

Sara's tenacity

I'm a lecturer in nursing. My route into this job has been through studying part-time whilst doing shift work full-time to achieve a BSc, MSc and PGCE. This is the norm in our profession. As a result I knew that doing a Doctorate, whilst working as a lecturer full time, would be an onerous task and I avoided getting on with it for several years whilst my son was small.

The trigger was the development of a taught doctorate in my department, which was one third taught modules and the thesis. I started in October 2011 and initially gave myself seven years put a date of May 20th, 2018 into my Outlook calendar within the first few months of starting. I submitted the thesis in just over five in December 2016 – 17 months early.

The taught component offered the potential for me to develop my ideas whilst offering a framework (with deadlines) for the initial 9 taught modules. I had a focus from the outset. This enabled me to apply it to all the modules taught and broaden my depth of knowledge as I progressed. Thus I could see that the work I did for individual modules would contribute to the final thesis; this helped to motivate me.

The taught component required assignment submissions and presentations at set points. This was a huge driver and I quickly learnt to work fast and produce work even faster, earning the nickname of 'girly swot' from my colleagues. I had a great bunch of people doing the doctorate with me; they also worked full time in the local health organisation. We supported each other and moaned to each other. We understood each other's pressures and swapped tips. It also helped that I had colleagues within the department to go to with questions, and I was able to learn from their knowledge and experiences of completing PhDs.

I approached the work as part of my job and something that had to be done. I was funded by my department so money was not a problem and I attended the taught modules in work time. I was excused running one of my three modules for one year (we run modules twice a year) so this meant some time was available from work. But this was the occasional afternoon, or an hour here and there, rather than 'protected time'.

For the most part I worked evenings and weekends to complete the work. Having self-funded my degree and MSc, I felt I was on a reasonably good deal but the pressure did come from having to deliver. Furthermore my work was marked by my colleagues and managers within the department so there was pressure to get good grades. I generally did and this helped to motivate me as well. As an established lecturer at that point, I had a good idea about academic standards so this was a huge advantage to producing

work of good quality. Possibly a PhD rather than the taught component may have been less stressful, although I can see how I have developed as a scholar as a result of broadening my knowledge on health service delivery and how the modules created the impetus to complete work.

I soon realised, as I had vaguely anticipated, that the doctorate was badly impacting on 'life'. This provided more incentive to complete the work and get it over with. I loved learning I found it stimulating and beneficial to my role as a lecturer.

I was very focused, if not obsessive, and had to be in order to ensure I was achieving my work as a lecturer as well, no small task in itself. At one stage I had downloaded one module outcomes and completed the assignment before we started the taught component.

Once the taught modules were over I felt I had got over a main hurdle and I could see the achievement of my goal in site. The thesis was totally in my control. I did not have to wait for the deadlines that had originally driven me, but later proved a hindrance to completing the work faster. I set my own deadlines, realistic deadlines giving me plenty of time, but generally achieved what I wanted to do ahead of my deadlines.

My supervisor became my boss at this stage, but this was OK as we had a good working relationship. My second supervisor was very reliable and supportive. Both were very approachable. I stepped up my efforts and worked harder.

Holidays were used to write up chapters or analyse data. I just locked myself in a room and got on with it as I knew that if I didn't get it done it would cause me more stress. In the last year I took on a post as a researcher on a National Health Research funded project and this was a huge learning curve and far more stressful than the doctorate. Both my supervisors were working on this project, which was an added dimension to deal with. Fortunately this was unproblematic as we continued to work well together.

Life did not stop during this time. I balanced my job with being a single mum. I tried to go for walks at the weekends and went to Church once a month. I learnt Welsh (an ongoing project). My father was very poorly and I spent a lot of time travelling to see my parents regularly and took work with me. My mum was very supportive – it was here that I could lock myself in a room and get on with it released from regular chores.

I had a new partner when I started who was also very supportive but, when problems arose in the relationship, I rather ruthlessly felt that he was one hassle too much and chose to separate. He remains a very good friend and I have no regrets about this.

The most stressful episode was around the viva. It was booked for the March 2017? with two external examiners. But one had a heart attack and had to be replaced, so the viva was delayed by a further two months (five months from submission). I note this with some irony as my thesis was about brief smoking cessation.

During this time, dad was dying and my son did not revise for his A' levels. I just kept on going because I realised that this was the one thing I could control. It actually helped to have this focus. I had the viva in May and submitted my corrections by mid-June (did them on a week's holiday). Dad knew I got the doctorate, he died in the August; he was very proud. My son went back to school, worked and re-sat. I got a dog and walked even more. Life is still very busy. I'm not sure where I got the time for the doctorate.

I was 43 starting it and I could have taken a more relaxed attitude but that's not me. I wanted to get it finished from the day I started. I was very lucky not to have financial pressures and to have support from family, colleagues and supervisors. As an older student I have learnt that you don't have to be bright but you do have to be committed. It was stressful because it meant new demanding experiences but as I was older I was used to being easy on myself when I felt inadequate or got things wrong, and I was flexible when things didn't go to plan. I knew I would pass from the outset, as I knew I would put the work in, be tenacious and eventually succeed. I think you need to believe you can do it and find your style and work within it.