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# Taking the plunge: Reflections on the decision to register for a doctorate

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the considerations that I (first author [JB]), as a working mother, employed as a manager in Higher Education, faced prior to enroling in part-time doctoral study. An autoethnographical, reflective practice approach is adopted to examine the issues that were central to my deliberations. I draw on a narrative written after my first Ph.D. meeting and entries made prior to enrolment in a reflective journal. Recommendations are made for prospective students to consider prior to deciding to embark upon doctoral study.



"Now that you've finished the postgraduate certificate when do you start a Ph.D.?" my husband enquires. "You must be joking, I'm not sure that I have the time or the academic ability" I reply.

## 1. Will I get wet?

In this article I [first author] examine some of the motivating and potentially inhibiting factors that I, as a mother of young children working in a full-time, middle management role in Higher Education (HE), considered prior to enroling in part-time doctoral study. There is little research on the motivation to start a Ph.D. (Brailsford, 2010; Leonard, Becker & Coate, 2005), or on the issues that affect those who study part-time (Greenfield, 2000). Through a discussion of these factors, I share my experiences and decision making process with others in a similar position and raise awareness of pre-registration concerns. It is widely recognised that the decision to enrol on a Ph.D. programme, due to the level of commitment required and the number of years it will take, is not a quick one. Moreover, in making this decision, it is important to be honest about one's motivation, insecurities, and strength and weaknesses (Wellington, Bathmaker, Hunt, McCullock, & Sikes, 2009). The studies conducted by Brailsford (2010) and Leonard et al. (2005) on the motivation to enrol and the benefits of successful completion were conducted using samples of doctoral alumni. Brailsford commented that, "Questions in the interviews were answered with the benefit of hindsight. What participants remembered about their motives, hopes, and aspirations might have been selective memories" (p. 24). Only a few of the many guidebooks on achieving a Ph.D., (e.g., Leonard, 2001; Phillips & Pugh, 2006), give detailed consideration to the dilemmas and issues that prospective students will face. Fewer still focus on the additional deliberations, including the social and emotional issues (Greenfield, 2000), that a part-time, mature student may have to make prior to embarking on this level of study. Although, the funding councils' view of doctoral students appears to conform to the notion of a young, full time student who will become a researcher the experience of Leonard et al. (2005) was different. They found that doctoral research was increasing among mid-career professionals who were studying part-time. Wright and Cochrane (2000) suggested that due to the significant time and effort required these non-traditional groups now do at least as well, in terms of successful completions, as their more conventional counterparts.

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However, funding council statistics suggest that part time students are less likely to complete than their full time counterparts (Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), 2005). As a mature, mid-career professional who would be studying part-time I needed to assess the risk and assure myself that I had a good chance of submitting a thesis, of the right quality, in a reasonable time-scale. All research students will approach Ph.D. study with their own set of personal circumstances; however, due to the number of issues that I needed to consider, including the research subject and question, achieving and maintaining a work-life balance and the possibility of role conflict in both family and work spheres, my experience is likely to resonate with other prospective students.

This autoethnographic, reflective article, written contemporaneously, will complement the existing literature which is predominantly conducted and written in hindsight. It covers the ten-months from the suggestion, by a work colleague, that I undertake a Ph.D. through to my enrolment and registration. I draw on a reflective narrative, written immediately after the first meeting with my supervisors in January 2010, in which I described my concerns, and motivation in relation to doctoral study. I also refer to extracts from a reflective journal kept during the pre-enrolment phase, from February to September 2010, when I undertook pilot studies and compiled my research proposal. Excerpts from the reflective narratives convey how I envisaged Ph.D. study, added to an already busy existence, would impact physically and emotionally on my work and domestic life. These excerpts have been inserted at relevant junctures throughout the sections that follow; their inclusion illustrates my thoughts and feelings. A brief overview is provided of the research methods that were used to record the narratives which fall into two main themes. The first considers the maintenance of a work life balance and the second management of research issues pertaining to the conduct of research in my own organisation and being supervised by colleagues. Following a discussion of my deliberations recommendations are made for prospective doctoral students.

## 2. How do I know if I should jump?

I had been the Business Support Manager (BSM) in the Cardiff School of Sport at Cardiff Metropolitan University since 2006. After four years in post I needed a challenge. The need for academic stimulation and personal fulfilment had been a regular feature of my life; during 11 years as an RAF officer I had completed an MBA and numerous personal and professional development courses. When my children started school, wishing to update my professional knowledge, I enroled on a Postgraduate Certificate (PG Cert.) in Leadership. A year-long course seemed a sensible level of commitment. However, once completed I sought another challenge. In a job I enjoyed and with workable and stable childcare arrangements in place, achieving the challenge through new employment was not the best solution. I needed something to prevent me from becoming complacent and to add a manageable level of pressure to help me continue to perform my role well. Despite suggestions from family members, it was only when a work colleague, with extensive supervisory experience, proposed doctoral study that I gave it serious thought. A review of the self help books on Ph.D. study revealed that there was little guidance for a mature student trying to balance part-time study with full-time work and a family. The most informative accounts, for me, were the first hand experience narratives of students undertaking Ph.D. study presented by Greenfield (2000), Salmon (1992), and Vartuli (1982). Reading these helped me to rationalise and appreciate the normality of the thoughts and feelings that I was experiencing and realise the benefit to others of such personal stories. However, society and HE have changed since the latter two accounts; the former is one of the few contemporary narratives, examining any aspect of the doctoral journey from which I or any other prospective student can seek affirmation that their dilemmas are normal and find encouragement to proceed.

I needed to be sure that Ph.D. study was right for me; but how would I know that it was right? My initial reaction had been that I had neither the time nor the ability. My colleague's suggestion encouraged me to think again. During our first formal meeting I was asked to write about my motivations for study; it was this narrative that set my decision making in motion. Following positive feedback about this work from my supervisors I maintained a journal describing my thoughts about the Ph.D. project and my ability to cope academically while retaining some balance to my life. In the following paragraphs I describe briefly autoethnograhy and reflective practice which were the methods I used to gather, record, and reflect upon my actions and feelings that informed my decision to 'jump'.

Autoethnography is a form of autobiographical personal narrative that explores the writer's subjective experience of life and connects the personal to the cultural (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It has evolved to include a range of autobiographical forms including personal narrative (Rinehart, 2005) and provides an opportunity to embrace the extant literature (Boyle & Parry, 2007). Although autobiographical writing has been considered by some as self-indulgent (Mykhalovskiy, 1996), and questions have been raised about its value as *proper* research (Sparkes, 2000), this naturalistic approach would enable me to draw comparison between my culturally and socially driven dilemmas and the relevant literature. Using an autoethnographic approach I was the subject and the object or focus of my research and my personal experiences and responses to events became the research data.

There is no precise definition for reflective practice with practitioners working within a number of frameworks, methods and techniques in order to understand and learn from experience (Hickson, 2011). Knowles, Gilbourne, Tomlinson and Anderson (2007) described reflective practice as, "An approach to practice that involves creating opportunities to access, make sense of and learn from tacit knowledge in action we use in our daily work" (p. 109). Perhaps most appropriate in this context is Black and Plowright's (2010) definition that 'reflection is the process of engaging with learning and/or professional practice that provides an opportunity to critically analyse and evaluate that learning or practice' (p. 246). Reflective practice, as *reflection-on-action*, involves taking time to consider, interpret and understand the experience which