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## **To work or not to work? The postgraduate balancing act**

**Angela Dwyer**

This time of the year can be difficult for postgraduate students. You are likely to become very popular with academics as they vie for your available time to do tutorials, lectures, marking, and research for them. When you are an early career researcher, it is difficult to say 'no' when you feel the pressure to impress as well as the pressure of a not-so-great financial situation. So in this first in a series of discussions about postgraduate issues, I thought I would offer some useful tips on how to negotiate this balancing act.

Balancing paid work with any postgraduate or thesis work is difficult. There is a myth of the perfect postgraduate student that doesn't stray from their studies over the course of their degree and focuses purely on the thesis – but for most of us this is a myth. The reality is that postgraduate students want a job at the end of their degree, some in academia and some in industry. If you are going to get a job in these areas, you need some sort of broader experience than your thesis alone before you finish. And to make things even more complicated, you somehow need to maintain a social life alongside of these competing commitments. Talk to fellow postgraduate students about these demands, particularly those students in your School or Faculty. They will have a very good sense of how much time is required to work in certain units or to do particular types of research work, and they will have strategies that they use to manage these processes. Remember: from the moment that you are enrolled, you become a project manager of sorts and you learn how to manage your project. The same applies for your work: manage your work; don't allow it to manage you, and use the resources around you to make this happen.

It is important to remember though that you can be strategic in the work that you do. Firstly, you may be able to teach courses and be involved in research work that links in with your own work so that you can maintain your ideas about your thesis as you do your work. Talk to your supervisor, other academics and get involved in the research culture so that you know about the big research projects being conducted (and being planned) so that you can get a sense of who needs research assistance and when they might need it over the coming year – then you can target these people for research work when the time comes. Secondly, seek out unit coordinators whose units align with your thesis work and tell them about your thesis and that you would be interested in giving a keynote lecture about it. I found these types of teaching very useful as they helped immensely to clarify and define the scope of my thesis – and I had lots of PowerPoint slides for conference presentations and oral seminars. Thirdly, try to avoid repetitious teaching and research work. If you have taught one course for two semesters, try not doing this course and look for other courses you would like to be involved in. If you someone asks you to do research work that requires skills that you have already had experience with, then say no and seek out research work that further develops your skills. Fourthly, look over job advertisements of the types of jobs that you would like to get at the end of your degree – what types of skills and experience do you need to get those jobs? Do

research and teaching work that supply you with experience and skills that 'fill-the-gaps' in your curriculum vitae for those positions. One final strategy: which units have external students? Find units with external students in those semesters where you think you are going to need time to work without the interruption of being out of your office or on campus doing tutorials. If there is only tutorial work available, approach the unit coordinator early so that you can group your tutorials all on the same day, thus lessening your time away from your thesis during a week. All of these are things you can think about when making decisions about teaching and research work.

Regardless of the stage of your studies, there always exists the danger of overcommitting yourself with paid employment. This is a lesson that I had to learn the hard way because I didn't have explicit advice about how to manage this (or how not to manage this). Something I found useful, and something that Lucinda Becker (2004) suggests, was to very roughly plan out what I needed to achieve over each semester. Do this at the start of every year and plan it from week to week so that you have a clear idea of what you will be doing on your thesis. This will give you a better understanding of where the gaps are and, hence, where you can manage some work. These plans will undoubtedly be revised multiple times over the year but it will help you to schedule important tasks over the coming twelve months and to include some paid work.

Finally, remember to be selfish with your time. Postgraduate students come from all situations and all life circumstances, be it living at home with your parents or being a single parent with children – in all of these circumstances you need to be selfish with your time and use the resources you have available to you. Block chunks of your time for your paid work and for your study, and do everything you can to make it uninterrupted (lock your door, unplug the phone, don't check your email). This will help you to overcome the guilt that can come with having some down time – you won't feel guilty if you have achieved what you set out to achieve.

Becker, L. 2004. *How to manage your postgraduate course*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.