

Jan's crisis
How do I finish my PhD in 8 months?

Episode 1

March 2007

Dear Professor Wakeford

Thank you so much for the seminar day; it certainly opened my eyes and I listened attentively to every word you said, it is a pity I didn't get a chance to attend the entire day.

As requested I'm emailing my experience at this University. I'm currently in my last year (3rd year) with 8 months to go. My work is not going to be great, because the nature of the PhD is very linear, namely if a lab experiment doesn't work, I cannot go on to do further experiments until the original problem is fixed. I am a Microbiology PhD student, but the PhD feels very much like a Chemical biology PhD

I want to tell you a little bit about my background. I started my career as a lab technician at Middlemarch University helping Medical, Dental and PhD students. After 9 years of working at Middlemarch I was getting into a rut and felt I wanted to do a project of my own and learn different lab techniques instead of doing the same repetitive menial work so I contacted the staff development office who arranged for me to do a part time day release course, namely a BTEC first certificate in science, to which the university paid for. I did really well and the officer suggested that I do the BTEC ONC and HNC in science, this sparked my interest in studying and I left to complete a degree in Applied Biology at the University of Barchester. I then took a year out from studying and then came here to complete an MSc in Applied Biology (part time -2 years), subsequently I was very lucky to get a full time studentship to complete a PhD and here I am in my last year.

My current problem is that in the first year of my PhD, my second supervisor who is a Molecular biologist left the department for another job, this supervisor was crucial to my PhD studies, because he knew the laboratory techniques required for my project. My first supervisor is an Organic chemist and although he has some knowledge of biological processes, his specialism is chemistry. The departing of my second supervisor was a major blow. I also found out that the two supervisors were applying for a grant for a post doc, most of the application was written by the Molecular biology second supervisor - fortunately the grant was granted by BBSRC and interviews took place to which the post doc of my second supervisor was given the post despite him not having worked on a similar project, whereas the other 4 female candidates were working on projects similar to mine. I was disappointed; however the choice was not mine.

The reason my supervisor chose the current post doc was because he wanted me to work closely with him. I wasn't too happy about that because I thought that the supervisors role was to guide me and teach me techniques and that the post had his own project and would 'occasionally' help me - unfortunately the post doc and I fell out in a big way due to racial issues and I find it very hard to approach him for help.

My supervisor wanted to have weekly meetings with the post doc and I - similar to a mini seminar I didn't enjoy the meetings because my presentations was ripped by both of them, I understand constructive criticism is part of the preparation for the wide world of academia, but I felt their comments were very personal bordering on sexism and I used to absolutely dread going to the seminars I was humiliated, because I have a problem with maths - I felt there was an old boys network going on.

I feel I wasted my first year of my PhD because my supervisor didn't quite know how to do certain lab techniques, he told me he went to Cambridge (his old laboratory) to work along people working in the field, but had to cut short the trip because of work commitments at the University. I see my fellow PhD colleagues with their supervisor who literally stands with the student and goes through the techniques with them. I am really jealous, because I keep hearing from my supervisor that he must get back into the lab MORE, but he seems to be bogged down with administrative work, I feel he is relying on the post doc take over my training, but the atmosphere with post doc isn't that great.

I am very scared that I will not complete this PhD in 8 months (my funding runs out in November 2007) and I so badly want to finish before it is too late. My supervisor is currently suffering from clinical depression which was finally diagnosed two months ago. I personally knew something wasn't going right with him, because he would go around the Uni building looking sullen, he would sit in the dark in his office, he would snap at me for no apparent reason and then apologize for being grumpy- so after two and half years I had to put up with his personal depression and tread lightly with him.

Last week was the worse week of my life everything went wrong for me personally and I stayed at home, because I couldn't cope with a car crash I had, health problems, sleepless nights, and my ever increasing anxiety. My anxiety stems from not being upgraded from my MPhil to PhD status and I'm in my last 8 months. I've heard nothing from the PhD committee telling me to submit an upgrade report. The last I heard was that I was supposed to do this in December 2006, but I've heard nothing since. I questioned my supervisor and he said the upgrade is just a "formality"- well I don't think this is the case, what I think is happening is that I probably have not got enough results to report for an upgrade or secondly the work is not good enough for an upgrade- either way I would like to know.

My other concern regarding my supervisor are that I found a report on another PhD student he had who had submitted his PhD thesis but who was asked to rewrite large portions of the thesis before he could have his viva- the report was very damning and I got very worried, because the thesis was very Chemistry based which is my supervisors specialism, so if the examiner thought the thesis was unacceptable in my supervisor field of knowledge, what is going to happen to my research project.

Another group member who was female did not complete her PhD because she felt she was not being properly supervised and I heard she wrote a crushing email to my supervisor explaining her anger on his lack of supervision.

I am also upset by my supervisors' lack of care. He didn't even phone me to ask why I wasn't in all week. Talking to him today I asked whether he was concerned and he said he was really busy and he forgot to enquire- I was not happy about this, he has my mobile number and personal email; it would not have taken him a few minutes to ask whether I was OK, but he just didn't bother. I feel as if he doesn't care about the project. He never asks for my project results I always have to initiate the meeting, this I find very weird, because if he is not interested in my lab results how do I move forward with the project.

In my second year progress report the PhD committee were concerned that the project was difficult to achieve within the 3 years and I should be given a secondary project to supplement the work otherwise I would have to show at the end of the 3 years. I'm glad that the committee had recognized the problem as I know I would have been in trouble- the only problem with the secondary project is that it is very chemistry based and my chemistry is limited. My supervisor gave some books on organic chemistry, but I'm struggling to understand the chemistry concepts, because you need to have at a least an A level background of chemistry to get to the level of the book which is used by Chemistry undergraduates. I'm not making excuses and I take my own self learning very seriously, but to learn 3 years of Chemistry in 6 months is a little beyond me as well as having to read other research papers on top of reading the Chemistry handbooks

I'm currently having counseling at the College

Because I left the supervisory day early I would like to know how I can complete my PhD before my funds run. I do not blame my situation completely on my supervisors, but I wish to take some responsibility to completing this project.

I would really appreciate some feedback

Yours sincerely

Jan

Q1 Discuss the issues that have arisen so far

Q2 List the main points you would make in your reply to Jan

Episode 2

March 2007

I just wanted to say thank you for the practical advice, it was exactly what I needed.

At the same time I've been feeling really guilty, because at the back of mind or it is my paranoia is kicking in, my supervisor has been very helpful this week. I mentioned to him that I attended the supervision day, but didn't discuss the contents of the seminar. I think he may have attended a similar seminar before or might be wrong.

I think supervision is extremely important for example. My supervisor had emailed me instructions for an experiment, but I didn't quite understand what he wanted me to do. I emailed him back for a little clarification on the procedure, but still didn't understand what he wanted me to do.

So it was very fortunate that he was in the laboratory with me this Saturday guiding me on what I needed to do as I would have got the experiment wrong and lose valuable time repeating the investigation. So two things were happening here the first being miscommunication about lab procedures with my supervisor and secondly I was really grateful that he was there in lab with me, because I know personally as science researcher I can be shown a technique only once and I can pick it up very quickly.

I will contact you in two weeks to report back on how things are going.

Once again thank you for taking time to read my email and the advice given.

Regards

Jan

Q1 List the major issues now facing Jan, and

Q2 Suggest what part the supervisor should play at this stage

Episode 3

August 2007

Hello Dr Wakeford

Sorry I have not contacted you sooner, but I am piled up with work at the moment.

Here is the situation so far. My supervision meeting with my supervisor went well and I set myself a deadline of September to complete all the experimental work, but the reality is that I won't make the deadline.

I've put plan B into place as I feel I will need another 6 months to a year to complete the project including the write up. My project has dramatically changed from a Molecular biology degree to a Chemistry/ Biochemistry PhD. I have absolute no background in Chemistry, so my supervisor is trying to get me up to scratch and I'm finding it a struggle to understand Chemistry. My supervisor gets a little impatient with me, for instance he tells me to work out a chemistry problem and I don't know to start - he assumes the concepts are easy. I've tried to help myself by reading as many Chemistry books as possible, but what I would like him to do is work through a chemistry problem from start to finish because the way I learn is for somebody to show me just once how to work through a problem or question and I can pick up the concept very quickly, but I feel as if I've been thrown into the deep end.

My PhD studentship finishes in November 2007, so my back up plan is work part time 4 days a week at Waitrose and use the rest of the week at Uni. I feel because of the change in the PhD proposal my project has set me back a year or two. I intend to take classes at Uni to catch up with any gaps might have

I don't want to struggle with this PhD but I do regret not doing a straight Biology/Microbiology PhD which is my background. I feel little cheated by the whole PhD process.

Yes do a PhD is lonely work, but I will get there.

I would appreciate any feedback from you.

Regards

Jan

Team task 1

On the acetate provided list suggestions for improving the success rate of postgraduate research students in her department



John's response to Jan (August 2007)

Dear Jan,

Very many thanks for bringing me up to date. I am glad to hear that you are making progress.

I can quite see that there is still much to do and understand that you would like to have another year to complete the thesis. However, from discussing this with other PhD candidates, I get the clear impression that having such a distant deadline combined with the need to spend much of that in full-time, tiring work, makes the completion of the doctorate increasingly difficult particularly as it competes with domestic, family and other obligations. So I would like to put another scenario to you, where you will work like a journalist with a firm deadline, who has to tailor what research is done to meeting it:

1. Clarify in your own mind the number of weeks you can have to devote yourself full-time to the doctorate. E.g. 30th November.. 14 weeks.
2. This is the deadline by which time you will have submitted the final draft of the thesis to your supervisor. It will probably be incomplete in many respects, but all practical work will have been done and where there are gaps you will put in the text 'reference to be followed up', etc
3. Communicate this plan to your supervisor/s, asking them to agree to work with this plan and set aside appropriate times for reading chapters etc, and giving feedback, although minor revisions may be left until after November. Make the point that most PhDs who leave ft registration with such a draft never complete...
4. Divide the tasks needed to be completed for this plan to work and put on a work plan 'Jan's Thesis' and pass to everyone who might otherwise interrupt it.
5. Clarify your daily routine etc with all parties.

You will not be surprised by this suggestion, but in my view it is the most likely way of getting yourself and your supervisor organized so that you get your PhD.

As a small contribution I would like to pay you £50 for the right to add your problem to my case study file. I attach my draft, which is effectively an anonymised version of your emails.

Let me know what you think, but don't waste more than 5 mins on it...

Best
John

Team task 2

Discuss John's response and alternative suggestions team members would have made

Epilogue

Correspondence August 2008

Dear Professor Wakeford

It's been a while since I talked to you and I just thought you would appreciate an update.

Things haven't been too great with me and the PhD, as I had previously wrote to you, I'd been struggling in completing the PhD on time because the nature of the research was beyond my field whereby it had a heavy chemistry content and I'm a Molecular/Microbiologist.

Two weeks ago I talked to one of my lecturers who is on the PhD committee explaining to him that after a long think I wanted to write up for an MPhil and re-register as a part time PhD within his research group, as I had previously worked with him on an exciting microbiology topic.

He suggested that I complete the MPhil as closure so that I wouldn't leave Uni with nothing and I was happy with this, I then went to see my supervisor and explained to him that I was writing up for an MPhil, his initial reaction was disappointment, as I had previously told him that I didn't want to leave with this lower degree at the same time I was writing up my transfer report when in reality I should have submitted a PhD thesis and be waiting for a viva by now, my supervisor went on to insult by asking me whether he should persuade me to stay on and finish the PhD. I couldn't believe he asked me this, it was obvious that he didn't give a damn about whether finished or not, throughout whole writing up of the transfer report, he never once phoned or emailed me to see how I was getting on .

When I emailed the partial completed Transfer to him for feedback, it took me weeks to get anything from him and I constantly had to email him to get some sort of feedback .

I made an appointment to see the Head of Department that I was unhappy with the project and he said that he would talk to my supervisor, but I haven't heard anything since I had the conversation with him, in fact nobody seems to be talking to me about anything, I've had no correspondence from the PhD research committee, my supervisor or the Head of Department. Nobody is talking to me.

As a last resort I went to talk to the Registrar about the whole situation as to why I was unhappy with my research project and that I wanted my project to have more Microbiological slant. The Registrar just gave a booklet on the complaints procedure and told me that I should talk to the research committee head. I thought the advice was useless because I had already talked to the Research

Programmes head about my situation and I've heard nothing. It's as if they swept the whole situation under the carpet and hoped that I go away quietly.

I read the complaints procedure and yes I do have cause to make a complaint, namely a lack of duty of care by supervisor. The student union rep suggested that I put in a formal complaint, but I was too scared, as I thought I would rock the boat, but yesterday I talked to a fellow PhD student who is also a qualified barrister and he suggested at this point that I should take legal advice and get a solicitor. I'm in the process of doing this, as I feel totally let down by the Committee, my supervisor and the department in general.

I would like to know from you whether I'm doing the right thing

Thanks

Jan

Dear Jan,

Thanks. I was wondering what had happened since we last communicated last August.

I assume that your plan of that time to complete in 8 months was ineffective? have you analyzed why? this should help in making your next decision.

Then you should be clear about your ultimate objective and the possible avenues open to you to achieve it. You need to be clear about this before making a formal complaint.

Let me know the outcome of these thoughts and we'll go from there.

Best

John

Dear Professor Wakeford

I've decided I will not take legal action because, I know rocking the boat within the department will be to my own detriment. I just felt totally unmotivated by the research project. My supervisor wanted to complete a PhD project which was not of my own making or interest when in fact I had an opportunity by another academic within the department to make the project more relevant to my qualifications and interests.

I felt that my supervisor totally ignored my wishes and to this day he doesn't talk or email me. I felt that I had to write up as a MPhil as I'd lost totally interest in the subject I felt the who research project was an extension of my supervisors own PhD.

I plan to write up as quickly as possible and re-register as a part time PhD student at Uni working with another Microbiology research group. The academic lecturer willing to take me on is happy with this arrangement and I need closure from this unhappy episode.

In essence I feel I been cheated by the whole PhD process. It has drained me psychologically and I'm a little resentful that I have to start from scratch, but at the same time relieved that I will be studying a subject that truly does interest me.

I would like to know from you whether I've made the right decision.

Thanks

Jan

Dear Jan,

Fine. I'm still unclear about your long term objective though, and without this, it is difficult to give a view on what is the right course of action. But from what you say, you have made a decision. So, perhaps you should now apply and get a formal offer of a place on the new PhD before doing anything else, meanwhile writing up your current research for submission as an MPhil or upgrade. I assume you can cope with this financially?

best
John

Dear Professor Wakeford

Thank you for your quick reply. Well at 36 years my long term objective was to gain the PhD and do a post doc in a similar area, but the objective has now definitely changed, because I will be 40+ before I finish a part time PhD.

Tell me if I'm wrong, but are you saying I should cut my losses and just do the MPhil and get a career or should I do the part time PhD? I feel so shamed because all of my friends and ex colleagues expected me to graduate with a doctorate this year.

I don't know what to do. I really need some advice.

Thanks

Jan

Dear Jenny,

Completing the MPhil, making any corrections, then pursuing a new doctorate part-time is an extensive investment in time and resources. We are probably talking about 8 years, and possibly longer, before you have the qualifications to apply for a post-doc which itself is a temporary appointment. During that time supervisors may move, your circumstances change etc. The national figure is that only 30% of those studying for a PhD part-time have that PhD 7 years later.... All I am thinking is that this is a monumental commitment with an uncertain outcome. So be sure that this is how you want to spend your time.

Best
John

Jan's response:

Thank you. I needed to hear this. I'm just disappointed that my supervisor did not give me a chance to fulfill my dream of getting a PhD in an area that I enjoy.

Yes academia is full of politics and I feel at this point I will have to walk away from further study.

I just want say thank you so much for your support and advice

Jan

Team task 3

On the acetate provided list the main lessons for

- **research students**
- **supervisors, and**
- **departments**

from your discussion of this and similar cases.
