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Doctoral Times.

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Doctoral Student Journey
**Experiences &
Challenges**

Part I

The Newsletter for
Doctoral Researchers

Editorial team

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**A big THANK YOU to everyone who contributed
to this edition**

Welcome

Welcome to the latest edition of the Doctoral Times

The doctoral experience can differ from student to student and we all face our own personal challenges along the way. This issue will offer an insight into the doctoral journey, highlighting some of the key challenges students face and overcome along the way. Providing you with a range of top tips and advice from current students and support services to help you succeed.

Whether you're studying part time, full time, or juggling family life or work commitments alongside your PhD, we hope this issue will provide some useful information to help make your PhD experience a positive one.

We would like to say a big THANK YOU to everyone who has taken the time to contribute and share their experiences with us, we couldn't have done this without you!

If you are interested in writing an article for the next edition of the Doctoral Times, then we would love to hear from you: doctoraltimes@sheffield.ac.uk.

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Surviving the first six months of a PhD

Beth Eyre, PhD student, Department of Psychology, shares her experience as a new PhD student

If you're like me you've wanted to complete a PhD for a long time, and while it's exciting to begin this new phase of your life, it can be somewhat daunting. So here I've compiled some practical tips that helped me navigate the first few months of PhD life.

1 Create a routine and stick to it

After finishing my MSc and going into my PhD one of the things I found difficult was the lack of structure, such as there being no set classes to attend. While this was unusual at first, you can make this work to your advantage and make your PhD fit around your life. So, I treat my PhD as if it's a job, usually working between 8am-4pm. Choose what works for you, but try and get a routine, it'll make you more productive.

2 It's normal to feel like you know nothing

A PhD can be overwhelming, especially at the start. You may have moved to a new city or you might be studying a new subject. At some point, whether in the first week or first few months it will probably dawn on you how little you know and how much you have to learn. A PhD is a learning process: you're not supposed to be an expert immediately. However, to help with this feeling read some of the key literature early on as it will make it easier for you to get involved in lab conversations, improving your confidence. Give yourself a goal of how many academic papers to read a week, this way you know you'll be continually learning.



3 Plan, plan, plan

A PhD is a marathon not a sprint. If you don't plan from the beginning, it'll make the next three years difficult. In the first month decide on a referencing system you'll use. Ensure you familiarise yourself with it, saving you time when it comes to writing. Make a Gantt chart, with your plans for the next three to four years. Having a visual representation will ease the anxiety of a huge project. Also, make a study plan early on with clear goals, it's likely that the plan will change so keep it flexible, but having one will keep you focused. Having goals will also make you feel like you're continually achieving things, keeping you motivated.

4 We are all unique and so are our PhDs

Everyone's PhD journey will be different. We all come to a PhD with different experiences and beliefs. Do not compare yourself or your progress to others. It's *your* journey.

5 Get involved

A PhD can sometimes be isolating, so find like-minded people and develop a support network - it's important to share your experiences, so get involved in societies, or academic online communities. Your first six months will probably be the least busy of your whole PhD, so take advantage of this. It's never too early to take part in public engagement or widening participation activities. Also, create a Twitter account. There is a huge academic community online who have been supportive when I've had questions and this is an easy way to network with people.

6 Write from the get go

I've always doubted my writing ability (we can often be overly critical of our own writing). The only way to stop being worried about writing is to actually write. Whether you begin writing a blog or your literature review, practise makes perfect. Start your literature review as early as possible, this means you'll not have to rush to complete it for your confirmation review.

7 Communication is key

It's important to get that supervisor relationship just right. Meet with them early on to discuss both of your expectations. Continue to have honest, open conversations with them. If you don't understand something, tell them. They're there to help train you, they want you to succeed. Get this relationship right from the beginning and it'll make the rest of your journey much easier.



8 Work/Life balance

We don't live to work: we work to live and a PhD is no different. Don't let your research encroach on your downtime. Try not to work in the evenings or at weekends, keep that time for you and your hobbies. Never let your research take away your precious sleep time, sleep is important for consolidating learning and memory.

9 Enjoy it!

Remember, it's a huge achievement to get here so don't forget to enjoy the experience!



Don't be afraid

Maria Hussain, PhD student, Department of English Language and Linguistics

You're a pioneer

Your colleagues seem bright eyed and bushy tailed, recalling recent conversations about their PhD projects with parents, colleagues, or friends. They turn to you and ask you about yours; your hearts immediately sinks. You know what you plan to do, but perhaps your friends and parents don't really understand what or why you would be interested in analysing assignment feedback received by international students or why on earth you find it interesting and want to spend the next four to five years (or more) pursuing a part-time PhD. You feel like a 'fish out of water', completely out of your depth, an impostor.

As the first in my family to go to university, complete a Master's degree, and pursue a career in academia as a Muslim Asian woman, I understand that you may be feeling alone, perhaps isolated, and even torn between two worlds. However, you will find your tribe of kindred spirits that are also on the same journey as you. Take some risks, be proactive and find colleagues that are at a similar career stage as you, you will be positively surprised how many common threads you will be able to weave together with peers from around the globe.

"Tell yourself: if others are doing it, you certainly can! Focus on what you have already achieved and how that made you feel. Be brave - you got this!"

"Embrace any and all opportunities that are presented to you, especially if you are part-time like me. Don't underestimate where a contact that you made at a small conference may lead to".

Embrace new opportunities

Everything may seem somehow new and strange. It's different to your Master's; you need to be steering your own course, but you don't really know exactly what you should be doing. Should you start with your literature review, methodology, or recruiting your study participants? You want to ask your supervisor, but fear that they may think you unworthy and so you doubt yourself.

It's definitely going to be new; after all that's what you signed up for - embrace it! Don't lose sight of why you are pursuing your study. It's not just your study, it's an opportunity to find the answers to those questions that have been niggling for so long, and now you have an opportunity to embrace it. This opportunity will give you the chance to grow and develop, not just as a researcher, but you will also find that you grow in other areas and in confidence.

and to be the first

Reap the rewards and plan ahead

You will have many opportunities to attend skills workshops, conferences, and network with both fellow PhD students and other peers and senior colleagues. You will at times feel inundated and bulldozed with emails about the latest workshop or research group seminar series. It's tempting to switch off from all of the extra activity that is going on around you if you are feeling overwhelmed and are trying to create quality time to dedicate to your doctoral study. However, with a little forward planning you will be able to not only work on your research which will be your main priority, but also grow a small network of fellow researchers and colleagues that will form part of your much-needed support network.

From personal experience, I can attest to reaping similar rewards in being able to attend some national and international conferences. These conferences have not only helped me to develop my emerging academic profile, but have also facilitated the growth of a small network of international fellow part-time doctoral researchers. This network has not only helped me remain motivated and connected, but will also serve to support future collaborative projects post-PhD.

“As a part-time doctoral student it's so important to seize as many opportunities to enhance your skills, this will set you in good stead for when you graduate and land your dream job. This is when you will really reap the full reward of being a 'part-timer' with an established network both academically and professionally”.



Student - Supervisor Relationship

Kristine Brance, PhD student, Department of Psychology, shares her own personal experience from her supervisor relationship



The PhD student-supervisor relationship has been an important part of my doctoral studies process. As a remote-location student, I am fortunate enough to have two supervisors whose guidance and support through my PhD studies have been invaluable. The key element to this success has been the ability to establish a good rapport between us from the start. These are some of the key elements of my positive supervision experience through the PhD journey:

Regular communication

Regular supervision meetings have been the key to the consistent progress of my work. Regularly scheduled meetings always keep me motivated to do more than it was expected of me. Every meeting is a great opportunity to discuss my work's progress and to clarify any ideas, thoughts, and challenges I may encounter. Regular meetings with my supervisors have also been of great help in identifying and addressing any problems in my work at an early stage, allowing me to get back on track in no time.

Progress is your responsibility

It is important to remember that while your PhD and its progress is the most important thing for you, you are one of the many responsibilities for your supervisor. With my supervisors' busy everyday schedules, I have learned how important it is to be self-driven and get the most out of every supervision meeting. In order to do so, for each meeting I prepare a clear agenda with discussion points that need to be covered, including updates on my work's progress and questions that emerged along the way.

As a result, I always get constructive feedback and a clear focus on what to do for our next meeting. This approach to supervision meetings keeps me organised and allows my supervisors to see my progress more clearly.

Understanding your role

Since my first supervision meeting, I realised how important it is to understand my role in the student-supervisor relationship, and how this role will change over time. My supervisors let me know that while they will be the ones who will guide me into the PhD process, give guidance and support during this time, my goal must be to become intellectually independent. Hence, at the end of the journey, I should be able to guide my supervisors across the PhD's finish line. In order to reach this goal, questions, clarifications, and discussions during our meetings are a big part of my learning process. Therefore, by learning to be comfortable in doing so, I have shown my professionalism and commitment to my work and my supervisors can be confident in my progress.

Keeping your supervisor informed

The PhD is a long journey, and I knew that encountering many ups and downs both in my personal and professional life would be unavoidable. Not long after I started my first year of PhD, I realized how important open and honest communication with my supervisors is. It was a vital ingredient to minimise the disruption of my work at the time. While I was hesitant at the beginning, I had to remind myself that my supervisors have been in my shoes. They know how important it is to keep balance in life during PhD studies to have a successful outcome. So, the discussions about the difficulties I faced allowed my supervisors to support me through the difficult times and challenge me more when the time was right. If I chose not to inform them, they couldn't have supported me when I needed it.

From my personal experience, the essence of an exciting PhD journey is a positive supervisory environment, which can be achieved by establishing a good rapport with your supervisor from the start.



Top Tips for Achieving a Good Supervisor Relationship

Laia Pasquina, PhD student, Department of Physics and Astronomy, provides her top tips to achieve the best relationship possible with your supervisor

When I arrived at Sheffield, I had no idea what to expect from my supervisor, and I did not know what type of relationship we were going to have. The beginning was difficult due to the language and cultural barrier. This is very common in international students. The way I overcame this was by being honest and asking for further explanation, saying “sorry I don’t understand this, what do you mean?”. Eventually, I got used to my supervisor’s accent and *vice versa* and communication was no longer a struggle.

The most important part of our relationship is our shared passion for science. Our scientific goals are the same and the project keeps evolving in a good direction because the research outcomes leads us that way. If your supervisor tells you to do a specific experiment or research plan that you do not agree with, speak up. You are the one performing the research, so you have to be as convinced as your supervisor is.

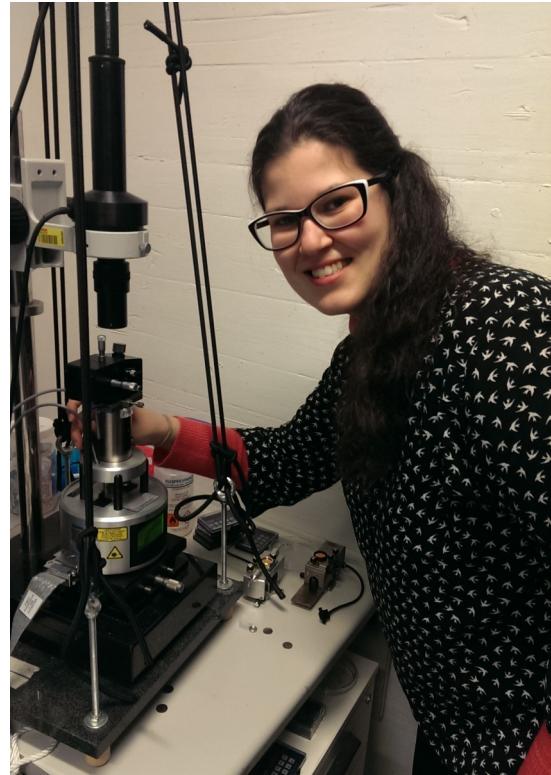
To sum up, here are some general tips that can help achieve the best possible relationship with your supervisor.

Positive attitude

The first few months are crucial, as they will establish the kind of relationship you are going to have with your supervisor. By having a positive and open attitude, your supervisor will be keener to guide you in your PhD from the beginning.

Share your problems

Speak up if you have problems, either research related or personal. Your supervisor should be a person you can trust to help overcome these issues. If that is not the case, talk to your personal tutor or advisor, who can also help mediate the situation if necessary.



Clear communication

Be comfortable with the project and the direction it is going. If you have an idea that might differ from your original research topic, get it across and present it to your supervisor with research data that supports it.

Don’t be scared to ask for validation. Do not settle with “it’s fine” if you are looking for specific answers. Be straightforward and clear while communicating, so that your supervisor is direct with you as well.

Enjoy it

Finally, enjoy your PhD journey and remember that having a good relationship with your supervisor will make your life easier if setbacks are encountered. I hope you all have the best experience possible during your PhD and that your supervisor guides you in the best way.

Managing Deadlines

Working to strict deadlines and prioritising workload is a key part of any PhD journey. Xiao Jin, PhD student, Department of Electronic and Electrical Engineering, and Denise Giovana Carrasco Gonzalez, PhD student, Department of Oncology and Metabolism, provide some essential tips when it comes to managing deadlines.

I found the most efficient way to deal with the stress of an approaching deadline is fitness training. I found daily running very useful. For me, I would love to do this whenever I got the time. During a run, I am able to think deeply and get into the music world to relax. [Sport Sheffield](#) at the Goodwin Sports Centre offers excellent equipment and services for you and your friends to get involved with. Exercise helps me with my physical conditions and makes me more energetic and prepared to handle my daily work. I found that I became tougher mentally and was able to deal with work pressures and stress much better.



Another approach I found effective to reduce the stress that deadlines can bring is good time management skills.

The [Learning Management System](#) (LMS) provided by the University of Sheffield was useful to enhance my time management skills. There is a wide range of classes you can choose to help with your PhD studies. I gained lots of benefits from the courses they have available. Excellent time management with your daily work and deadlines does make your life much more comfortable.

Xiao Jin

Make your own deadlines

There is nothing like the adrenaline rush when we have to submit or send something on time. This might not always have the best expected outcome, especially when you urgently need



feedback from your supervisor. To avoid last minute typos or badly written texts, **be aware of your own work pace** and create your own deadlines. Start by planning to submit a day or two in advance and allow time for a proper revision from you and your supervisor. Remember that some supervisors are busier than others so be reasonable and give them a little more time than it would take you to revise the same text from someone else. You will feel a relief if you read what you've written a couple of times and have the necessary feedback to improve what you submit before the deadline.

Denise Giovana Carrasco Gonzalez

Building Resilience

Caroline Wood, PhD student, Department of Animal and Plant Sciences

'Resilience' can be defined as the ability to withstand and bounce back from challenging circumstances. Unless you are extremely lucky, your PhD will involve testing times – both related to your studies and your wider life. Out of all the things my PhD journey taught me, I am most grateful for learning how to stand firm when all the foundations are being shaken. So how can you be proactive in building your resilience before the trial arrives?

Keep your relationships strong

Your family and oldest friends may not understand your project, but they are the great constant presence in your life. They know you best and can be a source of unwavering love and support when things get tough. Keep the channels of communication open whether by email, texts, or phone calls, and make time for visits. It can be easy to feel that a PhD is such an intense experience that it justifies putting everything on hold for those years. But when it feels as though you will never get the results you hope for, you need to know that you are loved by those who don't value you just by academic success.

Don't see leisure as 'wasted time'

Beware the vicious thought trap: "The more I work, the more results I will get, therefore working all the time equals maximum productivity". This attitude only leads to burn out. Often, the most effective way to work mimics the high-intensity interval training of athletes: short, intense bursts followed by periods of complete recovery. A frazzled mind isn't conducive to those moments of insight and making connections that will really drive your project forward. Learn to work smarter, not longer.

Find out now what support is available

You may feel that, as a postgraduate, you should manage any difficulties yourself but no one wants or expects you to do this. With the thousands of postgraduate students that have gone before you, it is almost certain that the University has encountered your issue before.

The Students Union and associated services are not just for undergraduates: the [Student Advice Centre](#) and [SSID](#) can be your first point of call for a whole range of issues and can point you to more specialised services.

Develop your networks

Finding a crowd who 'gets it' can make all the difference when the bad times come. There are specific networks for mature students and parents, besides career and subject-specific groups. But your most immediate network is likely to be the peers you share a lab or office with. Those mid-morning coffee breaks may not seem like 'proper work' but they serve an extremely important purpose: strengthening your social links and giving you access to a hive of shared experience and knowledge. Thanks to these moments of informal discussion and friendship making, when things start going wrong you'll often find you know the perfect person to ask and have the confidence to do so.

Keep your mind open

Academia is not the only way. You have to have a degree of self-vision to want to do a PhD. But be careful that this vision doesn't become too rigid or domineering. Having your heart set on academia can lead to intense stress if significant results are not forthcoming. For myself, getting involved with public engagement and the student-run Science in Policy group opened my eyes to careers I did not even know existed. Rather than being options for 'failed academics' there are many jobs that could use your scientific training for real impact.

Find an impartial mentor

It may feel at times that your supervisor may have lost interest or that they are trying to make your project fit with a long-term strategy that you feel may compromise your ability to gather enough data for a credible thesis. If this is the case, it is important that you can have a frank and honest discussion with them, but it may also be helpful to find an impartial academic mentor. This doesn't necessarily need to be someone with expertise in your specific field, but they should have enough research experience to know what is feasible to accomplish within the duration of a PhD.

Maximising a Non-Academic Career alongside a Doctorate

***Mariyah Mandhu, PhD student,
Department of English Literature***

I started my PhD over three years ago, deciding to self-fund a project in the Arts and Humanities with little more than a passion for nineteenth century poetry and a determination to succeed. Little did I know that working full time and undertaking a thesis would bring with it a whole host of challenges, some manageable and some not so much. Despite these obstacles, I feel proud of what I have achieved so far and have a few pointers for anyone considering or already undertaking a part-time PhD alongside a full-time job.

The best advice that I can give anyone, is to get organised. Annual planners and scheduling a full four year project plan is integral to the success of any thesis project. Breaking the project and/or chapters down into bitesize chunks also helps – having an idea of the smaller milestones really helps to get to the bigger ones. Checking in with your supervisor regularly and planning with them, so that you are both aware of what is feasible in terms of deadlines and workload will also help to strike a good work/life/PhD balance.

Find a job that gives you flexibility and an understanding manager. I've worked in campaigns and policy, events, student recruitment, business development, and quality assurance, so when I say I've had to do a lot of trial and error to find a working situation that works for me, I don't say it lightly. In my time, I've found that working in universities and/or higher education usually results in a more understanding work culture, giving me the flexibility to work compressed hours. That's not to say that non-HE jobs are unaccommodating, but it is always good to have a conversation around the demands of your PhD during the interview.

Taking a break and getting away can make all the difference. Everyone needs a rest, and when I say rest, I don't mean a day off from reading, writing or collating data. I am talking about a true seven day holiday when you can relax and unwind. This will really help give you a proper break and sometimes, having time away from your work can help trigger new and extensive ideas that perhaps were not working when you chain yourself to your desk 24/7.

Though the PhD and my job take up a lot of my time, I never forget to pursue my hobbies and socialise. These include travelling (yes it's possible to spend money holidaying – I also incidentally worked in international student recruitment), interior design, art and watercolour painting, and cycling around the Peak District. Try something new so you can meet people and take your mind off research for a few hours a week - it will take away any feelings of isolation and loneliness that you might encounter along the way.

Working and doing a PhD part time can be incredibly isolating, particularly if you are doing it as a distance student like I am. Attending conferences, meeting students in your faculty through social events, and even asking your supervisor for any advice on events are all ways in which you can find and build this network.

To say that working a full-time job and doing a PhD is manageable is something that I have had to learn and, more importantly, understand that it can't always be plain sailing. Establishing a good relationship with your supervisor and seeing what is feasible is essential, as with such little free time you need to be ahead of the game. Once you get into the swing of things, life does get a lot easier and while you may have to miss a few important engagements here and there, for the most part, I've found my life over the last four years nothing short of exciting and stimulating.

Researching Remotely



Dan Royle, Department of History

Returning to Sheffield after ten years was something of a surreal experience. Nothing had changed, but everything had changed. Significantly, owing to work and family commitments, I have returned on a transient basis: I still live and work in Epsom, Surrey, and, at the moment, my research takes me to Spain for one week every month. Researching remotely brings with it some challenges but also presents opportunities.

I'm fortunate to have worked with my supervisor during my undergraduate studies. Having built the foundations of a good working relationship back then, we were able to hit the ground running, which helped overcome one of the biggest challenges for all research students (not just those studying remotely).

Since leaving Sheffield, I have completed an MA by distance learning from Northumbria University as well as taken a couple of distance-learning courses with the Open University. These gave me a better understanding of some of the barriers distance-learners face. For me, the most significant of these is the lack of contact with staff and other students.

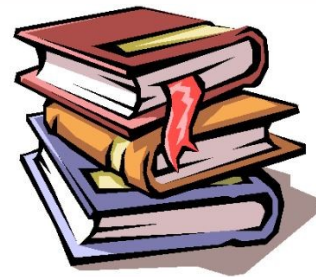
For support, then, I have to look to family and friends and make the most of the opportunities I get for collegiate interaction. I have been fortunate enough to have presented papers at Sheffield and Glasgow and have attended seminars in London and Madrid, meeting academics and discussing ideas. My job takes me all over the world and have used these opportunities to arrange meetings with academics in Spain, the USA, and Canada to discuss my work.

I have also learned to be more forgiving when I get things wrong. Rather than beat myself up when I realise that I have been prioritising work, socialising, or just day-to-day life, I resolve to spend some time prioritising research. I know when I'm working away in the archives that that time is pretty sacrosanct, but when I'm at home, I have to plan time for reading and writing more carefully, but I try to be as flexible as I can.

In research terms, though, I have found that there are now few practical disadvantages to remote study. E-books, e-journals, digitalised archives, and newspaper repositories have brought a wealth of resources onto our personal computers. I tend to do my reading at the British Library, but most university libraries welcome students from other institutions, and the staff at the University of Sheffield Library are always ready to investigate new electronic acquisitions. E-mail, Skype, and social media make keeping in touch with supervisors easier, although I prefer to meet in person where possible.

All doctoral students need self-motivation but researching remotely needs self-forbearance; a willingness not to be too hard on yourself when you've struggled to find time to dedicate to study, particularly if, like me, you work at home.

Library Services



Researching remotely – conducting your research when you're not on campus

Many doctoral students will spend some time living and researching away from campus, commuting into the University campus infrequently or conducting some or all of their research in another country. In the case of part-time doctoral students they might be living and working at a distance from Sheffield.

The University of Sheffield Library offers lots of support for students who are studying at a distance to ensure that they still have full access to research, training and library support.



Reading online journals, research papers and eBooks when off campus

As a researcher at the University of Sheffield, you have access to a huge range of online journals, research papers and eBooks. Use the following tips to find and read them when you're away from the University:

StarPlus

StarPlus is designed to help you to search, find, and read the Library's collections. It's a good way to check if we have online access to a journal, book, or journal paper. You can get to StarPlus by logging into MUSE and following the link in the My Services menu. [More information on using StarPlus.](#)

Setting up Google Scholar for off-campus searching

When searching Google Scholar off campus, you can change the settings so it will link to any papers that are included in the University's journal subscriptions. [Follow the instructions here \(under Finding Full Text\)](#)

BrowZine

The BrowZine app is a good way to browse the University journal collections and keep up to date with the latest issues of your favourite journals on your phone, tablet, or computer. [More information on BrowZine.](#)

Use a literature searching database

Databases such as [Web of Science](#) and [Scopus](#) are a good way to explore the literature in your field and undertake a literature search. Log into Muse and search for them in StarPlus or on the University web pages and you'll be able to read any papers you find from journals we subscribe to. [Video guides to using key databases.](#)

What if the Library doesn't have something you need?

You can use [Unpaywall](#) or [openaccessbutton.org](#) to check if there's a free, legally available copy online.

If not you can use the library's [InterLibrary request service](#) to request a PDF copy of a journal article or book chapter from another Library.

You can [recommend a book for the library](#). We'll try to get an online version if we can.

Do you need a VPN connection?

All the methods above can be used **without** a VPN connection, so you don't need to set one up unless you want to. [More information on VPN.](#)

Getting support from library staff

Help is available from library staff not only in person but also through instant chat, phone, and email (details on the [Library Help pages](#)). The library Virtual Advisory service is open during weekday working hours, evenings, and weekends. When the service is closed please email library@sheffield.ac.uk or check out the [Frequently Asked Questions](#) - hopefully you will find what you are looking for, or we will be in touch during staffed hours.



You can also book an appointment with your Liaison Librarians. These librarians are experienced in certain subject areas so can advise on enquiries related to specific databases or literature searching, for example. You can book an appointment via your [subject guide](#). You can meet in person, by phone or over video chat, for example Skype. Simply let us know which is best when booking the appointment. You can of course also email or phone us directly - our contact details are available on the [Faculty Engagement Librarian List](#).

Developing your research skills

We have a number of resources to support you in developing your research skills. As an introduction you can work through our [Information and Digital Literacy Tutorials](#) which introduce key functions such as the StarPlus Library Catalogue and Referencing. You are also very welcome to attend our complimentary [workshops and webinars](#) - the webinars may be of particular use if you are researching remotely.

You can also sign up for the [Doctoral Development Programme](#) and attend library courses on Literature Searching, Copyright, and many others. If you aren't able to attend we also have some video recording of our webinars and other resources available [online](#).

Visiting the Library

If you study remotely and visit the University occasionally it's worth knowing about the [four library sites on campus](#). They all offer something different in terms of study space, library collections, and opening hours and have PCs and laptops for students to use. You can [check PC availability](#) at each library before you visit.

The [Information Commons](#) and the library in the [Diamond](#) are both open 24 hours a day, seven days a week to registered staff and students. They offer a wide range of study spaces from quiet and silent study areas to group working spaces. The [Health Sciences Library](#) serves the staff and students of the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health and staff working for the NHS in Sheffield. Its collections cover medicine, dentistry, nursing, and midwifery.

Children under 16 are welcome at all four libraries if accompanied and supervised at all times by a parent/carer. There are some restrictions on bringing children to the Information Commons, the Diamond, and Health Sciences Library outside of staffed hours, more information can be found [here](#).



Getting books off-campus

Students studying remotely from campus may be entitled to [longer loans](#) and [postal loans](#). This may include distance learners, commuter students, part-time students, and students conducting all or part of their research in another country.

The library can also help to arrange for access to other University libraries in the UK through the [SCONUL](#) access scheme. University of Sheffield is also part of [White Rose postgraduate researcher access scheme](#). Postgraduate research students from the Universities of Sheffield, York, and Leeds can become affiliated PGR members of all three libraries in the White Rose group.



PhDad

*James Harman-Thomas, EngD Student,
Department of Mechanical Engineering.*

This article is here to help people who are thinking of starting a PhD who have childcare responsibilities, or anyone who wants to read some of my anecdotes and have a laugh at my expense. Firstly, as you may notice, I am an EngD student, however they are very similar and I prefer PhDad as a title.

My Family

Me and my now-wife studied our undergraduate degrees at the University of Leeds. We had our first child, Arthur, during the fresher's week before starting our second year and our second child, Bluebell, was born two weeks after my wife had graduated with a BSc and I was going into my master's year. I started my EngD at the University of Sheffield in September 2019.

Tips for Student Parents

Sleep:

You will never have enough of it but try and do your best. It will make you a lot more productive and help you feel better whilst you're working, but it isn't easy, especially whilst your children are little. I wish I could offer advice on how to help them sleep, but unfortunately I never figured that out.

Bad Days:

You will have them, there are days you will be sleep deprived or family life will be playing on your mind, don't worry. Just make sure you prioritise your most important work and come back brighter tomorrow. Plan your important tasks for the next day, enjoy some family time and get an early night.

Enjoy Parenting:

Whilst it's important to get your work done, no-one has ever regretted spending time with their kids. Make the most of your weekends and holidays and enjoy your children. Remember your children are only little once! There will be times when, despite your best efforts, PhD work starts to invade your family time, but for me, I always make sure that from when I get home from work to when they go bed, my children have my full attention (minus a bit of washing up).

Organisation:

Time management becomes much more important when you have someone else depending on you, the kids' classes and activities won't stop for you. Make sure you keep on track to finish all your work in advance of the deadline in case of any emergencies. Write the deadline in a diary or calendar and work backwards writing in all the individual stages to ensure you stay on track to finish.

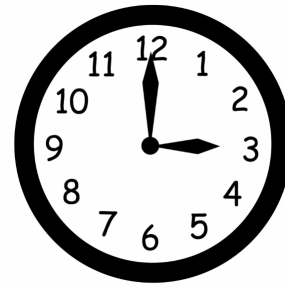
Working Hours:

Try and stick to them. I have found since starting my EngD, sticking to set working hours has been best for my family, for me that's starting early but everybody is different. It's great that the flexibility of a PhD allows you to do this. Try to stick to working hours as well, there's no point rushing through your freshly collected data all weekend, if you're going to be sat at your desk Monday morning with nothing to do. Also, if you have the opportunity to work from home don't be afraid to take advantage. I know there are some tasks I can perform equally well at home and save the time I lose commuting to help around the house more.

Imperfections

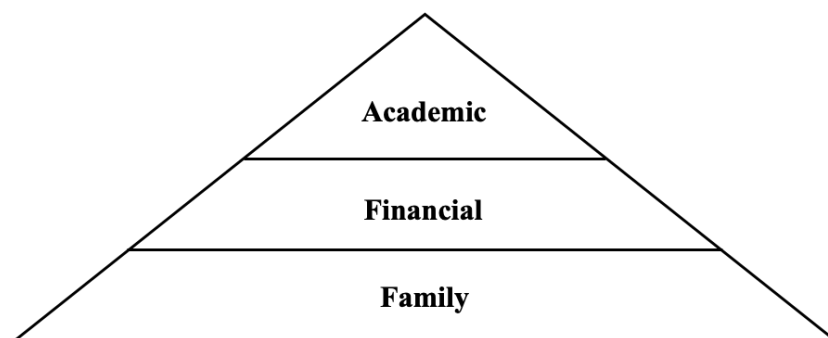
I have read articles from PhD parents with well-meaning advice like I have offered, however, I think they tend to paint the picture of people who have mastered the art. In truth, it's a learning experience and different for everyone, so I wanted to highlight some of the stupid stuff I did, and challenging experiences I have had during my undergraduate and start of my PhD.

- * Became so sleep deprived I cut the top of my thumb off the day before an exam.
- * Pushed my son's pushchair the 45-minute walk to the University nursery to discover I never put my backpack on.
- * Sat in A & E with my son until 3 o'clock in the morning the day I had an important initial meeting with my supervisor.



Summary

My experience so far as a postdoctoral student parent has been fantastic. I have never felt like becoming a parent has stopped me from doing anything in life and has probably given me the confidence and support I needed to apply for my EngD. Although being a postdoctoral parent is not uncommon, it can seem daunting and it really shouldn't. Doing a PhD and being a parent may be two of the most challenging things you can do, but they are also two of the most rewarding. Consider the 'PhD Parents hierarchy of needs':



The most important thing is meeting the needs of your family and building the important relationship with your children. From this if you are financially stable, you guarantee yourself the best chance of academic success.

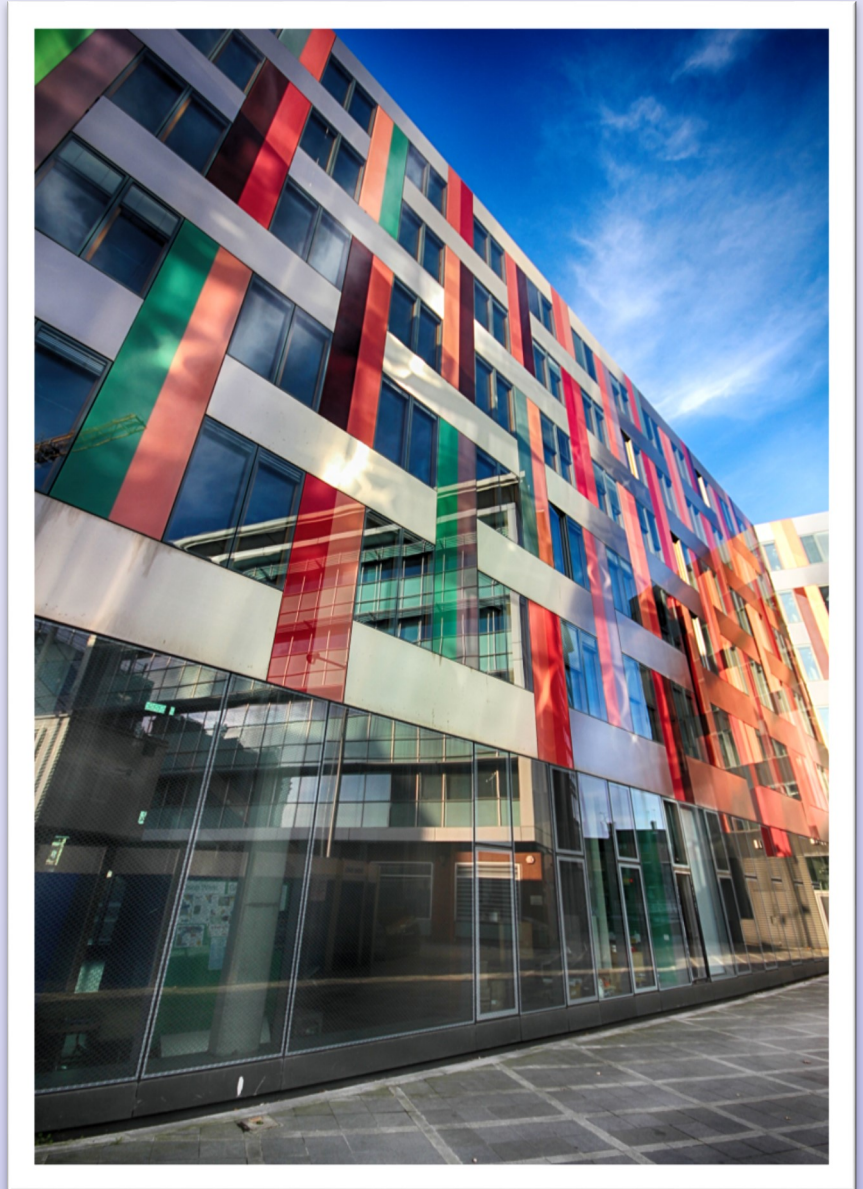
Acknowledgements

I would like to give a special thanks to my wife Evie, who pushed me to the position I am in today whilst achieving her own success as we managed our young family.

Talking my way through my PhD

Sally Eales, PhD student, Department of English Language and Linguistics, shares her own personal experience as a mature student.

People say that completing a PhD is an isolating process and when I started on my PhD journey I had reason to believe this applied to me more than most. I was in my fifties - 52 actually - when I started my PhD. Why, you could ask, would I embark on such a journey at that point in my life? Maybe it was a passion for researching or maybe it was simply that I was fortunate enough to secure PhD funding at a point when I was looking to steer my life in a new direction. Whatever the reason my 52 year old self arrived at a Doctoral Academy event in Sheffield in October 2016 to be faced with a daunting array of fellow, fresh-faced, bright, and - in comparison to me - young PhD students. My sense of isolation had just increased tenfold.



This sense was also amplified by my geographical location, not only was I of 'mature' age, I also lived over 130 miles away from Sheffield - oh, and I had family commitments too in the shape of teenage children who were both, at that stage, still living at home. All of these factors meant that I felt old and out of touch so that when the Director of the Doctoral Academy stood up at that event and told us that we were academically la crème de la crème I just didn't believe he meant me.

For the first few weeks of my PhD I felt like an imposter and fully expected someone to tap me on the shoulder and say “sorry but there’s been a terrible mistake…” Clearly that didn’t happen as here I am three and a bit years later about to submit the first full draft of my thesis to my supervisors. So what happened? What kept me going? I think the greatest factor was the realisation that I wasn’t alone. Maybe I had crow’s feet, had to make a trip of three hours just to get to my desk, and was juggling the demands of family life but I soon realised that every PhD student has their own obstacles to overcome.

“Other people may appear to be sailing through but the reality is that each one of us will struggle at some stage.”

Many will experience imposter syndrome or a sense of isolation or some other issue along their PhD journey. When I understood this I decided not to listen to that voice in my head telling me that I lived too far away, or had too many family commitments, or that my brain was simply too old for all this academic malarkey. I silenced that voice and decided instead that I was going to power through and enjoy it.

I didn’t expect to make friends - what vibrant, bright, 24 year old wants to be friends with someone old enough to be their mother? As it turns out my two closest friends have been two vibrant, bright, 24 year olds – yes their mothers are the same age as me - but they have been a lifeline. My geographical location and age are non-issues. We have talked

endlessly, laughed frequently, cried occasionally and got drunk probably too often since meeting at that first event three and a bit years ago.

As for my old tired brain, there is no doubt that I felt out of my depth at times but I was lucky enough to have two great supervisors who created a collegial space in our meetings for much intellectual discussion and also for vital catch-ups about the lives of our pets! There have been times, of course, when I have felt alone and isolated but I always remember the words my supervisor said to me one day when I was at my desk in a stage of paralysed procrastination and producing nothing much. She sought me out and said “you mustn’t hide, come and talk to us. We are here to help you.”

Completing a PhD is not about inhabiting the body of a lone scholar isolated at a desk producing a single work of genius. It is a conversation, a chance for scholarly discussion, and an opportunity to share experiences. Many students can feel intimidated, not only by their PhD supervisors, but also by their fellow PhD colleagues who might appear to be effortlessly producing chapter after chapter when the reality is often very different. Being open and transparent about what was going on for me was vital for overcoming feelings of inadequacy.

“I learnt that my PhD pals were experiencing the highs and lows of the PhD journey just like me and that perhaps I wasn’t as isolated as I thought I was”.



Thesis Writing



Jordan Milner, PhD student, School of Mathematics and Statistics, shares his essential tips for thesis writing

Your thesis: the not-so-hard write

As time progressed into the third year of my PhD, there was a dark cloud rumbling in the distance. It wasn't quite overhead yet but it was looming closer and it foretold of a great dread - the thesis. Fear was beginning to creep in. However, it needn't have done so as I discovered (better late than never!) that writing up your progress throughout your PhD helps to minimise this worry.

Start now

Even if it's too soon for you to be formally writing your thesis, you should document anything you think might be valuable later on. Whether that be literature reviews, discussions with your supervisor, results, methodologies, abandoned approaches, or whatever - the more you have written up, the easier it will be to piece together the chapters of your thesis when it is time to. You don't want to be frantically searching for a half-remembered quote from a half-remembered article that you read three years ago!

It's good practice

Writing up your work as if for someone else to read it is good practice for publication. As well as developing your writing ability, this process also encourages you to be thorough and honest with yourself when answering questions such as 'why did I take that approach?', 'what are the pros and cons?', and 'what should be the next step?'. If you're like me and you enjoy moving from one idea to the next, you quickly build up a large backlog of work that isn't properly documented. Getting it all formally down on paper will help jog your memory of all your thoughts and decisions when you have to revisit it at a later stage.

Create a plan

In the maths department, we were required at the start of our third year to create a short, predictive outline of our thesis. It encouraged my supervisor and I to take stock of work completed, in progress and not yet begun; we began to form a narrative and an idea of what each chapter should contain. The plan may change, but I found it was particularly helpful in reviewing what work I was aiming to complete in the funding time I had left, which meant I could prioritise better.

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Look up examples of theses to see how they are structured - particularly ones from your field of work. The [White Rose eTheses Online](#) repository will have plenty of examples from your department here at the University of Sheffield.

Piece it together

Once you have a good idea of what a chapter will contain, draft it. Again, the exact contents and requirement of a chapter may change a little in the future, but some restructuring will be a lot easier than pulling together three or four years worth of work if it is all left until the end. You may also be able to get some early feedback on it from your supervisor, which will then help guide your future writing.

Motivational Tips - Surviving a PhD

It is a truth universally acknowledged that studying a PhD is quite the journey. While working on my Masters project, I decided to continue my studies and took the crucial decision of doing a PhD. From this, I have discovered that the overall outcome of this experience relies on several aspects: self-motivation and interest in the project, your relationship with your supervisor(s), being able to multitask, and your future plans. From my perspective, these key elements are the very core of any PhD and, among the things that I have taken with me, I would like to share the main ideas that have kept me focused on my goal.

Be the professional you want to become

There comes a time when you realise you might not fit a mould, or you might not want to, but don't feel discouraged, that can be a good thing!

People have their own way of doing things, you are just finding your own. Aim high, create an expectation of the kind of professional you want to become and follow it thoroughly. Particularly, do whatever you can for your knowledge: take online or short courses, improve your communication skills, learn something beyond your scope, simply **challenge yourself**. This is the moment where you are allowed to explore and overcome your fears and doubts. Bear in mind that the University offers a variety of tools that can allow you to boost your potential so make the most of these opportunities. Very importantly, remember that although your supervisor will give you great guidance, you know what's best for you.

There is no magic formula or shortcut. As you might already know, there will always be ups and downs on the way. If something is becoming challenging, **read, read, and read some more**. Once you familiarise with possible solutions, try to approach someone with experience (most people are happy to help and this will make your life easier). Don't be afraid of trying new things if there is logic behind it and try to make things work by **putting in the hours and working very, very hard**.



Denise Giovana Carrasco Gonzalez, PhD student, Department of Oncology and Metabolism

Don't forget to have non-academic activities. When it comes down to how we decide to spend our time, we tend to prioritise our work above anything, but I have found that the best way to stay fresh and organised is actually having various activities other than work. Throughout my PhD, I have attended a monthly book club, I am part of the fencing club, and I was the secretary of the Latin American society, all linked to the University. Even though some people can multitask easier than others, try to **introduce yourself into a new activity** little by little and you will see the difference in how revitalised you can feel.

Last but definitely not least, remember that **the only thing that you can control is your attitude**. No matter the difficulties you might face, never be too hard on yourself. Going through a PhD is a fluctuating journey and to keep you driven and motivated you have to know that you can do it - and you will. **Love what you study because one day you will love what you do.**

