-year period to convince me that I could not resume the PhD and even if I do so I will not be able to finish due to my health condition, money and funding problem and time constraint. This was very destroying and without going into many details,

Point 4: I would give the following advice: never let people from your professional life take part in your private/personal life and vice versa.

Obviously, hearing this repeatedly, being harassed while I have been trying to recover slowly from the illness has been very disturbing and harmful to both my health and peace of mind.

I was a bit lucky that the post-graduate coordinator at my university very understood in the sense that she knew this sad people personally, so it was easy for her to understand their harm and help me to avoid their effects. As for their harassment, it was impossible to prevent it and stop it. They kept on harassing continuously me for over 5 years in total. I had to change accommodation at least 13 times, my phone number many countless times (I really cannot remember how many time countless!) and even my office in the University, I changed my office 6 times and it is only recently, since a few months that they have virtually disappeared from my life.

One important point I need make here is that this situation taught me how to deal with difficult people, sad individuals and hopeless ladies. Who instead of helping you get over these obstacles or just leave you in peace; they choose to harass you and destroy your motivation and see you unhappy.

It took me over two years to realize that in the work place I was encountered to a narcissist manipulator individual, who, I must admit, has almost destroyed me as a person. I am now much stronger, standing up on my feet and learnt a lot from this type of individual who could contaminate not only my thinking but also my whole environment with their sadness and gossip.

Point 5: Another point I need to make here is that managing our thoughts and be in control of them is as important as managing one's time. Having regular breaks is very important to the PhD progress.

In addition to the fact that I had several problems at my work including bullying, harassment and discrimination, one of my PhD supervisors was not supportive at all during the hard times.

Point 6: The advice I would give here, is do never expect your PhD supervisors to be understanding of personal situations. While my other supervisor was very understanding the second one was the

opposite. Managing a PhD project requires you to work in isolation, be very independent and have the emotional support when needed from an outside party.

Having been faced with multiple simultaneous challenges during the course of my PhD, and having been able to raise the challenge and overcome all the difficulties, I would expect anyone who has the will and the determination to be also able to face and overcome any sort of similar challenges to the ones I have gone through.

The advice I would like to give are as follows:

- **If you know that you can do it (regardless of the challenges), it means you can do it. I was able to overcome all the problems that were affecting me, because I knew that I have the ability to finish the PhD and I am capable. I also had the self-motivation and the determination.**
- **Always talk to a third party, an outsider to have a second opinion or an external view about any sort of trouble you are having. Do never let things, issues, problems build up and accumulate. Never ignore any bullying or harassment as this might affect you either directly or indirectly in the short term or in the long term.**
- **The job of your supervisors is to help you get the PhD. If you fail, they fail and the whole university fails. Never hesitate to change the supervisor if you feel you need to do so.**
- **When you come to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on. You are never a loser until you quit trying**

- **Finally, my advice again and again is never give up! Below is a poem ☺ dedicated for PhD candidate who are in hardships!**

At the end of the day, god does not impose on us loads more than what we could withstand. If we face it means we could get over it.

This experience not only shaped my personality but also allowed me to discover my potential and reformulate both my short and long term goals. I discovered many aspects of life through managing my PhD.

Doing a PhD is not about a subject, narrow field,...it is far beyond that, every experience is unique and you have to enjoy all aspects of the PhD even the downside of it! The challenge is to turn every negative to positive, transform the shortfalls to benefits and move step by step in small steps.

In Brief I have learnt the following:

- **Difference between a researcher and engineering and a scientist**
- **Time management**
- **Dealing with awkward situations. Adaptability to changing situation and ability to find solutions and alternatives**
- **Ability to work independently under extreme stress and find a source of emotional support**
- **Shape your career and create a supportive network, which you will definitely need for your step backs.**

I am now ready to submit my thesis next month and have just heard that I have been awarded a very prestigious award from a Royal Engineering Institution for future leaders in my field. Please find attached a certificate.

Don't Quit ☺

*When things go wrong as they sometimes will,
When the road you're trudging seems all up hill,
When the funds are low and the debts are high
And you want to smile, but you have to sigh,
When care is pressing you down a bit,
Rest if you must, but don't you quit.
Life is queer with its twists and turns,
As every one of us sometimes learns,
And many a failure turns about
When he might have won had he stuck it out;
Don't give up though the pace seems slow—
You may succeed with another blow,
Success is failure turned inside out—
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt,
And you never can tell how close you are,
It may be near when it seems so far;
So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit—
It's when things seem worst that you must not quit.*

Edgar A. Guest

Team exercise

List the lessons here for

1. Postgraduate research students

2. Supervisors, and

3. Institutions