

Part-time PhD: Top tips for success

By Barry Moran

Doing a PhD part-time around a busy day-job in a research facility can be a challenge, not only in balancing the time and responsibilities, but even getting it off the ground in the first place. There can be plenty of logistical and financial considerations, as well as dogma and attitudes to break through, but some advanced planning and steps can ease the way a little.



I run the Flow Cytometry Facility in Trinity College Dublin. Like many core facility scientists, I came into the job and performed ably (I think!) for many years without the letters PhD after my name. As with similar disciplines operated through central facilities, cytometry requires technical and scientific expertise, but also skills like project management, planning, reporting, book-keeping, HR, and customer service. Such abilities are not necessarily reliant on having undertaken a doctoral degree, so a PhD is frequently not required for the post.

But for me, once in the job a few years I felt a real impetus to do one. I think this was for a number of reasons, perhaps pride and ego amongst the top ones. Over 90% of people I work with either have, or are studying for, a PhD. Working with them over time and in many cases being able to make substantial contributions to their research, I started to think I might be up to it too and that I was missing out a little. Also, I felt it ultimately would help in my long-term career goals, or more so that not having one might hinder them.

Given my personal circumstances and indeed age, going back to full-time education was not top of my list. More than anything, I had a job I really liked so didn't want to give it up, so I wondered was there a way to manage the two. I slowly started to look into doing the PhD around my day-job, and how to go about it. Thankfully I was able to move all the pieces into place to make it happen, and fortunately I'm now on the other end having completed it and survived!

Maybe some of the things I found in the initial steps may be of help to some. A PhD is quite a personal journey but there may be some considerations and steps to smooth the ride.

Is a PhD for you?

Undertaking a PhD is not for everyone, irrespective of knowledge and intellect. Key attributes for the job include perseverance and pragmatism. If you decide to do it while working a full-time job, are you prepared to give up so much of your free-time, and over so many years? Are you organised enough to balance the research project with your full-time job? Are your circumstances likely to change within the period (e.g. travel, marriage, kids, health, family)? Do you want it for the right reasons, and what are the right reasons for you? Like everything, full consideration and going into it with eyes wide open will help.

Bide your time

Undertaking a PhD part-time requires a lot of buy-in from the powers-that-be, and that has to be earned over time. If you look to make it happen in your first or second year in the job, you're unlikely to have the bonds or kudos developed just yet. Keep your eyes and ears out on who you think are going to be the decision makers in this step. Does the head of department know (and like) you? Is there any precedent in the department for enabling part-time PhD projects? Can you chat to someone in the middle of it? Any co-workers that might have advice?



Show an interest in research

Let PIs see you're not simply turning up to the job. Go to departmental talks and meetings and interact if you can. Try to get to seminars and conferences. When chatting with researchers in the core, be sure to display any interest you might have in their work. Like in most things in life, if you're pleasant and convivial to work with, people are more likely to want you to do well and to support you.

Sell it!

Such is human nature, there's frequently a degree of "what's in it for me" with others' consideration. A PhD may be great for you but not for your co-workers, boss, or institution. If you can highlight

potential advantages for them, that will help. For me, this was that it would bolster my technical and scientific understanding of the area; I had no real immunology training in a large immunology department. It would keep me more invested in the field and institution, and maybe most importantly, it was likely to keep me there more long-term. Your boss might worry that you'll just get your PhD and then leave; but maybe they should be worrying that you'll leave unless you have this opportunity!

Pick a project that fits best

Inevitably, a part-time PhD is going to be less flexible than a conventional one. You need to identify a project that will allow you to work around your

day-job. Think what is likely the most doable. Mainly do it out of hours, or one or two morning/ days a week? Maybe it can be all dry lab, or if in the lab what type of work makes sense, e.g. human or mice work, time courses, long tissue culture experiments? For me, building a lot of cytometry into the project would leverage the expertise I already had. Human studies, with samples arriving later in the day meant I could probably do it all around my office hours, where I mightn't have had the same freedom with mice. And once I acquired the data, there would be considerable analysis that I could work away on through the evenings and weekends at home.

Identify the right supervisor

A supervisor is arguably the key consideration for any PhD. They will be your advisor, counsellor, sounding-board, confidante, and all-round rock of support. You may require more flexibility and understanding if part-time, so picking the right fit in a supervisor is vital. Make sure their research interests align with yours, that they understand your situation and that they can be relied on for the long haul. Given that not only are you likely older than the typical grad student but your supervisor is a co-worker, perhaps seek out one with whom you have a good personal and working relationship.

Who'll pay?

Working with your potential supervisor, think about how all of this will be funded and where to minimise costs. Maybe you'll be lucky, and your PI-to-be will be able to fund consumables and student fees themselves. One benefit going part-time is you'll unlikely need a stipend. For me, we had no real funding to start with, so we set about writing some small grant applications. I negotiated some additional discounts with key vendors, and I applied for university funding for my annual fees. If you can show you're doing everything you can to generate your own funding, your supervisor (and department) may be more willing to subsidise you in the meantime.

Ideally, surround yourself with an understanding and supportive bunch!

Going down the PhD route is arduous under any circumstances so it's vital you have a good support network around you. To a degree it's a selfish undertaking so it's important that your loved ones know what to expect and fully back it. Doing it part-time just adds to all this, it laps up almost all your once-free time. It's for a pretty long time, generally a 6-year project rather than the 3-4 years more common in full-time. Having a good group of friends around for the cuppa or pint when called-for helps a lot too, especially during the more frustrating spells. Personally, I was married a month before starting, and we added two kids to the mix over the duration of the studies. Without the full backing from my wife, I would have had to abandon it long before finish. More so, I really wouldn't have been up to it without her support!

Overall, I found the whole process very rewarding albeit challenging, but I never regretted it or had any of the dark days I thought might come. It's certainly not for everyone and can be more a test of pig-headedness, resolve and endurance than intellect and learning. Most of the time, I was able to successfully juggle the work with the research, with no real slippages. I loved working with my supervisor and how my project evolved over time, and I felt my findings could make an impact on patients' lives. I think it further developed my critical thinking and problem solving, as well as giving me a much deeper understanding in the field of immunology; all of which I can apply to the day-job. Although I'm glad to see the back of all the long nights and weekends, I'm still involved with the group now and will continue with the research, albeit not at the same level. Ultimately, completing the PhD is something I'm immensely proud of and I think will always be of benefit to me, no matter what the future holds.