

Leslie's PhD Diary

Episode 1 – November 2011

My background

I currently work full-time as a senior manager in public sector science and technology research organisation. This will change in spring 2012 when I step down to part-time working, giving me more time to pursue other things, including my PhD.

Why do a PhD?

I persuaded my employer to sponsor me to take an MSc at a Business School. I wanted to put some theory around all the practical skills and experience that I had acquired and this MSc programme was the nearest fit. I was the first student from the public sector. While I found the course very useful, it was not as challenging intellectually as I had anticipated. The style and format of academic writing and the way in which every statement or assertion had to be verified or evidenced by an academic author shocked me and took some getting accustomed to. This was very different from my undergraduate experience (more years ago than I care to remember) in History and Politics.

It was only when we started the module on developing our research proposals for our dissertations that I realised that this was where my main interests lay. I was a late blossoming academic researcher in disguise, waiting to be let out. Part of this stems back to undergraduate days when I was the first in the family to go to university and 'doing a PhD' was something to aspire to. For a long time I thought that I did not have the ability and capability to undertake a PhD. So it remained an unfulfilled ambition and dream.

I wanted to explore the possibility of undertaking a PhD at the School but found out that 'the regulations' there would not permit it. I then raised this with my dissertation supervisor, and he was very interested in my proposed research topic. He was moving to take up a new post at Barchester University, and suggested that I could 'follow' him and apply to them.

My application and submission process

So I applied in October 2010 as a self-funded student. This was about half way through my 'dissertation writing' year and I was due to submit and complete the MSc in June 2011. For Barchester, I had to prepare a pre-proposal including a personal statement together with the name of two referees. My MSc tutor agreed to provide a reference and a work colleague also agreed to provide one. I heard in December that I had been offered a place to start in October 2011, on condition that I provided a copy of my MSc certificate in due course.

I enrolled online in early September 2011, paid my fees and attended the PhD induction session in the School of Management on 5 October 2011. I also went to see the 'subject librarian' who gave me really useful insights into which databases to search. Officially I am enrolled as MPhil student and will not become a PhD candidate until I pass the upgrade (about the end of the second year for three year full time students). Although I was probably the oldest student there, I was pleased to meet some other students who were almost my peers. I also found out that about a third of the PhD students in the School of Management are part-time and live off campus.

As a part-time student I have some six years to undertake and complete my PhD. The only compulsory course that I have to attend is a week's long course on research methods which is held during the first week of December. The course is accompanied by coursework which I have to pass. As a part-time student I can opt to take the course this year or next (in 2012). I have decided to do it this year. So in a month's time I'll become a full-time student for a week (Monday to Friday), staying in a hotel near the campus.

Where I am now

I have met with my supervisor (HJ) twice now, once in mid-August and then on Skype in mid-October. We will meet again when I am on campus during the Research

Methods course.

At present I seem to be spending my study time on gathering my material to read, and constantly changing my approach to my topic. At this stage, I have not come up with research questions as HJ and I agree that I need to do a wide range of reading before I can do so. I have made notes, organised myself (laptop, software etc) and seem to be spending most of my evenings and much of the weekend studying. I have prepared a first draft project plan which I have sent to HJ and will discuss with him when we meet next month. I am also keeping a progress log where I can write about my progress, ideas etc and keep a notebook on the table to jot down ideas, tasks for next day etc.

My relationship with my supervisor is, I think, different to what it would be if I was starting a PhD right after graduating. Bringing my professional and other life experience means that the relationship is more even-handed, that I am a more independent researcher than I would be if I were younger. I'm also finding the process more rewarding (with some frustrating moments).

Support mechanisms

During my MSc I found 'PhDChat' on twitter. This is a virtual community of postgraduate students who share and compare notes and support each other. We also have a weekly twitter conversation on a particular topic (selected by a poll held in the previous week) on Wednesday evenings. Some of the group have taken to holding weekly sessions in a 'hangout' session on Google+ - like video conferencing on Skype.

A close friend and work colleague is also undertaking a part-time PhD. She started her research almost two years ago and it is very supportive to be able to share ideas with her, compare notes on progress and on the frustrations.

And my family – other half (OH) and 20 something year old daughter (DD) - are tremendous supporters and fans. I would not be doing the PhD without OH's wholehearted support. I feel tremendously privileged to be undertaking a PhD now. I appreciate that it is a journey, and that I will change and be changed by the process. I am lucky in one way in that I do not need a PhD for career reasons. I am doing research in my topic for its own sake and hope that what I come up with will contribute in however small a way to the broader academic and intellectual discourse /discussion.

Q: Discuss any issues that Leslie and her supervisors should be considering at this stage

Episode 2 - February 2012

Since I wrote the first episode in November 2011, it seems that progress on my PhD has been intermittent or erratic. On the one hand I have completed several pieces of work; on the other, I do not seem to have had a 'breakthrough moment' that has provided me or created the real focus of my research.

Achievements since November 2011

The tangible items are:

- attended a five day research methods course on campus at Barchester in early December 2011;
- written and submitted my research methods coursework, some 3,500 words;
- had 2 meetings with my supervisor, HJ.;
- developed an outline thesis structure; and
- done some reading and many notes.

Research Methods course

The research methods course was held on campus at Barchester, Monday to Friday. Lectures were held in the afternoon Monday – Thursday, with a class on Friday morning and a social session in the afternoon where we met with postgraduate students from other schools in the university such as art and social sciences. Classes each day covered different kinds of research methods, including epistemology, grounded theory, qualitative and quantitative methods, and some statistics. This meant that I had Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday mornings free.

The research methods course was run for researchers in the School of Law and Management. Barchester make this a compulsory course for PhD students and you also have to pass the coursework which is assigned. The pass mark is 50%. The PhD programme director had suggested that it was perhaps a little early for me to take the course and that I could defer it until December 2012. However I decided to go ahead and I was glad that I did so.

I stayed at a hotel about 15 minutes' walk away from the campus. When I call to book a room, they gave me a 20% discount when I explained that I was a student at Barchester. So that was helpful. However when I arrive there, we realised that the hotel did not have a restaurant and that the nearest place to eat was an Italian restaurant next door. This was acceptable for the first evening but it was going to be expensive to eat there every night. So I found myself buying sandwiches and fruit in the student shop on the campus and eating these in my hotel room.

In the mornings, I went to the Library on campus to do some reading. The Library had a coffee bar and it was revealing to spend time there. I tended to arrive about 9.00 when the study rooms were still empty, and would go for lunch about 12.30 before classes started at 2pm (and ran until 6pm).

I enjoyed being a student and some students in the class remembered me from the PhD induction session in October 2011. However, spending evenings on my own was isolating and I was glad when the week ended.

Coursework

The coursework was in two parts:

- a) a mini research proposal covering a summary literature review, research objectives and questions, how we would undertake our research (methodology and methods), including a justification of our selected paradigm. The word limit was 2,500 words.
- b) an overview of an alternative research approach (methodology and methods) – 1,000 words.

Full-time students were given a deadline of 20 January 2012 and part-time students like me were set a deadline of 29 February 2012.

I decided that I would aim to complete a first draft of the coursework before I returned to work after the Christmas holidays. It involved doing some rapid reading on research methodology

While we did not have to use what wrote about in the coursework for our PhD, I found that it gave me an opportunity to consider key issues at top level and to identify those areas where I would have to explore in more detail later on. I had to justify my philosophical standpoint, outline my intended research design, and the population for my intended sample. I also had to find out about an alternative research approach. So for the first part of the coursework, I decided that I would take a pragmatic stance and use mixed methods, with a two stage sequential exploratory approach, with a main qualitative phase using semi-structured interviews and a second quantitative phase. I opted to use grounded theory for my alternative approach.

In my initial draft I came up with about 8 research aims and questions, and when I did some checks on Google, I realised that the maximum at PhD level was about a maximum of 4. So I had to rethink my research aims and research questions.

I am not sure whether I will stick rigidly to what I have written in the coursework. However, it has given me a useful starting point which I have been able to drop into the first draft of the research methodology chapter.

I sent the draft coursework to HJ and we discussed it when we met on 8 February 2012 (see below). He suggested a couple of editorial changes. Apart from that he was happy with what I had written. So I was relieved that HJ was comfortable with what I was doing as I had been concerned about the transition from writing at MSc level to PhD, and how big a leap this could be.

So after making me some further changes, I sent the coursework to Barchester on 14 February, 2 weeks before the deadline.

Meetings with supervisor

I met with HJ on 6 December 2011 while I was attending the research methods course at Barchester. He was pressed for time and running late. So we only had half-an-hour and I did not cover all the items that I had on my list. However, he had printed out the draft of the academic poster that I had to prepare for the social session on the research methods course on the last afternoon.

I have since realised that the most effective way to manage these meetings is to liaise with HJ's PA and arrange some dates ahead in his diary. So we now have meetings arranged for later in April and in mid-June.

I also met HJ on 8 February 2012 and we covered all the items on the agenda that I had sent him the evening before. Our relationship is more even-handed than I had expected. HJ currently thinks I am on track and 'more than ticking' over. He is encouraging me to start reading about ethics.

Thesis structure

Barchester imposes a strict word limit of 75,000 words, excluding references, for theses. They also have a preferred format, and font. So I have downloaded this and I have developed a separate document for each chapter.

In discussion with HJ on 8 February 2012, he advised that he prefers the conventional thesis structure of introduction, literature review, methodology, findings/data analysis, discussion and conclusions. He feels that this is conventional and more appropriate to the audience. While he is willing to accept other approaches to the thesis structure, he feels that this is higher risk and would take some persuading. My reason for asking HJ about this was that I have been reading some of the first few chapters of Patrick Dunleavy's book called "Authoring a PhD". Dunleavy writes about the process of writing a PhD rather than on how to do research, formulating research questions. So I have had to put one of my first bids for originality in my PhD on hold for now.

Reading etc

I have read and made notes, and extracted quotes on articles about the role of universities, academic values, knowledge exchange/knowledge transfer, corporate social responsibility (CSR), stakeholder theory, and I know that much more to read in these areas. I am now starting to read about ethics. I bought a Kindle book on "Business Ethics for Dummies" by Norman Bowie et al this week. It gives a very simplified overview and take on business ethics, and I have made notes

from this on ethical theories to give me a starting framework. I also have a large pile of other articles to read on ethics.,

Where I am now

I feel as though as I am plodding on – much reading to do and still not able to decide what the real central focus of my research is going to be. I have realised that I could not undertake the PhD full-time. For example, I spent much time last weekend on it and I was also trying to work on it on Monday which I had taken off from work. By Monday afternoon, I realised that I had squeezed my brains dry and needed to go away and come back refreshed and with some new perspective.

I had an interesting meeting with a colleague from one my KT networks last week and he seems to have his fingers in many pies and potential projects, some of which are complementary to my research. So there is some scope for future collaboration there.

I took voluntary redundancy/retirement at the end February 2012, and the transition has occupied much of my head space. I will be continuing some of my KT network CPD development activities on a voluntary basis and I have also taken on a couple of other voluntary roles to fit around PhD studies and working as a part-time consultant for the next 18 months.

A week away in The Lakes without access to laptop proved both frustrating and empowering as it has forced me to stand back from my the PhD and to take stock. It has enabled me to see some connections that I haven't seen before and also possible ways forward on the literature review. The break has also given me an opportunity to evaluate my commitment which if anything is stronger than before I went away.

My interim goal is to have a first draft of the literature review written by the end of this year. I have an initial outline structure for this chapter, and I have dropped some notes and quotes into it. I am not sure what my 'story' is yet or a clue about what arguments I will come up with.

I am still enjoying the research, despite the frustrations and find that it gives me an alternative focus, something to channel my intellectual energies into. I find I relate to it or think about my research when I am doing other things, and constantly looking for possible links and connections.

Q: Discuss any issues that Leslie and her supervisors should be considering at this stage

Episode 3 – December 2012

Since I wrote the last episode of my diary, I have made a major change in my lifestyle. At the end of February, I stepped down to part-time working, 2 days a week, as ‘retained consultant’ at the public sector science and technology research organisation where I had been a senior manager for 20 years. In theory, this should have given me more free time. In practice, my PhD occupies much of that. The big advantage is that I am not tied to my calendar and I have the flexibility about the days, and where I work. The part-time contract is due to run until September 2013.

In the 10 months since February, I:

- received feedback on my Research Methods coursework which I submitted in mid- February;
- written and submitted a literature review;
- made arrangements with Barchester about using non-standard software for my data collection and analysis;
- attended a research conference and related PhD colloquium in my broad research area;
- met my second supervisor.
- submitted my application for ethics approval for my research;
- started the fieldwork;
- written an 8,000 word draft paper;
- held 3 meetings with HJ

Coursework

I learnt in mid-March that I had been awarded a mark of 70% for my research methods coursework. This was a pleasant surprise and boosted my confidence.

Literature Review

I started writing this in March/April and at one point it was almost 35,000 words long. I was able to edit it back to 12,000 words, and I submitted to HJ early in August 2012. When I met with HJ early in September, he said that it was fine for now and that I could come back to it later.

Software

As I am doing mixed methods research, I thought that I would have to use two different software packages that Barchester provides: Nvivo for the qualitative research in phase 1 and SPSS for the quantitative phase. This would involve learning each package involving a 2 day training course for each one, inputting 2 different sets of data, undertaking two data analyses and trying to find

ways to integrate these. After some searching on the internet via PhD groups etc., I found Dedoose, (www.dedoose.com), which is software designed for mixed-methods research. It is based in the cloud and charges a monthly subscription of \$12.95, and the first month is free. Dedoose offer substantial discount for advance payment and for students. They have offered me a charge of \$10.95 a month. The big advantage of Dedoose is that it offers integrated data collection and analysis.

I decided to find out whether Barchester would cover the cost of the subscription. After going through the bureaucratic maze for six months, I was able to persuade Barchester that the cover over 4 years would be equivalent to the conference allowance they offer PhD students. Full-time PhD students receive an allowance of £600 a year towards the costs of attending a research conference and this adjusted pro-rata for part-time students.

I deferred using Dedoose until late last month (November 2012) and I have now set up my project with codes (the themes I'm researching) and the descriptors (characteristics of my interviewees). I am expecting to receive an invoice sometime this month. I have had to contact Dedoose on several queries so far, and they have been very helpful and respond promptly.

Research conference

I found that the Management School at Barchester were organising a second conference (in a series of three) to be held for 2 days in late October at a hotel in Barchester followed by a "PhD colloquium" on the third day at the University. My supervisor, HJ, was to be one of the keynote speakers at the conference.

The conference was part of a project selected under the European Cross-border Cooperation Programme INTERREG IV A France (Channel) - England, co-funded by the ERDF which aims to develop links between a business school in France and the School of Management at Barchester. The project includes exchanges between teachers, short term student mobility, development of joint programmes), research activities and the organization of annual cross-Channel conferences. Themes include: entrepreneurship, project management, corporate social responsibility, maritime and port management, intercultural management, innovation. The description for the conference provided a broad context and home for my research, the first time that I had found something. My supervisor and the conference organiser at Barchester agreed that it would be useful for me to attend as an observer rather than presenting a paper.

The conference itself was a series of presentations, mostly PhD students, on their research. So there was much being talked at rather than spending time in dialogue and discussion. The PhD Colloquium was more useful as it included some mentoring sessions and was more tailored to the researchers' needs. Still, it was a very useful and interesting experience. I came away feeling more confident about the validity of my research topic and how I was approaching it.

Ethics application

I dutifully completed my application form for ethics approval for my PhD research early in September and sent it to the Faculty Office for it to be placed into the appropriate channels. When I emailed them a fortnight later to find whether they had received it, I was advised that the arrangements had changed and that postgraduate researchers had been advised of this by email in May 2012.

So I had to complete another more complex set of forms via the “Ethics Research Governance Office” – ERGO) via a website at Barchester. I submitted these in mid-October. HJ approved it and sent it to the Faculty Ethics Committee. I received an email four days later to say that I had to make a minor amendment to the risk amendment form which I did. For some reason it took HJ more than 10 days to approve it, and then it took almost another week for approval to come through.

Second supervisor

I met my second supervisor BH for the first time since I started immediately after my meeting with HJ at the end of October 2012. BH is an expert in healthcare ethics. She suggested that I may find that ethical themes and ideas will emerge during my data collection and analysis, and that I will need to read up about them then. In other words, my apparent inability to find specific material for my literature review was to be expected and that possible patterns and ideas will emerge later.

Starting fieldwork

HJ has advised that I need to hold 20 – 30 interviews for phase 1 of my research, and that I should aim for 25. On reading round this, I found that this seems to be the norm for qualitative research. HJ advised if I had difficulty in finding 25 interviewees, then we could review the position after I had reached 20.

I decided that my sample should include 2 – 3 public sector research organisations with universities for the remainder. I identified the various university groupings (as in Russell Group etc.), and found an official BIS publication from 2009 that identified and classified public sector research organisations. So I’m using these as my starting point.

To find interviewees, I have issued calls through 2 knowledge transfer networks, and a call will be going out via a third KT network next week. I’ve also sent out about 40 emails to my various contacts and the response rate seems to be about one in six. I am also asking my interviewees to suggest the names of possible interviewees that I could approach (i.e. snowball sampling).

At the time of writing I have held 3 interviews, and I plan to complete another 5 before Christmas. I have arranged 21 interviews so far (taking me to mid February) and the remainder by mid- March. Most interviews are face-to-face meetings and they seem to last about 90 minutes – 2 hours (by the time we settle down, sort the paperwork etc).

I am recording interviews using a Sony digital voice recorder which is excellent. I have transcribed interview 1 and I'm a third of the way through interview 2. It is slow, painful work (I had been warned) and I seem to be able to transcribe about 5 minutes of interview an hour. I am using a foot pedal, Express Scribe and big headphones.

Draft paper

As there was a long gap between my completing my draft literature review and starting my fieldwork, I decided that I need to keep practising my writing. So I decide to explore the principles of my chosen research philosophy, pragmatism and assess the implications for my research methods. I have been reading largely from secondary texts and I have managed to write 8,000 plus words (much to my surprise). Although the draft is still rough, and needs major editing, it has shown me that the way I read and write works for me. I hope to be able to use it to form the basis of an article or journal paper later on and I can also draw on it for sections in my research methodology chapter..

Meetings with HJ

I have held three meetings with HJ? during the year, the most recent at the end of October 2012. I have cancelled the meeting that we were due to have on 8 January 2013 as I will be in the middle of my interviews. Our next meeting after that is on 5 March 2013, and that will be a good time to review progress.

Where I am now

I am still enjoying the whole PhD experience and my research topic., feel isolated at times (Barchester are recognising that part-time researchers cannot attend the training courses but they are going to video them and make them available via Blackboard, an excellent idea). Now that I've started my fieldwork, 13 months in I feel as though I can officially claim the status of a PhD student – I am real, I am genuinely doing research.

Q: Discuss any issues that Leslie and her supervisors should be considering at this stage

Episode 4 – December 2013

2013 has been an up and down year. I no longer work part-time on a regular basis and although I am still on target in my PhD overall, things have not gone to plan.

Collecting data

HJ had advised that I needed to conduct between 25 – 30 interviews. I held 31 interviews with 32 people between mid-November 2012 and March 2013. I conducted more than half the interviews face to face; I held about four interviews on the 'phone and carried out the remainder on Skype. I recorded all interviews, using a digital voice recorder. Recording interviews held on Skype is easy and the recordings are very clear. The quality of recordings of interviews held on the telephone varies and are harder to transcribe. I transcribed about two thirds of them, using Express Scribe software and a foot pedal. I found that it was taking me about two days to transcribe an interview (before checking and formatting it). So I outsourced the initial transcribing of about a third of the interviews. While this enabled me to stand back from the data, I had to check the initial transcripts with the recordings and make some corrections, and format the text. Once transcribing was completed in mid-April, I started to code the interview transcripts on the qualitative data analysis software. In the middle of this, I visited the university campus in mid-May for various meetings. The graduate research director in the School told me that when she was reviewing academic papers for publication, she was finding that 35 interviews was becoming the norm, especially for researchers who wanted to publish and she suggested that I would only need to undertake four more interviews to achieve this. I thought about this and realised that I was reaching saturation point in my interviews and that I was not learning anything new. So I decided to go ahead with analysing the data from the 31 interviews that I had.

When I met with HJ early in August, I told him about the discussion and he advised me that I would have to be able to justify in my viva why I had not following the advice about doing at least 35 interviews. This came as rather a shock. Soundings on Twitter among #PhD chat twitter community showed that being expected to undertake 35 interviews was not normal or common practice. However, I realised that I would have to heed HJ's advice. I was also rather frustrated as this would mean that I would have to start the actual data analysis from scratch after I had undertaken the additional interviews. I was fortunate that I was able to approach my contacts and I was able to find an additional six volunteers who agreed to be interviewed. I conducted the six interviews over a five week period between mid-August and the second week in September.

So I had to code the additional interview transcripts and then I started the data analysis again from scratch early in October. And this is where the challenges arise.

Books on analysing qualitative data provide a starting point for analysing the data and the data analysis software can take you quite a long way. However, there are limitations to both of these approaches. A researcher has to delve deeply into their data to see the connections and contrasts, to see patterns emerging and make connections. As I had been able to explore the data in the summer, in between the main and additional data collection, I had absorbed much of it and I was

already starting to make connections. I have found that I already have a draft theoretical framework and the challenge now is for me to verify and finesse this during the current phase of detailed data analysis. Much of this work is tedious and needs to be done before I reach conclusions and I can start writing up the findings. I think that I am going to be working on the detailed analysis for at least another month before I can even start to think about working out the story and preparing a first draft of the findings.

The data has already shown me new areas that I have to read about and explore aspects and issues that I did not encounter during the initial literature review. I will need to undertake this reading before I start writing the results up. HJ has advised that I should include some literature in the findings chapter, and hold something back from the literature review (which I will have to revisit and rewrite later on).

Planning for upgrading

I am due to upgrade from M.Phil to PhD between now and January 2015. Until July 2013, PhD students had to submit a specified amount of material such as a draft literature review, research methods and draft findings chapter, give a presentation on their research so far and prepare a project plan for finishing and submitting their thesis. The School has introduced new arrangements for the 2013/2014 academic year. Under these, PhD students have to submit material and undertake a mini viva. Details of what is required for this are meant to be included in the new PhD student handbook for the faculty. This has not yet been finalised and will not be published until early next year. So it is difficult to work out what I need to do to prepare for the upgrade and to work out when I want to apply for it.

Contribution

HJ has advised me that I need to work out what three new things that my thesis will include, that my PhD will contribute. I will need to be able to articulate this at my upgrade and my viva. I have at least two of these, and possibly have the third one.

Lecturing

I saw that the School was introducing a new Masters programme on global strategy and innovation and I contacted the programme leader. We agreed that I would give an introduction to contracts. I spent some time preparing the material and found out that I have much more to say than I thought. This was scheduled initially for late October and then it was deferred at the School's request. I then realised that I was then being offered the last Wednesday of term to give my talk and I realised that most students would not be interested in hearing about a new subject when they would be focused on the upcoming holiday. So the lecture is on hold for now. .

Part-time PGR student rep

I have been discussing the apparent lack of support for part-time postgraduate researchers (PGRs) with the School, particularly those who like me live away from campus and are long distance researchers. As a result I have been appointed the part-time PGR representative and I now sit on the Faculty Graduate Student Advisory Group with other postgraduate student representatives and academic staff. I undertook a survey of part-time PGRs in the School in September and there was a high response rate to this. I prepared a paper summarising the results and presented this at the first meeting of the Faculty Graduate Student Advisory Group in late October. We are exploring various possibilities about how we can work with the School to offer other ways of supporting part-time PGRs. Talking to PhD students at other universities confirms that universities have not yet addressed or resolved of how they can provide more support for PhD students. At Barchester, the School is introducing monthly PhD seminars where PGRs can give presentations for their research. Full time PhD students will have to attend at least four seminars, while these will be optional for part-time PGRs.

Associate lecturer

I successfully applied for and was successful in being appointed as an associate lecturer at a university on the outskirts of a major city to which I can commute when required. The contract is a zero hours based contract paid on an hourly rate. This means that I can be allocated work as and when the university has something for me. So far, I have assisted with research on student enterprise. I found that I needed to work about one day a week on this, and I could be undertaking some supervision later on in the academic year (although I am not expecting too much of this).

PhD log

I have continued to maintain a log of my research, rather intermittently during recent months while I am analysing my data. It is useful as I can explore ideas, draft frameworks and different models and use some of what I write in there in the draft chapters.

Next steps

The to be read pile of articles continues to mount. I have drafted the survey for phase 2 of my research and I am in the middle of piloting it. I plan to launch it later in January 2014.

Looking forward

I am now reaching the mid-way point of the PhD and it feels as if I am going through a bout of the so called PhD blues. I am feeling more isolated than I felt at the start; I am having to grit my teeth a little more and keep plodding away. Perhaps some cynicism is setting in, or maybe I have read too many 'how to do PhD' books. I am going through a patch of thinking my research is not very

original or interesting etc. I am realising that I am going to have find my own way to the end, to submitting my thesis.

Q: Discuss any issues that Leslie and her supervisors should be considering at this stage

Episode 5 – August 2014

Where I am now

I submitted my transfer thesis for my upgrade from M.Phil to PhD on 15 August 2014.

Background to the upgrade

The format of the upgrade has changed since I started my PhD in October 2011. At that time, the upgrade included giving a presentation to staff and other researchers, and taking questions. Now, the upgrade consists of an internal viva based on the “transfer thesis” that the PhD student submits. The transfer thesis comprises an introduction, literature review, research methods, data findings/results and a timeline for completing and submitting the PhD thesis. Full time students are expected to have their upgrade at about the end of the second year (assuming that they are on a three year programme). I have until January 2015 to undertake my upgrade.

The Postgraduate Office in the Management School at the university had advised that there was about a month between submitting a transfer thesis and the upgrade being held. I had planned to submit my transfer thesis early in September 2014 and that the upgrade would be held sometime in October. Although it took more than a week to do, compiling the transfer thesis was straightforward. It involved assembling the relevant material into a thesis template that university provided, editing, formatting and checking references. However after preparing, proofreading and checking the transfer thesis, I found that I was only tweaking the text and not making any substantive changes. So I decided to send it to Barchester three weeks earlier than I had planned, even though I realised that the university was closed for the summer holidays and that no one would look at it until early September.

What has happened in the interim

I started writing up the phase 1 (qualitative data from interviews) data findings in January 2014. It took me six weeks to prepare a first rubbish draft that gave me something to start to shape and make something of. I tried to write a section or two each day, and I found that I really enjoyed writing the chapter.

I undertook the survey for phase 2 of my research via Barchester’s university’s electronic survey system. I undertook a pilot of the survey in December 2013 and I released and circulated it at the end of January. When I closed the survey early in March, I had received some 250 responses. However, many of these were incomplete and there were only 52 complete responses. The explanation for the apparent blank responses was attributed by the survey system to ‘robots’ and search engine spiders trawling the internet. On analysing the 52 complete responses, 11 or 20% of them came from organisations that were outside of the focus of my research; i.e. were not universities and public sector research organisations.

I had planned to analyse the phase 2 data, using Dedoose, the software that I had used to analyse the phase 1 data, and had proclaimed to be software that could be used for mixed methods research. However, I found that while Dedoose worked really well for qualitative research data analysis, it was not really designed to undertake comprehensive statistical analysis. So I had to learn to use SPSS as a separate package. Although SPSS is excellent, I found that I could only take the data analysis so far. I consulted my supervisor who suggested seeking advice from a colleague of the university who had expertise in statistical analysis. The ‘expert’ commented that I was on the right track. However, I found that writing up statistical analyses did not produce or provide an interesting ‘story’; it was very dry to read and I did not feel that it added anything to my thesis. So I decided to use the findings from phase 1 of my research (qualitative data) as the basis for my data findings chapter. Fortunately, the phase 1 data findings were very rich and yielded some interesting findings.

The change in approach has meant revising my research methods chapter to explain the change in the research design. Further reading has revealed that there is an approach called “pragmatic qualitative researcher” and also something called “interpretative qualitative research” which have helped me to justify the change in my research design.

I have realised that I am a better qualitative than a quantitative researcher. I have also acknowledged that research does not always go to plan and that I have to be flexible so that I can take adjust what I am doing. The research findings have opened up a new area, which I had not considered previously or read about. So I have had to find out about this and include a section on it in the literature review.

Meetings with HJ

I have had two face to face meetings with HJ this year. I was due to have another meeting early in September 2014 and this has been cancelled as he will be away on business. My next meeting is on the first Tuesday in November and future meetings are scheduled to be held in alternative months until July 2014.

Preparing for the upgrade

So now I am in this strange limbo, waiting to hear when the upgrade will be held. The guidance from Barchester makes it clear that the supervisor is responsible for arranging the upgrade. It is very tempting to check the university’s system to track what is happening with the transfer thesis, to see whether my supervisor has reviewed it and passed it. I seem to be able to resist this for now.

In this limbo, it is very hard to do any work, as I know that I will have to revisit what I have done so far when I receive feedback from the upgrade; for example, I realise that I will need to revise my literature review. I re-read and edited it for the transfer thesis and it was not quite as bad as I had expected. I have some ideas of areas that I can remove and how I can strengthen the arguments. I have made on developing an outline or approach to the discussion chapter.

It is difficult to prepare the viva at the upgrade until I hear when I have to go to the university for this. I have researched and noted some possible viva questions and answers to them. I have also tried to work out the areas where I think I can expect to be asked about at upgrade viva: conceptual framework, research design and data analysis.

My timeline going forward sees me submitting my thesis in about September 2016. HJ has said that he thinks that it could be much sooner. I am being conservative in my planning as I expect that writing the discussion chapter will be the hardest part of the thesis for me. This is where I will need to show my original contribution. I am also allowing at least a month off each year for holidays and as contingency.

Developments at Barchester

Things are changing at Barchester as well. The Management School where I'm undertaking my research is to become a business school. So when I graduate, my thesis will say 'Business School, University of Barchester' on the front cover.

I had a meeting with someone at Barchester last month about communications and student engagement more generally. I explained about the isolation of part-time PhD students and how Barchester, like other universities, seemed to be reluctant to find ways to engage with them. Barchester have also received funding from one of the research councils to undertake some 'impact' or dissemination activities. I have put forward an idea about holding a conference for researchers and PhD students on university-industry links and I'm waiting to hear back about a possible meeting.

Work-life balance

When I took redundancy in February 2012 and left part-time working at the same organisation in September 2013, I intended to replace this with some consultancy and lecturing. Unfortunately the consultancy work has not materialised due to the recession (despite what the Government says). The university terminated my associate lecturer post in March due to funding cutbacks.

So instead, I have concentrated on volunteering and creating opportunities for this. I have been doing online mentoring for about three years. I usually have about four mentees at a time and talk to each of them about every three to four weeks. In January, I saw that our county voluntary and community action group were recruiting ambassadors to help extend their services into local towns and areas. I applied and I was successful. I undertook about four days of training in February and since then I've been active in the role. It gives me an opportunity to connect with and support local charities, and community and voluntary groups, and to help them recruit volunteers for them. The role is entrepreneurial and flexible. I'm meant to spend about 6 – 8 hours a week on it. This varies, depending on how busy we are. So each week is different, which is something that I like. I'm one of six ambassadors and we meet as a team regularly. I also report to the main office as well. I'm about to start volunteering with another local group as well.

So a typical week for me looks something like:

Planned	Actual
Monday 8.00 – 9.30 Coffee, exercise and catching up with partner 9.30 – 10.00 email 10.00 – 11.30 Shopping and walking 11.30 – 12.00 email/catching up 12.00 – 13.30 PhD reading/writing 13.30 – 14.30 Lunch 14.30 – 16.30 - PhD reading/writing 16.30 – 18.00 Leisure reading 18.00 – 18.30 Tea /catch up with partner 18.30 – 22.00 PhD reading/writing 22.00 – Midnight Supper and relaxing	Monday 8.00 – 9.30 Coffee, exercise and catching up with partner 9.30 – 10.00 email 10.00 – 11.30 Shopping and walking 11.30 – 12.00 email/catching up 12.00 – 13.30 PhD reading/writing 13.30 – 14.30 Lunch 14.30 – 16.30 - PhD reading/writing 16.30 – 18.00 Leisure reading 18.00 – 18.30 Tea /catch up with partner 18.30 – 22.00 PhD reading/writing 22.00 – Midnight Supper and relaxing
Tuesday 8.00 – 9.30 Coffee, exercise and catching up with partner 9.30 – 10.00 email 10.00 – 12.30 Volunteer ambassador meeting 12.30 – 13.30 Writing up and submitting notes of meeting 13.30 – 14.30 Lunch 14.30 – 16.30 - PhD reading/writing 16.30 – 18.00 Leisure reading 18.00 – 18.30 Tea /catch up with partner 18.30 – 22.00 PhD reading/writing 22.00 – Midnight Supper and relaxing	Tuesday 8.00 – 9.30 Coffee, exercise and catching up with partner 9.30 – 10.00 email 10.00 – 12.00 Volunteer ambassador meeting 12.30 – 15.00 Friend comes for lunch 15.00 – 16.45 - Writing up and submitting notes of meeting PhD reading/writing 16.45 – 18.15 Leisure reading 18.15 – 18.40 Tea /catch up with partner 18.40 – 21.45 PhD reading/writing 22.00 – Midnight Supper and relaxing
Wednesday 8.00 – 9.30 Coffee, exercise and catching up with partner 9.30 – 10.00 email 10.00 – 11.30 Shopping and walking 11.30 – 12.00 email/catching up 12.00 – 13.30 PhD reading/writing 13.30 – 14.30 Lunch 14.30 – 16.30 - PhD reading/writing 16.30 – 18.00 Leisure reading 18.00 – 18.30 Tea /catch up with partner	Wednesday 8.00 – 9.15 Coffee, exercise and catching up with partner 9.15 – 10.15 email 10.00 – 12.30 PhD reading/writing 12.00 – 12.30 email/catching up 12.30 – 14.45 Out for lunch 14.45 – 17.00 - PhD reading/writing 17.00 – 18.15 Leisure reading 18.15 – 18.50 Tea /catch up with partner 18.50 – 22.00 PhD reading/writing

18.30 – 22.00 PhD reading/writing
22.00 – Midnight Supper and relaxing

22.00 – Midnight Supper and relaxing

Thursday

8.00 – 9.30 Coffee, exercise and catching up with partner
9.30 – 10.00 email
10.00 – 11.30 Mentoring
11.30 – 12.30 PhD reading/writing
12.30 – 13.30 Walking
13.30 – 14.30 Lunch
14.30 – 16.30 PhD reading/writing
16.30 – 18.00 Leisure reading
18.00 – 18.30 Tea /catch up with partner
18.30 – 22.00 PhD reading/writing
22.00 – Midnight Supper and relaxing

Thursday

7.45 – 9.00 Coffee, exercise and catching up with partner
9.00 – 9.30 email
10.00 – 11.30 Mentoring
11.30 – 12.00 email/catching up
12.00 – 13.30 Shopping/walking
13.30 – 14.30 Lunch
14.30 – 16.30 PhD reading/writing
16.30 – 18.00 Leisure reading
18.00 – 18.30 Tea /catch up with partner
18.30 – 22.00 PhD reading/writing
22.00 – Midnight Supper and relaxing

Friday

8.00 – 9.30 Coffee, exercise and catching up with partner
9.30 – 10.00 email
10.00 – 11.30 Shopping and walking
11.30 – 12.00 email/catching up
12.00 – 13.30 PhD reading/writing
13.30 – 14.30 Lunch
14.30 – 16.30 PhD reading/writing
16.30 – 18.00 Leisure reading

18.00 – 18.30 Tea /catch up with partner
18.30 – 22.00 PhD reading/writing
22.00 – Midnight Supper and relaxing

Friday

8.00 – 9.30 Coffee, exercise and catching up with partner
9.30 – 10.00 email
10.00 – 11.30 Shopping and walking
11.30 – 12.00 email/catching up
12.00 – 13.15 PhD reading/writing
13.15 – 14.00 Lunch
14.30 – 16.00 Ambassador meeting
16.00 – 17.15 Write up and submit note of meeting
17.15 – 18.00 Leisure reading
18.00 – 18.30 Tea /catch up with partner
18.30 – 22.00 PhD reading/writing
22.00 – Midnight Supper and relaxing

Saturday

8.00 – 10.00 Coffee, exercise and catching up with partner
10.00 – 16.00 Trip out with family
16.00 – 17.00 email/catching up
16.30 – 18.30 Leisure reading
18.00 – 18.30 Tea /catch up with family
18.30 – 22.00 PhD reading/writing
22.00 – Midnight Supper and relaxing

Saturday

8.00 – 10.00 Coffee, exercise and catching up with partner
10.00 – 16.45 Trip out with family
16.45 – 17.30 email/catching up
17.30 – 18.30 Leisure reading
18.30 – 19.15 Tea /catch up with family
19.15 – 22.00 Relaxing with family
22.00 – Midnight Supper and relaxing

Sunday

Sunday

9.00 – 10.30 Coffee, exercise and catching up with partner/family	9.00 – 11.00 Coffee, exercise and catching up with partner/family
10.30 – 11.30 PhD reading/writing	11.00 – 11.45 email
11.30 – 13.30 Walk with family	11.45 – 13.30 Walk with family
13.30 – 14.30 Lunch	13.30 – 14.30 Lunch
14.30 – 16.30 Relaxing with family	14.30 – 17.30 Relaxing with family
16.30 – 18.00 Leisure reading	17.30 – 18.30 Leisure reading
18.00 – 18.30 Tea /catch up with partner	18.30 – 19.15 Tea /catch up with partner
18.30 – 22.00 PhD reading/writing	19.15 – 22.00 PhD reading/writing
22.00 – Midnight Supper and relaxing	22.00 – Midnight Supper and relaxing

Relationship with supervisor

As I mentioned in episode 1, my relationship with my supervisor is different to what it would be if I was undertaking my PhD in my twenties. Although it is less of a teacher-pupil relationship and more even handed, it also has its disadvantages. I think that HJ assumes that I know what I'm doing, that I need less guidance and prompting compared with other doctoral researchers. It makes for a more distant relationship, more impersonal; for example, it means that I receive less feedback on my work than I would have expected and this makes it harder to ask for it. I'm also aware that as he is Dean of the faculty, he is very busy and I feel less inclined to ask him for support; I try to resolve problems on my own first and only go to him as a last resort. Earlier this year, I did ask him if he still wanted to be my supervisor and he confirmed that he did. I'm hoping that the formal feedback that I receive from the upgrade will help me to assess progress on my work and to understand where I may need to make changes.

Although I have a second supervisor, I have only met with BH once in November 2012. Again I suspect that this is because I'm seen as being organised and understanding the "rules of the game".

Interactions with the academic community

There is still a clear lack of interaction with my peers in the Management School at Barchester. This is not for lack of trying (see notes above). It is frustrating to receive so little response and it means that I'm going back into my shell and concentrating on completing the PhD. I'll keep plugging away at the idea of a conference for researchers in my field. I've also suggested the idea of some kind of 'festival' when the new Business School is launched formally. I'm still in contact with my PhD buddy and I'm active in the #PhdChat community on Twitter, where I host some of the regular sessions discussing particular topics.

Three years in

I am now almost three years into my PhD. Despite some frustrations, I am still very interested in my research topic, enjoy writing and undertaking research. I'm also feeling much more confident in my capabilities as a researcher and as a writer.

Q: Discuss any issues that Leslie and her supervisors should be considering at this stage

Episode 6 – November 2014

Finally

After much waiting (and getting rather down with what seemed to be a protracted wait), I heard early in October that my upgrade was to be held at 3 – 4 pm on Wednesday 19 November 2014 in my supervisor's office. From the invitation, I could see that my supervisor HJ and his colleague, OM, whom I'd met previously, would be examining me.

Significance

The upgrade is a major milestone in the PhD process. It determines whether a student who is initially registered as M.Phil can progress to register as a full PhD student. So passing it becomes a major goal.

What the upgrade entails

Until 2013, the upgrade consisted of preparation and submission of some material about your thesis together a literature review, a presentation to Departmental colleagues and a short discussion afterwards. The arrangements were altered in autumn 2013, so that candidates for upgrade had to submit a transfer thesis and attend an internal viva.

The transfer thesis is meant to comprise: introduction, literature review, research design, methodology and methods chapter, analysis of data findings to date and timetable from upgrade to submission of the final thesis.

The waiting

Waiting to hear when the upgrade was going to be held is the hardest part because I felt that I was in limbo. I could not start to think about preparing for the upgrade and I did not feel that I could make much progress with my thesis. In the end I decided that I needed to start looking at my discussion chapter and that a good starting point would be to compare my findings with my notes on my more recent reading. I set up a structure to do this in Word and it has proved to be a very useful exercise. It has prompted me to look at different aspects and to explore some areas/issues afresh. It is also helping me to think and see more clearly about my contribution that my thesis is making.

Preparation

I read my transfer thesis again about two weeks before the upgrade. As I was going through my reading notes and trying to relate them to my findings, this kept my thesis and the main ideas at the front of my mind. However, I did find that the tension did begin to build and I began to feel

stressed in different parts of my body. It felt as though that I had a major to sit and that it was looming. Interestingly in the 10 days before the day of the upgrade, I was unable to read any fiction and I found myself re-reading the e-books that I had on 'how to do your PhD'.

By sheer coincidence, I had been invited to travel north to the University of Sowerth to give a presentation in workshop that was closely related to my research area. The workshop was to be held on the morning of Monday 17 November 2014. This involved travelling to Sowerth on the day before (Sunday), staying overnight in a hotel, attending the workshop the next morning and travelling back home in the afternoon. The University of Sowerth booked my hotel and train tickets. As only about ten people had been invited to the workshop, it was much more of a discussion than my giving a presentation. It was very reassuring to hear some of the same issues being discussed that I had encountered during my fieldwork.

Travelling to Sowerth gave me a day between returning home and my upgrade. This gave me time to rest and relax a little.

The day

I had arranged for HJ to meet me in the visitor car park as his team had recently moved to a new building some distance away from where we used to meet. I went out to meet him at 14.50 and when he had not arrived just before 15.00, I called his office. He was still in a meeting and Becky, HJ's executive assistant, said that she would come to find me, and take me to their new building. By the time Becky found me and we had walked to the new building, it was 15.10. We then had to wait in the corridor outside HJ's office for 10 minutes as someone else had popped in to see HJ. OM joined in waiting in the corridor. So it was almost 15.25 when the upgrade proper started.

OM started by saying that she had enjoyed reading the thesis and she led the questioning. HJ asked me to say what three contributions my thesis would make. I asked for their advice on aspects of my thesis. I felt that I was able to hold my own in the discussion and to have a reasonably intelligent conversation. The discussion lasted until just after 16.05.

I was then told that I had passed the upgrade and passed a hard copy of OM and HJ's written report. OM also gave me a hard copy of my transfer thesis which she had marked up and written some comments in the margins. This would have to be signed off by the School and Faculty and sent to me officially.

The feedback

The feedback report included some comments on the research design, methodology and methods chapter, and the data findings chapter. I need to revise some parts of the research design, methodology and methods chapter, and to provide more evidence by way of quotes in the data findings chapter. I had previously removed quotes from the chapter as I had thought that there were too many. We also agreed that I would need to include a section in my introduction and (in

the conclusion when I come to write it) about my contribution, what gap my thesis fills. Although I had appreciated that I would have to cover this in the conclusions chapter, I had not realised that I had to be so upfront about it in the introduction. I'm now starting to see that the introduction is a bit more like an executive summary, an overview of the thesis and what it is about.

I was asked what the end result of my thesis would like, such as, would I be making some practical or policy recommendations. Interestingly I found myself developing some diagrams two days after the upgrade, trying to capture my thoughts and ideas on this.

HJ thought that I was on the fast track to my PhD and that I was improving all the time. He thought that I could submit within nine months or so, if I was minded to. I want to see how things go. I also explained that I thought that there were several areas in the thesis which could form the basis of some papers or articles, and HJ agreed that it should be possible for me to be attached to the University as a research fellow or associate after I complete my PhD.

I did not read the feedback report in detail until later that evening. What pleased me most was the summary paragraph which read:

“Overall the transfer thesis meets the criteria for an upgrade from MPhil to PhD effectively. The flow of the transfer thesis is excellent and the coherent and joined-up nature of the work presented in this thesis deserves a particular credit.”

Afterwards

I was relieved and exhilarated all in the same measure, and at the same time. I went through OM's comments in the couple of days immediately after the upgrade and the comments were better than I had expected. I also realised that I was not taking these personally, a big change compared with say a couple of years ago.

The upgrade has shown or proved to me that my research topic 'has legs' or substance, and that it is not just a daft idea that I had. It has also shown me that my writing is at PhD level and that my theoretical and conceptual frameworks are valid. It has really boosted my confidence in my ability to undertake research and to do it well.

What's next?

In the timetable that I submitted with the transfer thesis, I had planned to revise the literature review first before I started the discussion chapter. I'm now finding that I want to work on the

discussion chapter first and revise the literature review after that, once I know where my conclusions are heading.

I think that I am going to allow myself to ease up a little between now and Christmas, taking some time out and starting to mull over what I want to say in the discussion chapter and how I am going to say. I cannot envisage the discussion chapter just yet, and I suspect that I may have to start putting some words on the screen and see what happens.

Timetable between upgrade and submission

I had to include a timetable in my transfer thesis that covered the period between the upgrade and submitting my thesis. The regulations at the University of Barchester say that your supervisor has to sign off the final version of the thesis before I can submit. As HJ tends to be rather busy, I've allowed some time for this. I have also allowed some contingency by giving myself a month off each year for holidays. At the upgrade HJ said that believes that I could submit my thesis within nine months. I feel a little more conservative as I feel that writing the discussion chapter is going to be my biggest challenge and I need to allow time for this. So my (conservative) timetable looks like:

Task	Date
Upgrade	Late November 2014
Receive, digest and apply feedback from upgrade	December 2014
Prepare discussion chapter	January – Early April 2015
Send draft discussion chapter to supervisor for comments	April 2015
Holiday/break	May 2015
Receive feedback from supervisor on discussion chapter	June 2015
Revise discussion chapter	June/early July 2015
Revise literature review	July – August 2015
Send revised literature review to supervisor for comments	End August 2015
Receive feedback from supervisor on revised literature review	September 2015
Revise literature review in light of feedback from supervisor	October 2015
Write conclusions chapter and send to supervisor for feedback	End October 2015
Assemble thesis into one draft and edit	October – November 2015
Send draft thesis to supervisor for feedback	Early December 2015
Receive feedback from supervisor on draft thesis	End January 2016

Revise thesis in the light of feedback from supervisor and prepare final version	February – March 2016
Holiday/break	May 2016
Give notice of intention to submit	June/July 2016
Printing and binding of thesis***	July /August 2016
Submit thesis	September 2016
Viva	December 2016/January 2017

I suspect that the timetable is too conservative and that I will submit sooner.

I am waiting for official confirmation of passing the upgrade: the paperwork has to work its way through the system. Once that it is completed, my registration will be officially upgraded from M.Phil to PhD.

Episode 7 – February 2016

In the end I spent only 14 months from upgrade in November 2014 to submitting my thesis in January 2016, and six weeks from then to sitting my viva in February 2016.

Supervision arrangements

In February 2015, I heard that HJ was stepping down from his senior management position and leaving the University of Barchester at the end of the month. No reasons were given for this. HJ had not said anything to me and the university did not advise me what the implications of this could mean in terms of supervisory arrangements. My concerns arose from my knowing that I would need more input and feedback from my supervisors as I edited and finalised the thesis than I had during earlier stages of my PhD (and this turned out to be true). Also my second supervisor played only a notional role and I was anxious that I could be left in the lurch as it were.

So I met with the Faculty Director of the PhD Programmes early in March 2015 where it was agreed that HJ would continue to be my supervisor (as part of the convention that academics continue to supervise their existing PhD students even after they leave their university). In addition KM would be appointed as my second supervisor and she would play a much more active role. HJ later explained that he had brought in KM as a second supervisor so that she could take over in case he had to step down for any reason.

This change in supervisory arrangements yielded immediate benefits for me, with my meeting both of them in April, June and October 2015, plus separate meetings with each of them in the fortnight preceding my viva. I benefitted significantly from this, especially as KM provided detailed, constructive feedback on my drafts and revisions. It was sometimes hard to balance their advice and feedback, but their input strengthened my thesis. During this period, TJ from a university in the north-west of England, was nominated and agreed to be my external examiner, and TWP was appointed as my internal examiner.

Editing the full draft

I completed the first full draft of my thesis in March 2015 and received feedback from HJ and KM in April when we met to discuss it. I reworked the draft in the light of this by June 2015, and my final draft was approved in October 2015. HJ and KM felt that I could submit before Christmas. However, I felt that I needed more time to edit and tweak the text and did not want to send the thesis in during the Christmas vacation. I also wanted to arrange to print the thesis in draft form locally so that I could proof-read it. I also found that formatting references, and including and double-checking cross-references took longer than I thought.

Additional experience

In October 2015, KM recommended me to one of her colleagues who was looking for some assistance with some research he was leading with another academic. They were also launching their report at a workshop early in December. So the university employed me on as a part-time research assistant on a temporary basis. However, it meant visiting the university in person to register as temp: it was a legal requirement that the university confirmed my identity in person.

I was able to work from home and fit it in around finalising my thesis. The research topic was a new area for me and it took me a few hours to get my head round it. Once I did, I found that I was able to use the tools and techniques which I had learnt and used during my PhD and that I enjoyed it. The work consisted mostly of reviewing interview transcripts for particular themes and identifying appropriate quotes and evidence. I was invited and attended the workshop in London and this was very enjoyable.

Submission

When I had my upgrade in November 2014, the accompanying timetable which I submitted with my “transfer thesis” indicated that I planned to submit late in 2016. At that stage, I was being conservative and I was underestimating my progress and how I had reached. When I sent my supervisors a first draft of my complete thesis in March 2016, they told me that I would be able to submit sooner. When we met to discuss my second draft in July 2015, both my supervisors believed that I was only 3 – 4 months away from submission. When we met in October 2015, KM and HJ both advised that I was almost ready to submit and that I could try to do so before Christmas. In the end, I decided that I would not be ready before the end of the university term and that I would take advantage of the Christmas holidays to finalise the text and then arrange to submit in January 2016 (which I did).

I planned and was able to send my thesis for printing and binding the thesis towards the end of the first week of the new university term at the beginning of January. I had checked the requirements for submission and how I could do this remotely. In the end, I sent the thesis as a pdf file by email to the print room at the university with instructions for binding. Three copies of the thesis had to be submitted and I also wanted a copy for myself to use in preparing for my viva.

The print room at the university emailed me when the thesis was ready. So we travelled to the campus in mid-January, went to the print room, paid the printing costs and then walked over to the Faculty Post Graduate Researchers Office when I handed my thesis in (after signing and dating the author acknowledgement page in each of the three copies). The Faculty Post Graduate Researchers Office advised that my viva was usually held 4 – 6 weeks after submission, although in some cases it could be as long as three months.

Interim

I felt that I needed to keep in touch with my research and that if I parked the topic for too long, I would not be able or want to pick up the threads again. However, I did follow one piece of advice

of not to look at or read my thesis for at least a fortnight, and that I should not pull it apart, find all the weaknesses and typos in it. Instead, I kept with alerts for articles etc. that I followed.

Viva

A month after handing my thesis in, the Faculty Post Graduate Researchers Office emailed me to say that my viva had been arranged for late February 2016. This gave me just over two weeks to prepare. I sorted logistics first, such as what to wear, when to travel to the university (the evening before and stay in a hotel rather than risk travelling in the rush hour and getting stuck in a traffic jam when the viva was due to start at 11.00). Then I followed Rowena Murray's advice in her book on How to survive your viva. I also practised answering some possible viva questions, using my other half as a pretend examiner. During the ten days preceding the viva, I found that I wanted to put off as many outside commitments as possible, apart from seeing one or two close friends. I wanted and needed mental space to focus on the thesis. However, I found that I could not work on preparations all the time; short bursts were sufficient and as the viva drew nearer, the more I found that my 'memory bank' was full and I could hardly bare to do much work.

What is said about the panic, nerves and adrenaline kicking in is all true, plus I had bad bouts of impostor syndrome. Although this is all 'normal' and to be expected, they are hard to live through. I had the option of being able to ask a supervisor to attend the viva as a silent observer. KM kindly agreed to do this and said she would take notes for me. I also found it helpful that someone else would be keeping track of what happened for me, examiners' comments etc. We met at a coffee shop about 90 minutes before the viva was scheduled to start. This was calming and reassuring (and by then I was numb).

My idea of success would be to pass with minor corrections, or possibly major corrections. We walked to the venue to find that TJ and TWP were ready for us, so the viva started early. TJ kicked off by saying that he and TWP felt that the thesis was a strong one (cue for me to almost fall off my chair at this point). TJ led the questioning and most of the questions centred on why I had not taken various approaches, or why certain things had been omitted. When it came to the question of 'Is there anything you'd like to ask us?', I asked about publishing from the thesis. TJ gave some helpful suggestions about this.

KM and I were sent out about 12.10 and we were called back in about 10 minutes later. TJ said that as he and TWP were unanimous that as the thesis was so strong and I had had a strong viva, they were recommending a straight pass without any corrections. At this point, I was falling off my chair, saying 'I never expected this'. Many congratulations followed, KM said she would be in touch about possible opportunities to collaborate. Apparently I'm to expect a letter from the Faculty Post Graduate Office. I will need to complete some paperwork, (which KM and I will need to sign) get a final official copy of the thesis printed and bound, and submit this, plus an electronic version for the University Library to retain.

So, I then called family and friends and travelled home. I was very tired, having not slept well in the hot hotel room the night before and waking up early. Since then, it felt like having several

birthdays in one go. Graduation is in July and we (including my husband and daughter) will attend this.

Next steps? I plan to attend a Faculty PhD student conference in three weeks' time; I've submitted an abstract for this and will give a presentation. I have applied to present at and to chair a session at a student sustainability research symposium which the university are holding in mid-April 2016. The university is holding a Festival of Doctoral Research in May 2016. and I need to plan how I can publish from my thesis. I am developing a publication strategy/plan for this. It feels as though securing the PhD is the equivalent of securing a badge of credibility and capability, and slowly these are starting to drip through.

Longer term

My ideal would be to have a position at Barchester University as some kind of research assistant or junior research fellow on a part-time flexible basis where I can and I am invited to collaborate with, contribute to and assist academic colleagues with their research. I would also like to be able to apply for research funding in my own right. If this does not happen, I will explore ways to establish myself as an independent researcher.

Epilogue: Leslie's suggestions

After four and a half years of doctoral study, some of my key pieces of advice would include:

a) For PhD candidates (part-time or full-time)

- *Choose a research topic that excites you and which you will passionate about all the way through your PhD; this will go a long way to helping you work your way through the lows, challenges, sticky moments and when you feel like abandoning your PhD.*
- *Determination and persistence will carry you a long way.*
- *You are an apprentice researcher – even as a mature student, there are new things for you to learn. This is your project and it is your responsibility, if only to yourself, to get on with it and get things done.*
- *If you are a mature student, your professional and life experience will take you a long way. Draw on these and use them as and when you can and when you need them.*
- *Make friends with the Postgraduate Researcher's Office in your faculty/school – they will be able to answer many of your questions about administrative aspects of your PhD, such as the paperwork that needs to be completed at each stage.*

b) For supervisors

- *Treat your PhD student as a peer , not as a student.*
- *Try to understand their particular needs and the experience and skills they bring to their PhD.*
- *Keep in touch with your student regularly. Try to reply to your student's emails, even if it is only to acknowledge that you have received the email and promising to get back to them by a specific date. What seems like a minor issue to you can be a major issue for your student..*
- *Let your student know of any change in circumstances which may impact on your student's PhD.*
- *Explore how you can find ways to involve your student in the academic community.*

c) For institutions

- *Find ways to include part-time students in the academic community and explore how to use technology for those who live away from campus and/or who have full-time jobs to enable them to participate.*
- *Ensure that full appropriate supervisory arrangements are put in place.*
- *Keep students in the loop about any changes, administrative or otherwise which may affect their PhD.*

