

9 Learning at a Distance but Not a Distance Learner: Re-examining the Support Experiences of Part-time PhD Students



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Abstract

This chapter explores the issues of belonging and connectivity (Wenger, 2010) namely access to programme-based information and support networks for part-time PhD candidates. Part-time learners tend to have limited opportunities to access the academic institution during doctoral candidature due to often balancing studies with full-time employment and other caring roles (Watts, 2008). This focus of this chapter is to present initial findings from the author's ongoing PhD study. The study explores the individual learner's experiences of completing a PhD on a part-time basis and gathers data from 18 students across five Irish universities. Based on an analysis of participants' responses, in a questionnaire and semi-structured interview, a dynamic picture emerges of individual learners who demonstrated resilience and resourcefulness and sought help from others inside and outside the academic institution to complete doctoral studies.

The findings from this study suggest that "one size does not fit all" (O'Regan, 2020b) and higher education institutions should consider the needs of PhD learners beyond assumptions of the student as full-time (Gardner and Gopaul, 2012; Hopwood, Alexander, Harris-Heummert, McAlpine, and Wagstaff, 2011) and situated in the academic institution during doctoral candidature (Pearson, Evans, and Macauley, 2016). This research offers recommendations to educational developers, academics and Student Services on providing online and face-to-face resources and supports for part-time PhD learners. Over the last year, since March 2020, many educators worldwide have moved teaching and learning from face-to-face to online environments to reduce social interaction and combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Therefore, the findings from this study may resonate with a larger audience of educators and learners than the part-time PhD candidates originally conceived of as the intended beneficiaries of this research.

Keywords

PhD, Part-time, Completed, Face-to-face, Online, Agency



Introduction

This chapter addresses changes in the student cohort and in particular the increase in enrolments of non-traditional learners at doctoral level. According to statistics (Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development, 2016) over a quarter of doctoral candidates are international students. Doctoral education policy and practice in Europe has evolved grounded in an assumption of the doctoral student, namely a PhD researcher, as being full-time, with over three-to four years candidature and ideally situated within a community of researchers in the institutional environment (European University Association, 2016; Hasgall, Saenen, and Borrell-Damian, 2019). Goals within higher education policy in Ireland include increasing enrolments at doctoral level and enhancing access and also providing flexible learning opportunities for mature, part-time, employed and distance learners (Department of Education and Skills, 2011).

Part-time Doctoral Candidates

Part-time doctoral candidates share characteristics with other non-traditional learners, for example they tend to be more mature in years and employment experience than many of their full-time peers (Wildy, Peden, and Chan, 2015). What is significant about research on the part-time learner's experience of navigating a PhD to completion is the issue of learning at a distance from the academic institution, due to often working full-time while undertaking doctoral studies (Watts, 2008) yet not enrolled on a programme designed for a part-time learners, for example the Professional or Educational doctorate (Bourner, Bowden, and Laing, 2001; Wildy et al., 2015). Participants who contributed to this study made recommendations on enhancing face-to-face and online doctoral programme information, personal support and sense of community for part-time PhD candidates.

Student Success and Engagement via Face-to-Face, Remote and Online Access

Student success has traditionally been measured in terms of academic achievement and retention (York, Gibson, and Rankin, 2015) with an emphasis on the student experience and activities performed within the context of the academic environment and campus setting (Gourlay, 2015). As well as participating in learning activities within the structure of an educational programme in the academic institution learners also engage with technology and databases, documents and reading material (Gourlay, 2015) often on a solitary basis and in informal learning environments, such as the home and workplace (Barnacle and Mewburn, 2010). Globalisation, greater diversity, for example increase in enrolments of international students and the potential of digital technology to support learners requires rethinking and expanding how student success is conceptualised and understood within education (Fumasoli, 2019). The role of personal agency and harnessing support and resources inside and outside the academic institution has been identified as influencing learners' experiences of progressing with and completing doctoral studies (McAlpine, Paulson, Gonsalves, and Jazvac-Martek, 2012).

Aim of the Current Study

The purpose of this chapter is to present the experiences of 18 individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis across five universities in Ireland. Participants' accounts of interacting with the academic institution to access programme-based supports and resources during the doctoral process illustrate the uniqueness of each learners' experience, often in the context of interaction with various face-to-face and online resources within and beyond the academic institution.

A common theme across all participants' experiences was the role of personal agency and resilience as influencing academic progression and quality of the learner's experience. Demonstrating agency to manage time, organise tasks and seek help, often in the context of managing other conflicting responsibilities was particularly important for individuals who were undertaking PhD studies on a part-time basis.

In the current climate many learners worldwide are forced to be distanced from the physical university environment to combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Therefore, the experiences of the part-time PhD learner may provide insights to educational technologists, academic institutions and student services on harnessing the benefits of online and face-to-face communications and supports to meet the needs of the physically and socially distanced learner.

Exploring the Experiences of Learners Who had Completed a PhD on a Part-time Basis

The decision to focus on the experiences of individuals who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis came from a preliminary study, which was conducted in a single academic institution. Eleven full-time and seven part-time PhD candidates at different stages of the PhD process participated in the preliminary research phase which was conducted both to develop the research instruments (questionnaire and interview process) and to identify a sample of part-time PhD candidates to recruit for the main study. The findings from the preliminary study illustrated the value of completed candidates' experiences and insights into what had helped or hindered academic progression at each stage of the PhD process to completion. In comparison participants at earlier or induction stages of their research journey did not have the same range of doctoral milestones and experiences to draw from, for example completion of the viva examination and submission of the final thesis/dissertation. To capture the experiences of learners beyond a single institutional context snowballing sampling was used to invite individuals who completed a part-time PhD in different universities in Ireland to participate in the study.

Methodology

The challenge of undertaking a study which explored the experiences of learners who completed a PhD on a part-time basis, was compounded by the sparse body of existing research on the part-time learner within the field of doctoral education. Researchers recommend further studies addressing the socialisation and academic experience of part-time PhD candidates (Zahl, 2015) beyond commonly held assumptions of the learner as full-time, traditional, namely under 30 years of age (Hopwood et al., 2011), situated (Pearson et al., 2016) and socialised in the academic

institution (Gardner, 2008). In addition the PhD is aimed at a researcher undertaking studies on a full-time basis over three to four years (European University Association, 2016), whereas the duration of part-time candidature is often five to six years (Watts, 2008).

In essence at the heart of this study was the goal of developing an approach and methodology which helped to shed light on the experiences of learners described as largely absent from the academic environment during doctoral candidature (Gardner, 2008). In order to move beyond a deficit-based understanding of the part-time PhD candidate's experience (Gardner and Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul and Gardner, 2014) this study aimed to add the part-time learner's voice to discourse in doctoral education to understand what may have helped as well as potentially challenged advancement with the PhD.

Questionnaire and Semi-structured Interview Process

A questionnaire and semi-structured interview process were developed to explore learners' experiences of completing a PhD on a part-time basis. The goal of the questionnaire was to explore if participants accessed doctoral programme support via email, web-based and online resources as well as on a face-to-face basis, for example from the supervisor, academic and administrative departments and Student Support Services. The questionnaire comprised of closed yes/no questions and open text comments boxes. Comments boxes were included in the questionnaire to provide participants with an opportunity to elaborate on answers in relation to experiences of accessing doctoral programme support and information via different media (face-to-face and online) from the academic institution during candidature.

The acknowledgement of the role of non-human (for example technology and document based resources) as well as human actors as potentially influencing knowledge generation (Latour, 2005) was identified as an important consideration in this study. Researchers have highlighted the challenges part-time learners can face in terms of opportunities to interact with academic staff and fellow doctoral researchers on a regular basis during candidature. Access to online and web-based resources may facilitate access to doctoral programme resources for learners with limited opportunities to avail of campus-based support.

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to explore if participants experienced any barriers and enablers to progression with the PhD including academic, institutional or personal influences. The purpose of the interview was also to explore if individuals demonstrated personal agency (Archer, 2003) and sought help, both inside and outside the academic institution to advance with doctoral studies (McAlpine et al., 2012). The accounts given by participants illustrated the uniqueness of each learner's experience of navigating part-time PhD to completion in the context of varying levels of interaction with face-to-face and online communities of support, within and beyond the academic institution.

Analysis of Data

Closed responses (yes/no) in the questionnaire were analysed using simple descriptive statistics (Pallant, 2005) to establish frequency and percentages of responses for each question. Qualitative responses from the comments section in the questionnaire and from the interview process were evaluated using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The findings are presented under three themes namely:

- 1 Doctoral programme support and information from the academic institution.
- 2 Barriers and enablers to progressing and completing a PhD on a part-time basis.
- 3 Personal agency, help-seeking and self-generated support networks.

Description of Participants

Eighteen individuals (13 females and 5 males) who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis in an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) discipline in five different universities in Ireland participated in the study. Over 80% of part-time PhD candidates in Ireland are based within the university sector, with the majority, namely 62% studying within an AHSS discipline (Higher Education Authority, 2018).

Participants had undertaken part-time PhD studies in different disciplines including Education, Education Technology, Business, Languages and Social Sciences within five different universities in Ireland. Individuals ranged from 26-55 years of age and over when starting the doctoral journey. All participants were in employment, predominantly full-time, while studying. Twelve of the participants had a spouse or partner and/or dependents. Undertaking doctoral studies in the context of employment and caring responsibilities has been identified as challenging for many part-time doctoral candidates (Watts, 2008).

Findings

The findings illustrate the variety in terms of individual participants' experiences of navigating a PhD to completion on a part-time basis. The relationship with the supervisor, primarily on a face-to-face basis, was cited as a key influence on the learner's experience of navigating the doctoral process. An academic staff member who had experience of supervising doctoral candidates to completion and who was familiar with the academic institution, structures, personnel, systems and doctoral procedures was identified as an invaluable source of support and information, particularly for learners who were often situated at a physical distance from campus during 9am – 5pm working hours. Participants commented on the challenges of working with an academic advisor who did not have experience of supervising PhD candidates to completion, or who was not familiar with the doctoral culture, structure and procedures within the academic institution. The findings illustrate the need to support academic staff and provide training and development opportunities for new supervisors.

The employment environment, job role, time commitments and family responsibilities were cited as factors outside of the academic institution which influenced progress with doctoral studies. Personal agency, resilience, project and time management skills as well as harnessing support from face-to-face and online self-generated peer networks were identified as positively influencing academic advancement and completion of a PhD on a part-time basis.

The following comments give voice to the part-time doctoral learner and highlight potential actions the academic institution and support staff can take to encourage dynamic interaction, communication and support on a face-to-face and online basis for part-time doctoral candidates with limited opportunities to access campus-based supports during the working day. Pseudonyms are used for all participants' comments.

Doctoral Programme Information and Support from the Academic Institution

Responses from participants indicated that sources of information on the doctoral process, guidelines and modes of assessment were often available in document-based format from departmental and university websites but were sometimes hard to find.

"It is difficult to read and interpret guidelines in a 100-page document." (Natalie).

"It's there somewhere online [information on the doctoral process] but it can be hard to find" (Natalie).

In general, participants tended to prefer to source doctoral programme information on an informal and face-to-face basis, predominantly from supervisors and personal contacts. Examples included administrators, academic and support staff and fellow doctoral candidates, often full-time learners who tended to be more familiar with the campus-based services and supports than the part-time PhD candidate as the following comments illustrate:

"There were pockets of support – I got a lot of help from a particular administrator in my department when I had an issue with my fees. I don't know if she was extra helpful or if I would have got the same support from another staff member in the university." (Fiona).

"The Library staff were lovely, so friendly and helpful, especially when you are part-time and are going into the Library to study, for example in the evening or during a wet weekend afternoon!" (Heather).

The sample of comments illustrate the difficulties participants experienced in navigating the doctoral process and deciphering academic regulations often in the absence of opportunity to access face-to-face support on campus during business hours. This was due to working, often full-time and at a distance from the academic institution.

"We are novice researchers. We need guidance because we don't have the safety support network that full-timers have. Because full-timers can knock on a door Monday to Friday, we part-timers can't as we are working full-time." (Mike).

Dependency on information which is sourced informally, for example through 'the grapevine' rather than communicated through formal official documentation or websites from the academic institution may potentially result in learners accessing outdated or inaccurate information (Gardner, 2007). The responses from participants suggest the need for academic institutions, educators and support services to provide more online support tailored to answering queries and meeting the needs of learners who may have limited opportunities to access the academic institution during the 9am to 5pm working day.

Barriers and Enablers to Progressing and Completing a PhD on a Part-time Basis

Family and friends were identified by participants as a positive source of personal, practical and motivational help, rather than providing academic or critical support with the PhD. However, participants also identified the challenges of managing family responsibilities with doctoral studies and full-time employment.

A key outcome from this research was the role of the participant's work environment as facilitating or challenging progress with doctoral studies. Individuals who were undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis and working in a research setting in an academic institution acknowledged the benefits of supportive management and staff and an organisational culture which encouraged employees to pursue doctoral qualifications (O'Regan, 2019). Benefits included having access to colleagues who were familiar with the challenges of doctoral study, opportunities to undertake research which complimented the nature of the job role and management who provided the financial support and time for the learner to pursue doctoral studies. In contrast, individuals who were undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis in the absence of support from the employer and with limited opportunities to access research communities within the academic institution, described a challenging and isolating experience of pursuing doctoral studies.

"I had access to my participants for my research in my day job. I had built up good relations and networks via my work" (Rose).

"My PhD topic and work experience contributed to my work as an academic – I brought cutting edge research to the classroom debate" (Nina).

However, the work environment was also cited as a barrier to progressing with doctoral studies, individuals who worked in an environment where the doctoral qualification was not valued or supported cited the difficulties both in terms of isolation as a researcher and the challenges of balancing studies with employment.

"I used my long train journey from work to home for PhD work, it was extremely focused work. Sometimes I thought I would miss my stop I was so focused!" (Una).

"I had to negotiate time with management to attend modules which I managed to do but it was awkward sometimes. I could work a bit late or something to make up time." (Gary).

The comments from participants illustrate the importance of the work environment as influencing learners' experiences of progressing with and completing a PhD on a part-time basis.

Personal Agency, Help-seeking and Self-generated Support Networks

Participants cited personal resilience as facilitating academic progression and quality of the doctoral experience. Part-time status was identified by participants as a barrier to accessing doctoral training, seminars, events and social opportunities held within the academic institution during the day due to other work commitments. Some participants sought help on a face-to-face basis from work colleagues and self-generated peer networks comprising of other full and part-time doctoral candidates to assist with navigating the academic, administrative and procedural aspects of the doctoral process. However, for many individuals online doctoral discussion forums, academic blogs and email contact with other PhD candidates helped to bridge the gap in terms of access to programme-based information and support, particularly for learners with limited access to research training and supportive communities in the academic or employment environment.

“I depended on the kindness of strangers on online doctoral forums, researchers, academics and fellow learners from around the world who just wanted to help other doctoral candidates.” (Elaine).

“I think more could be done in terms of support services. I’m resilient but if I hadn’t been I wouldn’t have got through [the PhD]. At certain points you could have some targeted supports that would keep people in the system in terms of progressing and completing the doctoral process. Even a parcel of online resources that the student can consult, for example here are some resources on qualitative research methods, guidelines on the Ethics process etc...” (Fiona).

What this research has highlighted is the need for a joined-up approach from academic staff and support services to support doctoral candidates beyond a dependence on face-to-face contact with individual staff and “helpful” others.

Recommendations and Wider Implications of this Study

Individuals who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis within the university sector in Ireland provided insights on personal and institutional factors which had facilitated or challenged progression and completion of doctoral studies. Research on the experiences of individuals who have completed the doctoral process, in comparison to learners who are at early stages of the research journey, can provide valuable insights into what worked and did not work in terms of enhancing academic advancement and the learner’s experience.

Therefore, it is important for academic institutions to include the voice of non-traditional learners, for example part-time PhD candidates, when developing teaching and learning supports that meet the needs of individuals who may have different potential challenges and enablers in terms of accessing research communities and services. Part-time PhD candidates who experienced the greatest barriers to progressing with doctoral studies, for example limited opportunities to engage with the supervisor and lack of wider supportive doctoral networks inside and beyond the academic institution may provide insights on how digital technology, online communication and social media can facilitate academic and social engagement for the physically distanced learner.

The outcomes from this study illustrate the importance of understanding not just *who* learners are, for example, full-time, part-time, mature or international candidates but acknowledging *where* learners are in terms of life-stage, employment context and physical distance from the academic institution to ensure that supports and information are designed with the needs of the learner in mind (O’Regan, 2020a). Part-time doctoral learners’ who described their experiences as academically and socially isolating highlight an issue which may potentially have been overlooked by academic institutions and support services to date, namely addressing the needs of students whose needs are unknown or are not captured via traditional methods for example student feedback surveys. Researchers recommend further exploration of doctoral candidates’ experiences of undertaking studies beyond an assumption of the learner as full-time, socialised (Gardner, 2008) and situated within the academic institution (Pearson et al., 2016).

Digital and technological resources have been identified as providing a potential solution to connecting educators and learners across diverse locations (Fumasoli, 2019). The importance of belonging and membership of a community, even at a peripheral level (Lave and Wenger, 1991) has been identified as a key influence on learners’ experiences (Wenger, 2010). This suggests that academic institutions, support services, educational developers and technologists, as well as students themselves need to work together to harness the benefits of digital technologies and online resources as well as face-to-face supports and services to enhance the quality of the academic, social and personal aspects of the learning experience.

Supporting Learners at a Distance in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Over the last year since March 2020, educators have responded to the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic by moving teaching and learning from face-to-face to online platforms to reduce physical and social contact between individuals (Irish Universities Association, 2020). The forced requirement for learners to be ‘distanced’ from the university setting could help highlight what was already existing for part-time PhD students. This suggests that academic institutions may need to reframe traditional assumptions of the learner as located within the academic institution with access to face-to-face support networks.

Conclusion

The current research on part-time learners' experiences of navigating a PhD to completion within universities in Ireland has highlighted an aspect of student inclusion and engagement which has received little attention to date. Namely how the position of a learner at a physical and social distance with limited opportunities to spend time on campus has an impact on access to programme-based information and quality of the student experience. Individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis provided insights on how technological resources, for example doctoral discussion boards and academic blogs helped with advancement of studies, often in the absence of ongoing presence on campus with limited access to college-based supports and resources.

This suggests that academic institutions and stakeholders involved in supporting doctoral candidates ensure that communication and interaction with the learner is dynamic and intentional and that resources and guidelines are accessible, user friendly and available in different formats. A key recommendation from this study is to explore how different stakeholders within academic institutions including educational technologists, student services and individual doctoral candidates can work together to bridge the gap between face-to-face and online resources to support learners at a distance from the university environment. Many of us are currently working, learning and potentially teaching remotely and online due to enforced social distancing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These unprecedented circumstances can provide us with insights into understanding and meeting the needs of the distanced learner, now and in the future.

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