

Some of your questions answered

Dr Layla Cassim's first two articles on postgraduate study elicited a flood of queries from students keen on (or anxious about) making the jump to this level of tertiary commitment. Here she answers some of your enquiries.

Can I do a PhD part-time?

Yes. Your first task would be to determine what your field of interest is, and to narrow this down to a specific topic for your research. Look out for possible research supervisors.

You then need to decide on an institution, focusing on those universities that offer part-time PhD programmes *in your field*. It is sometimes a good idea to apply to — or at least make in-depth enquiries at — several universities and then decide which one best suits not only your academic but your personal needs as well.

When you're comparing different part-time PhD programmes, consider all the factors that affect your own circumstances, such as:

- Cost;
- The minimum time the university stipulates for completing all requirements of the degree;
- The number of "contact" hours when you will have to be physically present; for example, will you have to present seminars on your work; and if so how often?
- Is a minimum number of meetings with your supervisor stipulated?
- For all university-specific doctoral requirements, which do vary across universities and disciplines, scrutinise university and departmental annual handbooks on postgraduate study — and get early clarification of anything that's unclear to you.

How does one juggle a part-time PhD with family and work commitments?

There is no set formula because each person's constellation of commitments is unique. You do need to consider your

own juggling act carefully: postgraduate "stories" are filled with struggles to complete degrees within prescribed time periods — often precisely because of these other commitments.

Like any programme of study, a PhD does require that you make certain sacrifices or choices. A part-time PhD can involve some tough decisions, so your time-management skills have to be well developed and you might have to accept in advance that your social life will suffer — or that you have to function on less sleep!

You will need to assess your own support system: Do you have family members and friends who will be willing to babysit or go grocery shopping, for instance? These are very personal decisions and only you can make them. Keep in mind as you do so your own motivations for doing a PhD: know *why* you want it.

I am thinking of a career change. Will a PhD help?

No single answer here applies to everyone. So, key questions you need to ask yourself include:

- Do you want to embark on a PhD in a very different field from your current employment?
- How drastic is the career change you are envisaging? For instance, do you still want to be in the same field but in a different capacity — a hospital manager instead of a practising doctor, say? Or do you wish to change professions entirely?
- How will the PhD research topic you're thinking about enable the career change, or career-path adjustment, you want?

If you do wish to embark on a PhD in a very different field, make sure that you know what the minimum admission requirements of that PhD are; you may, for example, be required to have an undergraduate and/or postgraduate degrees in a particular field.