

Clare's diary

'So when are you starting your PhD? You'll never get a senior research job without one.'

1 The question

I had studied for part time Masters over 3 years whilst working in a full time research job. I completed it in 2004 and swore that I would never put myself through the experience again. Part time study had been exceptionally difficult and had consumed more evenings and weekends than I can bear to think about. It had been particularly difficult as I was young and surrounded by friends who always wanted to go out. As I already had a research job I did not consider that undertaking a PhD was going to be of much extra use or benefit to my career. Indeed, I was adamant that my experience that I had gained over the 4 years in the job was equivalent to someone who had completed a doctorate.

But in the Masters viva the external examiner commented on the quality of my work and asked when I was starting my PhD. I was surprised, particularly by the assumption that doing a PhD was the logical next step for someone who had only just about finished a Masters. I explained that I was not considering doctoral study then or in the future. I was exhausted. The sheer thought of more work was far too onerous. I needed to go out, have fun and reclaim my free time.

The examiner was particularly surprised, stating frankly that I would never get a senior research job without a PhD. Who wanted a senior research job anyway?! Over the following months, whilst trying to forget the remark, it continued to haunt me. It was even worse whenever I saw the internal examiner, who would ask in passing, 'so when are you starting your PhD?'

Q1 Discuss the issues that arise for potential doctoral candidates

Q2 How would you advise Clare at this stage?

2 The answer

'So when are you starting your PhD....?'

Fourteen months later I gave in to the thought of doctoral study. I was in the same job and still enjoyed it. I was on a good salary and was accustomed to the lifestyle that I enjoyed. I was used to working on numerous projects at once, juggling my time amongst them. I could not comprehend working full time on one study. There was only one thing for it – to do a PhD PART TIME. I never thought I'd hear myself saying it, but there I was, in a moment of enlightenment, sat on a London bus thinking, I am going to do a PhD! Not only am I going to do a PhD, but I am going to do it PART TIME! And that was it, my decision was made. It felt like a weight had been lifted from me - 'so when are you starting your PhD?' Now! The only issue was then deciding what I was going to study....

Q1 What factors should be taken into account now that Clare is committed to applying for a part-time doctoral programme

Q2 How should she go about deciding what and where to study?

3 Admission

The important thing for me with my PhD was to tie it into my area of work (drug and alcohol addiction) as much as possible. This way I knew that I would be able to spend some work time on the study and I would also have the full support and backing of my manager, an expert in the field.

It took a while to decide what the study would be, toying with various ideas. I had the support of my Masters supervisor, who had also been keen on me embarking on a PhD. He was an expert on my chosen research methods, rather than being an expert in the field and was based in the Sociology Department. After numerous discussions between us all I put a rather hasty proposal together in order to make the application deadline for entry that year. I somehow felt that I had already wasted enough time and I just had to get on with it and get started, before I changed my mind. I decided to study what happened to people's drug and alcohol addiction when they go to prison.

I was introduced to the second PhD supervisor from the same department in a very strange way. I had thought I was meeting them to see if I liked them and if they were going to be a suitable supervisor, but in fact the opposite was the case. I was heavily cross-examined and questioned on my hastily put together proposal and at times really felt quite belittled by their comments and apparent disregard for my work. I left the room almost in tears, but managed to wait until I had got home to vent my upset. Was all this stress really worth it?

Q1 Discuss Clare's choice of topic and supervisor(s)

Q2 What makes a good admissions procedure?

4 Induction

I was surprised that, after the viva-like experience when meeting the second supervisor, the department gave me the go ahead and approved my proposal for research study. I chose the Sociology Department due to my existing relationship with my Masters supervisor. However, I did question this as I did not have a sociology background and I was not one hundred per cent convinced of the sociological nature of the work.

I registered (and paid for) the PhD in November 2005 and work began straight away. I was new to PhD study and what it entailed. However, having registered late I also had missed a number of the training courses aimed at new PhD students. Oh well, who needs those anyway? Surely attending training sessions on time management and project management and the like is a waste of time. After all, I had been working in research for nearly 5 years and had organised and managed numerous projects. I was overwhelmed by my own eagerness to get on and start my PhD. I just wanted to get on and do it.

Q1 Comment on Clare's departmental location and induction

Q2 What part should training courses play in her PhD?

5 Year one

So I started. In my initial meetings with my supervisors we discussed that I wanted to try and complete the PhD as quickly as possible. Whilst the University has some regulations on this, I wanted to work on it whilst I was at my most motivated and whilst I was allowed to spend a day each week of work time on the study. The other motivation behind trying to complete the study in under 7 years was that of finance – as a self funding part time student, any time saved has a real cost benefit, as the fees were in the region of £1500 a year.

The first year went well. Particular highs were being awarded a bursary for half of the fees, and also the award of a small fieldwork grant. I also applied and I was granted ethical approval for the study towards the end of the year I started the fieldwork.

As the year went on I struggled with some aspects of studying part time. Just exactly when does part time mean you work? It was a challenge to fit the work around my paid employment and my social life. I also struggled in not really being an active or recognised member of my department, and so did not have a peer group who I could discuss things with or relate to. In fact, I felt particularly isolated and my non academic friends did not quite understand what I was doing.

I found it very easy during these low periods to lose motivation. If it wasn't for the regular meetings with my supervisors, and their continued interest and belief, I'm certain that I would've given up. Other low points of the first year included being unsuccessful in a funding application and the main supervisor taking 6 months sabbatical towards the end of the first year. It had been a tough year, and this just capped it all, especially as he left for sabbatical at the same time as I started my fieldwork (he was the main supervisor because he was an expert in the methods). Great! However, I was surprised how much I had already got through, I was even more surprised that I was still doing it, was determined to not let this affect me or my work any more than it had to. So I gave myself a few weeks off before registering for my second year.

Q1 Discuss Clare's first year and any special issues that have arisen

Q2 Have you any suggestions as to how she should prepare for her second year?

6 Year Two

The second year started strangely. Firstly, there was the issue with my lead supervisor having now gone on 6 months sabbatical. Then I discovered that I did not appear as a registered PhD student in the departmental information or on the departmental website. I couldn't help wondering if this was because I was studying part time, with little departmental contact.

Whatever the reason, coupled with the first supervisor's sabbatical, it was a real blow to my confidence and subsequent motivation. I felt like I did not exist, and felt particularly cheated as I was paying myself through the studies with little to show for it apart from an increasing stress level! My second supervisor (the one who was still there) was particularly unhappy about all of this and spoke to administrative and academic staff. They raised it at the next departmental meeting to check what had happened and to ensure it would not be so poorly managed in the future. It appeared that 'an administrative' error had occurred, which had gone unnoticed as I was not a regular face in the Department. The 'oversight' was later amended.

I also opened up to my supervisor and discussed how I felt as a result of the lead supervisor going on sabbatical. Whilst they said that they were happy with my work and the progress I had made, they understood my concerns. We therefore arranged to meet more regularly whilst the lead supervisor was away and place extra focus on the areas that the lead supervisor would've led on, so as not to neglect them.

These issues cleared up, I began focusing on the work again (rather than worrying about what was happening and if it was worth continuing) and things improved. I had made a good start with a literature review and so began concentrating on the fieldwork stage. Fieldwork progressed well during the few months, and the regular meetings with my second supervisor were a great support. I had expected to have email contact with my lead supervisor, although this did not really take off, so I gave up and stuck to liaising closely with my other supervisor.

I started realizing quite what undertaking a part time PhD whilst working full time actually entailed. My PhD time was being spent reading, writing, conducting fieldwork, applying for grants and general admin. This was already exceeding the day a week that my work had allowed. It began necessary to spend more of what was my 'free time' to work on the PhD and began spending evenings and weekends reading and writing.

It felt like I had begun to 'own' the work much more and take more responsibility for what I was doing. The PhD became more of a feature of conversations with friends and family than it had been in the first year, probably as both they and I realised the scale of the undertaking. I also felt more supported during the second year as a former work colleague started a full time PhD. Whilst they were registered in a different department, they were at the same University. It was great to have someone to talk to who was going through the PhD process too and discuss ideas and issues.

Like the first year, there were highs and lows. The major highs were the fact that it really felt that I was *doing* a PhD, maybe because the fieldwork had started, but also linked to my greater ownership of it. However, it was still tough, particularly financially as a couple of funding applications that I had spent a lot of time on were unsuccessful. I was awarded a further small amount of money towards more fieldwork costs, so at least this went some way to helping with the indirect costs.

Q1 Identify the issues that are now facing Clare and discuss how they could have been handled

Q2 Have you any suggestions for her at this stage?

7 Supervision

As the second year progressed, talk of the upgrade began to dominate supervision meetings (as I had to upgrade in between 18 and 24 months through the study). I felt quite daunted by this, as knew that this would determine my fate in terms of whether my studies would continue. Preparing the report for the upgrade meeting began to control my time, both in work and at home. Any time that I could spare I would be reading, writing and preparing the main report and appendices in time for the summer upgrade.

The biggest high of the second year came when I found out that I had been selected for interview for a prestigious scholarship from a charitable organization. In truth, I considered the application that I had submitted months before as a real long shot, so much so that I had actually forgotten about it. I was therefore more than surprised to have been given an interview. I was ecstatic to find out a month later that I had been successful and was awarded a scholarship. This meant so many things. I felt the financial weight of self funding the studies lift from my shoulders. Further, knowing that others believed what I was doing was worthy enough of such an award gave my confidence and motivation a real boost. I also felt that I was somehow flying the flag for part time students. It was a great feeling, particularly after having experienced some of the low points earlier in the year.

In and amongst working and preparing for the upgrade meeting my lead supervisor announced in April plans for a second period of study leave lasting four months over the summer and into the autumn term. In my opinion, this had already happened once too many times before. This was not welcome news and really made me question the commitment of the lead supervisor to me and my studies.

To my surprise, my relationship with my second supervisor had really developed over the course of the doctoral work. In fact, my relationship the second supervisor was now far better than the relationship that I had with my lead supervisor. I opened up to both supervisors to allay my concerns regarding the second period of study leave. I questioned the departmental responsibility and what was going to be done in terms of supervision arrangements whilst the lead supervisor was away. I felt well within my rights when I suggested a stand in supervisor.

The lead supervisor was more than surprised. I could tell that he felt somewhat shocked by this, although it was apparent that he didn't see what was wrong in his imminent departure. He assured me that it would be different from the last time when he was on sabbatical - promising regular email contact and also telephone calls. I still felt uneasy about the situation and my second supervisor knew this. We decided to see what happened, but I was not holding my breath.

Q1 Discuss the arrangements for Clare's supervision. What alternatives could have been considered?

Q2 Have you any comment on her decision?

8 Conference attendance

During the year I also presented the progress of my work at two postgraduate conferences, one in my own department. Whilst used to giving research presentations I was rather concerned about nominating myself to give a presentation – as it would be the first time that I had spoken to an audience about my doctoral work. I was anxious that other postgraduates would see flaws in my work or question what I was doing. However, I knew that there could be a lot of benefits of doing this, and would only prove to benefit my research in the long run – so I thought I would give it a go.

Whilst my supervisors were pleased when I told them that I had decided to do the presentations and were supportive, neither of them attended either of the presentation sessions – so I really was left to fend for myself. Luckily however, I found both experiences particularly useful – there were a few interesting questions asked and the process of writing and delivering a presentation helped crystallize some of my ideas. Importantly, as nobody hounded me about the work or questioned the quality of it, the presentations actually gave me more confidence in what I was doing. I even had some follow up emails from a newly registered doctoral student working in a similar area but at a different university. We have since met each other on numerous occasions and kept in touch over email, asking questions, helping out with obtaining articles, but most importantly, providing each other with mutual support. It made me realize how important it is to share experiences with other PhD students and how much of my time up to then had been devoid of peer support, which I believe was largely due to my part time status.

Work for the upgrade has continued into the summer, although the date for it was pushed back to mid September due to the lead supervisor being away up until then.

As the upgrade report progressed I had some slight disagreements with my supervisors who both wanted it to be heavily based on Sociological theory. I found this difficult and challenging given my lack of Sociological knowledge and training. I again began to question my choice of Department and wondered if I had been foolish to choose this Department primarily based on my relationship with my Masters supervisor, a relationship that I had increasingly begun to question.

The upgrade report went from draft to draft and grew in size. By July, it was already lengthier than my Masters dissertation. This acted as another reminder of how much work I had already done on the PhD, but also of the amount of work that was still to do, and of the scale of the undertaking of doing a PhD.

Q1 Comment on Clare's decision to present her work at conferences

Q2 What makes an effective upgrade procedure?

9 The upgrade

The upgrade proved difficult to organize as finding a time that all 5 of us could make was impossible. September had been chosen for the upgrade as the lead supervisor was in the country, albeit for a week, prior to taking yet another 3 months of study leave. Nevertheless, it was still impossible to find a date that all parties could make during that week. Only the second supervisor was therefore present at the upgrade.

The upgrade meeting itself went well. Whilst I was nervous, especially as I did not know the postgraduate tutor or the internal examiner, I found myself actually enjoying talking about my work and answering their questions about it. The outcome was positive, with good feedback from the panel and I was upgraded from my provisional status. I was even told that I was one of the strongest PhD students in the department! I found this particularly surprising and somewhat ironic, given the fact that I had been omitted from the departmental information earlier in the year. I was also allowed me to discuss with the panel any concerns that I had.

I raised two. Firstly, about the lack of active involvement and apparent concern from the lead supervisor. This was linked to the second concern – which was how the Department had (not) responded to the lead supervisor taking so much study leave and more generally how they had dealt with me as a part time student. The postgraduate tutor took the concerns seriously and suggestions were made to help me integrate in the department – adding me to mailing lists and study groups. We decided that the second supervisor could formally become the lead supervisor and the possibility of a stand in supervisor with the methods expertise would be investigated.

I couldn't help feeling that I had been pushed from pillar to post by the department on numerous occasions, but now felt like they were starting to take my concerns more seriously. About time!

Q1 Comment on the upgrade procedure

Q2 How should the make up of supervisory teams be reviewed?

10 Year Three

I felt relieved following the upgrade experience and was particularly motivated to continue with the work knowing that I was no longer classed as a provisional student, but was more formally recognised as a PhD student. Towards the start of the year I also received the first scholarship cheque, which felt good and made the registration process less painful than the previous two years. Progress with the work continued for the first few months and everything seemed to be going smoothly....

However, as we know no path to a PhD ever seems to run smoothly and one day I found myself in yet another dilemma needing to contact John Wakeford for advice. Perhaps I should've seen it coming, but I hadn't and nothing really had prepared me for the news which came as a lot of a shock. My original lead supervisor (still on sabbatical) emailed me to tell me that he was leaving the University. Not only was he leaving the University, but he was moving country – to a different continent and thus could no longer continue with my supervision. The first email for months and that was what he had to say!! Great, this really was the icing on the cake! Even though he was the lead supervisor, I didn't feel that I had missed out by not having him about as he had been crap and spent more time out of the country on sabbatical. Whilst he'd been away there was little or no communication. I had been unhappy with his lack of input or apparent concern, and to me, this just proved it.

I phoned the second supervisor who was equally as shocked at the news. However, they didn't seem to think that the lead supervisor leaving was a problem and couldn't really understand why I was so bothered about it as we had effectively been working without him anyway. I soon came round to thinking that the lead supervisor leaving could actually be beneficial as both John Wakeford and the second supervisor (now promoted to be my lead supervisor) assured me that it was the responsibility of the department to provide me with suitably qualified supervision. So in that respect, it wasn't my problem. I knew that it would be both unfortunate and unlikely that I would end up with another supervisor who wasn't in the country but would benefit from a new supervisor who was more keen, concerned and supportive.

I now wondered how to go about getting another second supervisor and who to get. My supervisor suggested a couple of people in the department with an interest in my methods. However, as no one in the department was knowledgeable in the area that I am researching (other than slight knowledge by the existing supervisor), I considered looking elsewhere within the University to see if there was anyone else suitable.

Whilst this initially caused a bit of a stir, (I think because of the obvious financial implications for the department) I did identify three academics within the university who are knowledgeable in the area and who specialise in my methods. But, following a departmental meeting with the postgraduate tutor, it was agreed that my replacement supervisor should come from my current department so as to keep the sociological focus of the work. However, it was agreed that the work could benefit from informal input from someone with

more specialist knowledge in the area and thus the other academics would be approached to gauge their interest in acting as a third, yet more informal, supervisor.

Whilst the change in supervision arrangements took some time to resolve, progress with the research continued. I completed my fieldwork which felt like a real achievement and gave me a boost during periods of frustration or uncertainty. I was half way up the PhD mountain and I was determined to carry on to the top. If anything, all the setbacks and the problems that I had experienced did not deter me from continuing with the doctorate. Rather, they inspired me to continue on the journey and I became even more determined to succeed and complete it.

As if that wasn't enough, a further significant event occurred during the third year of the part time study – I got a new job. And not just any new job – a senior research job!! I couldn't believe it – I got a senior research job without having completed the PhD. I wished that I could tell the external examiner from my Masters viva! Admittedly, the new position was not within academia, but nevertheless the opportunity was fantastic.

I knew I had to take it, despite it meaning leaving a job that I enjoyed and that I had been in for seven years. Not only that, it meant leaving a job and an employer who was very supportive towards the PhD and moving somewhere where working towards and having a PhD was much less important. It meant moving cities, relocating and leaving friends.....but I knew that it brought many benefits and would professionally be an important career move. I knew that in accepting the job, I would have much less 'work' time to spend on the PhD and my goal of completing it earlier than the stipulated 5 years would be pushed without devoting yet more of my 'free' time to the studies. However I also knew that that was a sacrifice that I had to take.

Q1 Comment on the reluctance of Clare's Department to agree to using a supervisor from another department

Q2 What effect do team members predict Clare's move to her new job will have on her progress?

Team task

On the acetate provided suggest guidelines for

- 1. Candidates**
- 2. Supervisors**
- 3. Departments/schools/institutions**

engaged in part-time postgraduate research degree programmes

