

June's letter
Letter from a former postgraduate

Dear Mr Wakeford

My failed PhD experience was at the University of Barchester. I managed to complete three years of part-time study in Psychology over a five year period and eventually gave up last academic year. This year I have completed an MSc in Software Development.

As a part-time student who was self-funding I had to work to pay for my studies. I also took on various voluntary convention organising posts during the period. I considered myself to have three jobs- student, circus skills coach/performer and convention organiser.

My problem was getting any studying done. I had to coach and perform to make money (and to pay the fees!) and I had to meet various deadlines in organising the conventions. As for my studies I found it very easy to read around the (fascinating) subject but very difficult to do the disciplined and boring work of getting things down on paper or collecting data. There was always something "more urgent" to do for another of my roles and I had a swathe of wonderful excuses as to why I hadn't really progressed to use to ease my guilt and for when I met with my supervisor.

Whilst I wasn't motivated or organised enough to cope with the relaxed attitude to self-funded part-time study my department and (very busy) supervisor should have done more to prepare me for the experience. I felt like I was a very welcome addition to the departmental budget but not quite so welcome in the department itself. It was too easy to pay the fees and then disappear.

I bought a book called "How to get a PhD" and found the information in it very useful but I still managed to fall into almost every trap going. My supervisor and I should have communicated more. I should have thought why I was doing the PhD and where it was going to take me before committing my time and money to it. I should have set aside time to study and chopped up my work into manageable chunks and made sure it got done. But none of this happened.

After five years of sort of studying the money I was making from coaching began to dry up and I had to look very closely at the opportunity cost of carrying on. I decided it wasn't worth it and did a year's IT conversion course instead. Whilst I have no real interest in IT I know it will get me a job at the end of it. I cannot say that about the PhD.

My advice to anyone considering a PhD is to examine the opportunity cost. If there is no funding for your studies then think very hard about the three or five years you will have to give over to getting your qualification. If a PhD is the only way to get on in your career then commit to it as if it is your first three/five years of employment. If you are just interested in the subject then do something else to earn your money and set aside time to informally study your subject as a