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○ NO. 1 | ○ SPRING | ○ 2006

LonDoc

A MAGAZINE FOR POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH STUDENTS
BASED IN AND AROUND LONDON

By its very nature, the PhD is a solitary piece of work. For many students, you and a handful of others are the only people on the planet who understand what your thesis is about. Whilst you might be working as part of a small team in the lab, a clinic, or a university department, you're the one doing 100% of the work and you'll be the one getting a grilling when it's time for the viva.

One of the difficulties facing postgraduate research students (we'll be calling them PGRs in LonDoc) is isolation. At undergraduate level you were part of a big cohort of peers around the same age who lived in the same sort of area and experienced the same pressures at the same time. Peers you could share books with, revise with, sleep with, that sort of thing. As a PGR you're now suddenly dropped in the middle of a busy department with no clear schedule and some vague inkling that you're basically going to be writing a book. You don't know what the topic is or how you're going to do it or how you're going to keep a roof over your head, but that's the goal.

When you think about, it doesn't really matter what your topic is, you're going to have a lot of things in common with other PGRs. Granted, a historian is not going to want to go into too much detail about the role of superoxide dismutase in rodents over a quiet drink, but there are some key features that are shared by everyone.

We all have supervisors, and our relationship with them is imperfect. We're broke. Our thesis is a daunting, scary undertaking and we're not really sure what it's going to look like. Procrastination has gone from an occasional hobby to a full-time occupation. We have to speak at conferences to a room full of academics who have been studying the subject for twice as long as we've been alive and they're going to see right through our flimsy arguments and start throwing rotten vegetables at us on stage.

So, if we're all facing the same challenges then doesn't it make sense that we should be talking to each other to come up with some solutions? That's what LonDoc is all about, focusing not on the nitty-gritty technical details but the things which we all have in common.

Funded by UK GRAD, our plan is to publish a quarterly newsletter with articles by other PGR students and people who have recently finished their PhD. We'll also be hosting an online forum for more interactive stuff. We're also keen to hear from you if you've got some more ideas about what we could do for London-based PGRs in the future, anything from helping you to set up a skills group (see page 2) to a conference or just a big party!

Paul Wicks, Editor



Automatic reference software can save you a ton of time when it comes to submitting papers to different journals; Reference Manager or Endnote are the standard packages and can alter the style of 100's of references in a few clicks.

Every time you read a paper make sure you enter it in to your reference software and it'll get assigned an ID number. Use that number to structure your filing system and you'll save a lot of time fumbling around for papers.

Just who are UK GRAD?

Back in days of yore, hardly anyone went to university. PhD's were for scientists and engineers. They could take many years, weren't particularly structured and acted as a sort of apprenticeship to a life of unruly haircuts and a lab in the basement of a university.

Nowadays, 50% of young people are supposed to be heading to uni and now there are people doing PhD's in everything from biochemistry to Klingon. In 2002 a report by Sir Gareth Roberts set the framework for the development of the UK's postgraduate researchers, not just to be future weirdy-beardies, but also this country's leading thinkers in business and the public sector. To do this they would need new skills. Transferable skills.

UK GRAD is an organisation funded by the UK's research councils to train their students in skills like communication, team work, and personal development. They run a series of GRAD schools around the UK as well as training university staff and coordinating local programmes through a network of regional hubs. The London Hub of UK GRAD is responsible for this magazine; come find out more at www.grad.ac.uk



Building a skills network - 'History Lab'

- When first-year historian Liza Filby saw an absence of transferable skills training she didn't get mad, she got involved

Your mates from uni may well be "friends for life" but try talking to them about the outrageous price of a Café Latte at the British Library or your latest scam for conning photocopying cards from the archivist at Senate House. They're just not interested! The only ones who understand your pain are fellow PGRs.

When I joined the Institute of Historical Research, there was already a small community of PGRs, but some friends and I wanted to extend this, creating a space where historians from all over London could come together to socialise, share experiences, skills and ideas. We applied to the University of London for funding and they agreed to fund us initially for two years.

The 'History Lab' was officially launched last October with over 150 post-graduates in attendance. Since last autumn we have hosted a number of successful social events including a pub quiz and a 'speed networking' event (speed dating but without the cheesy chat up lines).

Part-timers have found it an invaluable way of keeping in touch

LIZA R FILBY

We have also run various skills workshops on teaching, freelance research and public speaking, and a seminar series called *Talkin' about my Generation* in which 'established' historians reflect on their experiences in academia. We currently have a membership of over 350 students, including members from Ireland, Germany and America.

We are far from being a truly national network but aim to establish regional networks/events during the next academic year. We have had lots of positive feedback from students, especially part timers who have found it an invaluable way of keeping in touch with the academic community.

Others have commented that a network in which PGRs are allowed to discuss their research in an informal and safe setting builds confidence and helps to nurture ideas. I would strongly recommend the idea of a network for all disciplines as a way of meeting people that are undergoing the torturous experience of doing a PhD. Remember, a problem shared is a problem halved .

TOP 10: Reasons to do a PhD



1. Thought 'Dr.' would look cool on credit card
2. Wanted to add almost nothing whatsoever to the sum knowledge of humankind
3. Saw the character Ross Geller from 'Friends' as a role model
4. Quench thirst to explore the ethnobiosocioanthropsycholinguistics of sudoku
5. Get to wear jeans to work
6. Believed urban legends that doctors get free upgrades on airplanes
7. Delusional beliefs about curing cancer/AIDS/stupidity
8. Peer pressure from nerds
9. Disdain for humdrum things like salary, career prospects, employee benefits, etc.
10. Too clever for law school, too nice for politics

DIY - Develop It Yourself!

Start small: organise social events, seminars or an afternoon symposium within your department to bring people together- always allow time for socialising after the academic stuff. If you already have quite a strong community within your department, perhaps link up with departments from other colleges for joint events.

Choosing events: think about what students will want to do; they will only turn up if it interests them and be aware of other demands on their time. Once events have been decided, establish a termly programme well in advance so that students have time to organise their diary.

Draw on others' expertise: there is always someone who loves a bit of HTML coding and can whip up a website in an afternoon-get these people involved. (see <http://www.history.ac.uk/histlab/> for proof!)

Sponsorship: first try your department/university, then perhaps approach any learned societies in your field. They may not be willing to sponsor the entire venture but may be interested in supporting a one off event.

Publicity: set up a website, regular email newsletter and other publicity material to display on notice boards etc. Ask other department postgraduate administrators to forward your e-newsletter out to their students, visit other departments and tell them about the network, try and get as many people involved as possible.

Act as a network: collect a database of members' research interest and introduce students working on similar areas.



So, you've got a PhD. But what can you actually do?

- Cara Owens on highlighting your strengths

I had always assumed that because I was academic, I would have no problem finding the job I wanted. However, I soon came to the realisation that there was already a wealth of talented, academic young undergraduates out there (most of which were at least three years my junior!) for employers to fish among. I was faced with the question "how does my PhD make me stand out from the crowd?". The easiest way to persuade an employer you're worth hiring is to highlight your skills.

I would recommend all PhD students take a few minutes to consider the skills they already possess as a result of their PhD studies. Back in the early days when you decided on your research question, you had to identify gaps in the knowledge that you wanted your research to mend, applying the skills of critical judgement and analysis. This ability to seek out problems, and not to take things at face value are much sought-after attributes in many sectors of the workplace from academia to business and industry.

The easiest way to persuade an employer you're worth hiring is to highlight your skills.

CARA OWENS

One of the key and unique qualities of the PhD student is the ability to solve complex problems. This involves a process of logical and structured investigation as well as a good deal of creativity!

Next, consider yourself as a project manager. In order to move from your initial research question through to completion you have had to be an independent worker, managing your time and resources effectively. For many of you this has involved balancing your research workload with teaching and other academic activities, maybe even children too. Through your PhD many of you will have become competent public speakers, having presented your research to the academic community and responded to considerable scrutiny. Communication does not just mean talking about your research, compare your written skills now with those you had at the end of your undergraduate degree – it is amazing how a 75,000 word dissertation can fine tune your literacy skills! Think carefully about the skills you have acquired during your PhD, make sure you highlight them in your CV and at interview, and you're sure to shine.

Dear Dr. Flo...

I am in the final stages of my PhD in psychology, but about a year ago I transferred my registration from full-time to part-time as my funding was due to run out and I needed to get a job. I was lucky enough to get a job in the lab where I was doing my PhD but now that I am actually working as a research assistant, my supervisor keeps giving me more and more work to do so that I don't have any time to finish off my PhD. What can I do about this situation?

Aggrieved Psychology Researcher.

Dear APR,

It seems to me that there are several issues in this situation which may need to be resolved. Firstly, you need to consider very carefully why you were in the position where you needed to transfer your registration in the first place. Your funding should have lasted for at least three years, which is normally considered to be sufficient to get you to the writing-up stage. If you were not at that point when you transferred to part-time status, you need to examine the reasons why. Was it due to inadequate supervision? If so, is there an issue that needs to be raised with your supervisor or the

department's Director of Graduate Studies? Was it because you were not making sufficient progress? If this is the case, then no matter what your status, you are unlikely to finish your PhD without resolving these obstacles to progress first. Do you have other demands on your time, such as caring for children or elderly parents, which you put above everything else? If this is the situation, then you need to consider whether you really want to get the PhD and if you decide that you do, then you may need to put alternative arrangements in place until you finish.

Considering why you were in that position in the first place may help to shed some light on your current problem with your supervisor. It may be that you haven't previously put finishing your PhD to the top of your priority list, even if you thought that you had done. By putting it to the top of your priority list, you should find it easier to say "no" to additional work that your supervisor may be trying to put onto you, and also to additional demands on your time from family and friends.

If you are at the writing up stage (which I hope you are!) then some of your problems may be to do with the way in which you conceptualise "writing up". Too many students assume that writing up necessitates 8 hours per day, in front of the PC, just writing. Unfortunately this can actually be a waste of their time.

The issue isn't to do with how much time we have, but how we actually utilise it when it comes to writing. In fact, setting aside one or two hours per day, at a time when you know you are quite productive, can be sufficient for you to get as much done as you might in an entire day. You may also find that you need to plan your writing a lot more tightly to get it done part-time, but this is actually more of a help than a hindrance.

Don't forget to check out the courses that your university offers in transferable skills. They may offer help with time- and workload-management, or they may be one on writing up your thesis!

Whatever the reasons for the situation, you need to talk things through with your supervisor and ensure that they are fully aware of the difficulties you are experiencing. Think, and make notes, about what you want the outcome of the conversation to be before you go into the meeting – are you looking for a reduction in your workload, or more directive supervision for your PhD? And ensure that you emphasise the importance of a speedy and successful completion of your PhD to your supervisor. Don't forget that they want you to complete too!!

**Best wishes
Dr. Flo**



Run for your life!

- Lucas Richert on beating the PhD blues by pounding the streets

First of all, countless studies in the fields of psychology, neuropharmacology, and behavioural genetics demonstrate that physical exercise, particularly aerobic exercise like running, markedly improves performance on a variety of cognitive and skilled performance tasks. Short and long-term memory is improved through exercise, as is verbal and spatial abilities. Quite simply, running keeps you sharp and quick-witted.

Running can also beat those PhD blues. We all know that completing a PhD is a solitary endeavour. For some students, feelings of loneliness, isolation, alienation, and in some cases, depression soon set in. Duke University researchers found in 1999 that depressed people who exercised had comparable mood improvements to those who took the antidepressants Zoloft or Prozac. After six months, depression returned in only nine percent of the runners, compared with thirty-eight percent of the Zoloft group. As well as a potential treatment, exercise like running can also prevent depression from occurring in the first place.

Exercise like running can prevent depression

LUCAS RICHERT

The city of London offers all sorts of opportunities to try out the “life of the body.” It is reasonable for PhD students to run outdoors all year long – being from Canada I don’t regard the winter as particularly harsh. The Capitol Ring is a glorious jogging path connecting trails throughout London. The Thames river run is truly majestic. There are clubs situated all over the city. And the beauty of the PhD schedule is that we have the ability to go whenever we so desire.

Take Machiavelli’s advice. Just leave your computer to work on the SETI programme, put your trainers on, and slip your research into a desk drawer for an hour.

Clear your head. Put the viva and job prospects on hold. Drop your thoughts about loans, lectures, organizing research, and convening conferences and simply run. All indicators point toward the fact that the PhD research will be enriched by that time off; we can beat the ‘PhD blues’ and stay sharp.

In *The Prince*, Niccolo Machiavelli emphasised the significance of honing both the mind and body. The most worthy individuals in his day were able to run fast, jump high, hunt skillfully, speak sagaciously, and write trenchantly. This was a ‘Renaissance man’.

I’m not proposing that PhD students in London ought to form hunting clubs, or bunk off from the lab in order to master the art of Greek rhetoric (if one is inclined to do so, by all means give it a go). Instead, I propose something much simpler: running.

You think you had a long commute?

- Shweta Sachdeva on experiences as an international PhD student in the UK

It has now been more than a year since I first landed in London from New Delhi. It was my first trip to Europe, and the longest flight I had ever taken. Unfortunately my luggage exceeded the weight limit as I had packed loads of unnecessary things from my favourite pen holder to bulky sweaters! One crucial piece of advice to fellow eccentrics and international students: Don’t worry about bringing along home comforts, London caters to everybody. You can find almost everything -- ginger shampoos, dry chillies, even moon cakes!

If you are from an Asian/African country you had better be prepared for a long wait at the Immigration desk at Heathrow, there is a medical examination including an x-ray to be taken before one is finally allowed out of the airport! Carry all your papers about accommodation, travel insurance, passport, visa etc. altogether as it makes the process easier.

Luckily, I was in touch with another scholarship student whom I met at the Heathrow airport where we were welcomed by student

volunteers from SOAS. It was a warm welcome – important for newcomers like me. Yet how I wished they had got us a big bus, as my friend and I barely squeezed into the famous London cab with all our luggage! It was amazing to swish through the city -- historic old buildings, cobbled roads and pubs at every corner.

The trip was not too long and surprisingly the cab drivers didn’t haggle or take you round and round the same street, as is common in Delhi! I made my first friend at the airport and the next few at the reception in my new halls. We were about 6-8 students all travelling from various corners of the globe, waiting to be let in to our rooms. Since we had time and we needed duvets and pillows, we marched out to the nearest tobacconist to buy some snacks and to get advice on shopping.

It was a boon that the Angel Open Market was just a few minutes walk. There we were, buying duvets, eating fruits and enjoying ourselves. I bought my first phone card to call home, while others enquired about mobiles.



My family was relieved to know that I was fine, and my daughter was amused to hear about the horrors of using a vending machine that doesn’t return change till you kick it! Since the landing, I have enjoyed each day in London, at SOAS and especially at my halls where I have learnt to cook pork ribs, speak a bit of Mandarin, as well as tasting my first sushi, tiramisu and tzatziki! I learnt to tolerate noise at 2am, had a few arguments and made several friends for life. So I am back here for the rest of my research, ready to explore every inch of UK after lovely trips to Oxford, Cambridge, as well as Spain, the Netherlands etc. Studying at the University of London offers many opportunities to take part in conferences in Europe – trips that are fun and intellectually stimulating so do keep updated on university listings and newsletters. All the best for fellow international students, enjoy every bit of your stay and remember to experiment, explore, and have fun!



Diary of a PhD. Widow

- Michelle Cooke shows us life on the other side of the nerdproof fence

It seems that whenever there's housework to do, he "just has to get this concept down on paper" all of a sudden. The hazy days of university when small distractions take priority over work also come back with a vengeance. He can spend hours fixing a light fitting, or compiling Top 5 lists of celebrities you shouldn't fancy but 'probably would'. Mind you, this distraction never stretches to cleaning the oven.

One of the hardest things is judging how much you can ask. Suddenly, an innocuous question like "did you have a nice day love?" becomes a complete minefield - what if your partner has been staring at a screen for 8 hours rather than knocking out three chapters? You have to pick your moments to ask too - if you have ten minutes before all your friends arrive for the 4 course dinner party and you haven't finished your hair, you don't want to get the 30 minute rant about how rubbish the computers are, how the system has crashed and how maybe quitting to become a professional poker player would be a more viable option. You also have to be careful not to mention the thesis gut - "I really really still love you. Honest. I really don't mind that you now look like a fat KD Lang."

Then there's the issue of trying to pretend that you understand what the hell he is talking about. You find yourself saying things like "Oh yes I can totally see how controlling for multiple comparisons can completely screw your results" whilst hoping he hasn't noticed you switched off a while back.

There's also the assumption that you will understand all the acronyms that come tumbling off his tongue, and you start thinking if you hear another one ILYFTM (BTW that's: I'm Leaving You For The Milkman.)

No article would be complete without covering the impact on your sex life. After a day on the PC the only way to jump-start their libido is if a window pops up on your forehead saying

"OMG - FREE XXXXXXXX PORN!!!!!!!!!!"

However the last 2 years and 11 months are nothing compared to this final month when suddenly it all needs to be done and the very real prospect of being unemployed looms. Only a few more weeks now, although don't remind him of that, he has a PhD to write you know. "Yes honey, I'm just putting the kettle on...."



Although more costly to do, getting your thesis printed out at the binders is a lot less hassle and the results will look more professional. You'll need to send it to the binders as a PDF file, which you can make with this excellent freeware programme here: www.pdf995.com

Before your viva get hold of some 'Post-It' page markers and use them to index chapters and sections so you can quickly move around your thesis without having to go back to the index every time.

A new lease of life

Bhaskar Dasgupta on the only thing more difficult than doing a PhD. Doing two.

I did my first PhD in 1995 in hard-core mathematics. Since then I have been working in the City; my colleagues are almost all suit-wearing males in ties and brightly polished shoes, in by 7am and working obscene hours. If casual conversation happens to occur, it revolves around: the markets; who's going to be promoted to God (Managing Director) this year; the prospective bonus; who will get fired; and girls. Usually in that order.

In a moment of madness (9/11), I decided to go back to school and do another PhD on a totally different subject.

This earned me an extremely strange look from my wife and caused my seven-year-old son to exclaim "You are WILLINGLY going back to school?".

For me, the big draw was to be able to sit there with people expected to write, speak and present extremely nebulous, difficult to comprehend topics, without a single mathematical symbol anywhere, where everybody is right and nobody is wrong. For someone accustomed to the world of economics, financial markets, and risk management systems, this was like life on a different planet.

Sitting in the classroom and listening to amazing, wonderful and utterly enchanting topics such as the concept of "imperial over-stretch", naval strategy, United Nations, neo-realism etc.,

made me feel like I had fallen through an inter-dimensional rupture.

I had been getting into a rut at work; it was the same thing over and over again. Going back to studies made me feel alive once more. Age should be no bar to further study; I am two years into my part-time PhD at 38 years of age and I feel interested, have a smile on my face and there's a spring in my step. Best of all, my new classmates were extremely nice despite me being a capitalist, investment banker, and (worst of all), a wearer of double cuffed shirts.

Doing a PhD just, purely and simply for the love of learning is a wonderful journey. Go learn, old man.

Warning: Light at end of tunnel may be oncoming train. - Asma Ahmad on writing up

Writing up is just a case of tidying loose ends, polishing and connecting together. How long can that conceivably take? As it turns out, far longer than you will anticipate. I began by reading all the chapters that I had written at various points in the past three years. This exercise revealed some startling problems. The short version is that my chapters were not nearly as good as I had remembered them! If not done right at the outset, the little things can be time-consuming to rectify.

For instance, the way my chapters were divided internally was inconsistent. Some chapters were divided numerically, while others had sub-headings. I had not used footnotes consistently — sometimes I had grouped all the references in a paragraph together under one footnote, at other times I hadn't. The abbreviations I had used in my references differed from chapter to chapter — sometimes I had written *Journal of Political Thought*, and at other times: *JPT*.

As you uncover further evidence of your own incompetence, you get increasingly frustrated with yourself, especially if your funding is about to run out. Search for avenues of support rather than setting yourself targets that you'll never meet (like finishing off your bibliography in twenty-four hours).

Forewarned is forearmed. The day you want to use the university's computers, is the day the whole system will be down. It's the day you realise that your home printer has been out of ink for ages, and no one ordered any more. It's an ordeal, but ultimately, you will finish. And your thesis will be printed, bound, and submitted — just not in the timeframe you expected.

Then all (!) you have to do is pass your viva. There is only one thing that you need to know about this ordeal: **KNOW YOUR THESIS.** Good luck!



ANALYSIS FOR DUMMIES



Phase I: Proper Hypothesis Testing. Make a falsifiable prediction, test it.

Outcome: Negative findings.



Phase II: 'Exploratory' Analysis. Actively try and replicate other studies in literature. Call negative findings "non-significant trends"

Outcome: Results contradict previous literature.



Phase III: Writing-up stage. Invent covariates, remove 'outliers', transform data. Redo fMRI analysis in PhotoShop.

Outcome: Success!

NEXT ISSUE

Some, or none of the following:

- Launch of LonDoc.org.uk
- A UK-wide forum for postdocs
- Tips for teaching
- 50% of young people in education by 2010: expanding opportunity or dumbing down?
- Top Ten things not to say in your viva
- Will postgraduate courses survive top-up fees?
- Derren Brown on how to control your supervisor's thoughts...

Want to get involved?

LonDoc is looking for submissions from postgraduate research students, postdocs, and academics willing to share their experiences in an informal and informative way. We pay £50 for contributions that we use. Email contributions to p.wicks@iop.kcl.ac.uk. Keep them under 500 words please!



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