

# The realities of a part-time PhD.

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## The realities of a part-time PhD

David S. Smith, a part-time PhD student at the University of Aberdeen, shares his experiences

It is not often that I find myself identifying with a serial killer. Should there be a list of all the potential people I could imagine sharing common ground with, Stephen Griffiths (aka 'The Crossbow Cannibal') would surely be towards the bottom. Yet upon browsing an article about him I was surprised to learn that he is also a part-time PhD student. One of the first things I wondered, as I read this, was if he got the same reaction as me when he told people about his research: the hushed respect when one says they are embarking on a PhD, coupled with that pitied reference to the dilapidated job market when a graduate says they work in customer services. Indeed, the thought of doing a PhD part-time, whilst earning enough money to make a comfortable living, is a prospect so daunting a self-help book has been published on the matter (Bourner & Race, 1990), along with personal accounts (e.g. Caroline Gatrell's – see <http://tinyurl.com/c25zeac3> – and Wood & Payne, 2010).

According to a recent review (Kulej & Park, 2008, cited in Hooley et al., 2009) 32 per cent of full-time PhD students are below the age of 25 while just 5 per cent of part-time students are. This statistic shows that amongst graduates the latter option is highly unpopular, and I am part of a very small minority. Worryingly, this same survey showed that 73 per cent of full-time PhD students achieve their doctorate vs. only 48 per cent of their part-time counterparts. Given this statistic, who would want to be a part-time PhD student? Nevertheless, amidst the biggest UK financial cuts in generations, the amount of graduates considering the self-funded part-time route is likely to increase in the face of slashed departmental budgets. With psychology being such a prominent degree, and so many people wanting to take it to a career level, it seems likely that a substantial number of scholars are going to pursue their science in whatever way they can.

For potential graduates thinking about embarking on a part-time PhD I think there are four key issues to consider. First and foremost is the cost, and on a second closely related point the work/life balance that the primary concern is likely to disrupt. Even researching part-time the fees are not cheap. Part-time fees at my university are £1800 per year, although that may be subject to change. Even at this relatively low cost, that is still £150 each month to fund the course. On top of that, part-time students also have to cover rent (in my case £245 per month) and bills (around £35 per month) from the same pay packet. In addition they will also have council tax to think about (typically around £120 per month); something that full-time students need not worry about. Factor in sustenance, general living costs and a few understandable luxuries, prospective students will be looking for a job that pays a minimum of £850 per month to break even.

While most jobs will pay more than £850 per month, part-time postgraduates seeking employment will presumably be aiming to devote as much time as possible to their research. As such, jobs that require more than four days a week are not going to be suitable. Likewise, nor are jobs that can only offer hours on weekdays, as access to university facilities is not so readily available during weekends. To fulfil this fairly limited job criterion I have taken up a menial job in a mobile phone shop along with teaching and marking work in the department. However, given the demands that these jobs have on my time (around 33 hours per week) inevitably my role as a researcher is not always given priority. Furthermore, in a discipline where the bulk of work has to be done inside the lab, rather than home, time management can become particularly difficult. Typically I will devote around 20 hours per week to my research if possible. This means I have frequently found myself accessing the lab after a nine-hour day at work. Consequently, it is not uncommon for me to stay in the lab as late as midnight getting data, writing it up, or keeping up to date with the literature. For me, this commitment is a necessity so

as to feel like a PhD student that just so happens to be working in a phone shop, rather than the other way round.

This brings me to the third key concern; stress. Given the range of financial and temporal demands experienced by part-time PhD students, it is likely they are going to have problems with stress; a possible explanation for the significant discrepancy in completion rates between part-time and full-time doctoral students. Macan et al. (1990) looked at how perceived control of temporal demands can influence academic performance and stress, finding that students who perceived less control of their time reported lower performance and greater levels of stress. With regard to part-time doctoral drop-out rates, this finding makes intuitive sense. Pursuing an academic career without the funding or resources to do so comfortably is not a light option. In trying to devote their lives equally to both work and research, part-time doctoral students essentially have the worst of both worlds.

An additional finding from the Macan study was that those students with higher perceived temporal demands also reported lower satisfaction with both their work and their life in general. This leads to the fourth core issue. Morale. Given the slow pace and considerable length of a part-time PhD it is not surprising that the majority of students do not bring their thesis to completion. Indeed, as full-time colleagues appear to race ahead in publications, and get financed to tour the world for conferences, it can be hard not to have second thoughts about starting in the first place. I experienced this shortly after my second year when I was working upwards of 30 hours per week (while still being broke), had been rejected for funding three times in six months and seemed to spend my time surrounded by students blessed with departmental backing. Maybe it is unhealthy to consider life by the standards of others... but when struggling considerably more to do an identical job, it can be difficult not to.

Has it been worth it though? It definitely doesn't always feel like it. Every rejection I get for funding, every time I struggle to sell phone insurance or every time I get less than six hours sleep makes me think it's not. But then each significant result, each new finding and the thrill of getting work published reinforces that it is. All of us enrol in postgraduate research for the same thing. The thing that distracts us during the night, makes our friends call us 'geeky' and leads us to read journals as if they were gossip magazines; a sheer passion for our research. I get through this because whether or not a parttime PhD feels like a laborious process, each day is another necessary step towards the only career I could see myself comfortable in. That and at least when I do finally receive that desired prefix of Dr, it's likely to be long before Stephen Griffiths does.

#### Further reading

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