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Commentary

Is this working? The balancing act of work and postgraduate study

As a full-time undergraduate student in Sydney, I worked three days a week at the other side of the city. This required stressful commutes, arriving at work and class breathless and red in the face, but I managed to keep up appearances at both. Unfortunately, as many undergraduates can attest to, something had to give. I had low motivation, particularly after full days of work, and my studies suffered.

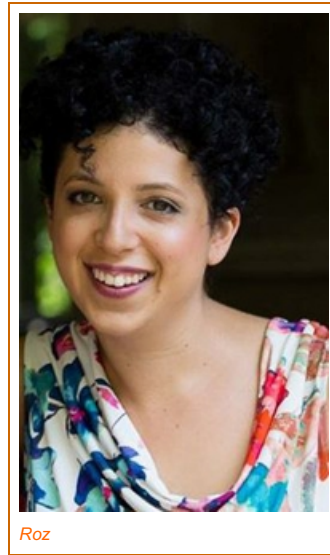
Consequently, I was hesitant about the logistics of postgraduate study. I deferred for a couple of years, wanting to be certain about the course but also needing to know that I could manage the work-study balance this time around. I began studying this March, a week before my wedding. Not the best timing, but I did as much forward planning as I could. I organised my timetables and textbooks, and adjusted to how technological university has become, in preparation for a year of bizarre M-words, such as Moodle, MUTTS and MULO. I attended almost all of the Academic Language and Study Support workshops and read the 'bible' of faculty-specific assignment and reference information.

I was surprised how few local students took advantage of some of these resources. Many think that these classes are only appropriate for international students; however, my confidence in my academic skills grew quickly and I learnt more about referencing, citation and language in these workshops than I did in most of my undergraduate degree!

The other important preparation before the university semester began was to organise my work schedule. I am lucky to have a flexible casual job in which I can move around my shifts and take off time generally as needed. This really helps when I need to take off weeks at a time for placements. I have an advantage in that I work and study in the same field, so I am able to offer more to my employer as I complete my studies. For those working in different areas, it is highly likely that as you progress in your postgraduate studies you are developing skills and experience that are beneficial to your employer. Think about what you might be able to offer, as this makes your student status an advantage rather than an inconvenience. Demonstrate commitment to your course and to your job, and try not to penalise one to serve the other.

I strongly recommend having a controlled, tightly managed schedule. I use the old-fashioned hand-written diary while others use electronic documents or smart phone calendars. The more technologically literate sync a combination of the above. Update these constantly, and not just with important dates and deadlines. When struggling to complete a large task, divide it into small manageable chunks – perhaps by word count or topic – and put these into your schedule, day by day. It may seem tedious but a specific plan will get the work done a lot quicker.

If time management and motivation levels are the problem, however, the university offers free programs in motivation, stress and time management ([SMART](#)), as well as



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“ My brain has to switch from analysing academic journals to speaking to customers, which requires some painful mental gymnastics ”

mindfulness meditation, which has scientifically proven results in developing adaptability, flexibility and cognitive performance, as well as minimising stress and anxiety. There are also counselling and support services for a range of problems and issues experienced at university and personally. I find that many postgraduate students do not spend much time on campus, as we are often running from one activity to another. However, if you have the flexibility to change your schedule in order to use the postgraduate study areas and resources, they can be well worth it. I hear from students who have to work from home for various reasons and it can be hard to clearly mark your own space and time, especially when the house needs cleaning or bills need paying. A set study space can be invaluable.

There is nothing wrong about admitting that the work-study combination is a challenge. The work-study combination means that from March to November you require your brain to multi task and learn to juggle completely different skills and abilities. My brain has to switch from analysing academic journals to speaking to customers, which requires some painful mental gymnastics. It is important to maintain your health, physically and mentally, and your relationships with family and friends throughout the year. Plan ahead for some time out, whether you are able to go on a holiday or relax at home. Australian students have a strange schedule – we have intense peak periods and then extensive summer and winter holidays. Try to get a lot of things done in the down time so that when things pick up again in March you feel organised and in control. If you can, work more in these periods – even by picking up extra casual jobs on Monash's Career Gateway, and save as much as you can to avoid financial worries in the new academic year. This is particularly important if, like me, you have 5-10 weeks of unpaid placements each year. While casual work is ideal for me at this point in my studies, it is hard to take unpaid leave from work and go and complete a full-time unpaid placement. Even minimal savings from the summer period help me stave off panic when placement rolls around each semester.

Finally, despite all of your planning and best intentions, sometimes things will get out of control. Keep a flexible, adaptable mindset and be open to change, as this will help when you face the inevitable complicated administrative issue. I have found it vital to maintain a sense of humour and perspective this year and, even when it gets very stressful, I really enjoy the variety and challenge of this experience.

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