



Trinity College Dublin

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath

The University of Dublin

Networked in or networked out: What can we learn from diverse learners' experiences of progressing with and completing doctoral studies?

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Access and success for all learners in HE

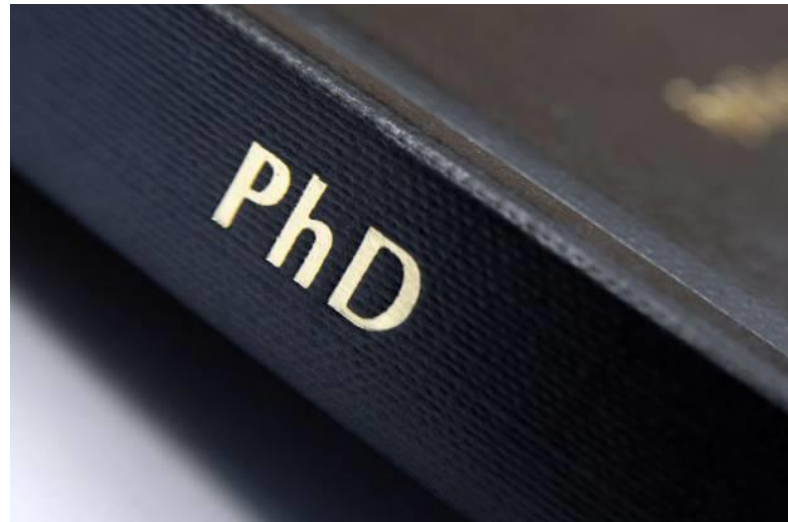


**F/t, P/t,
international and
online students.**



Background to study

Student Learning Advisor



**Part-time PhD student
2016-2022**

Definitions of student success



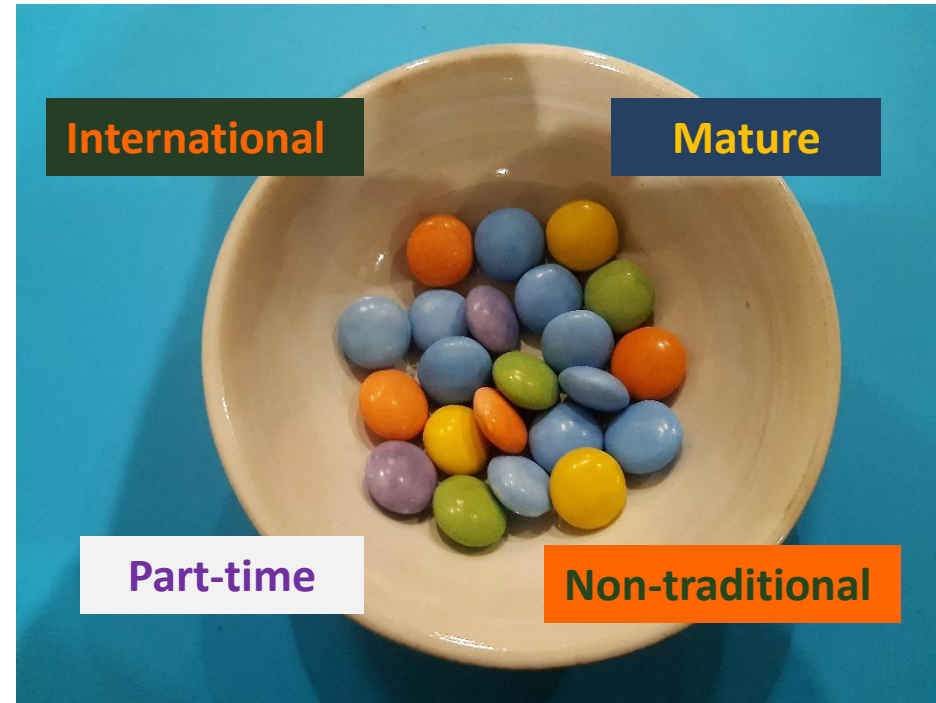
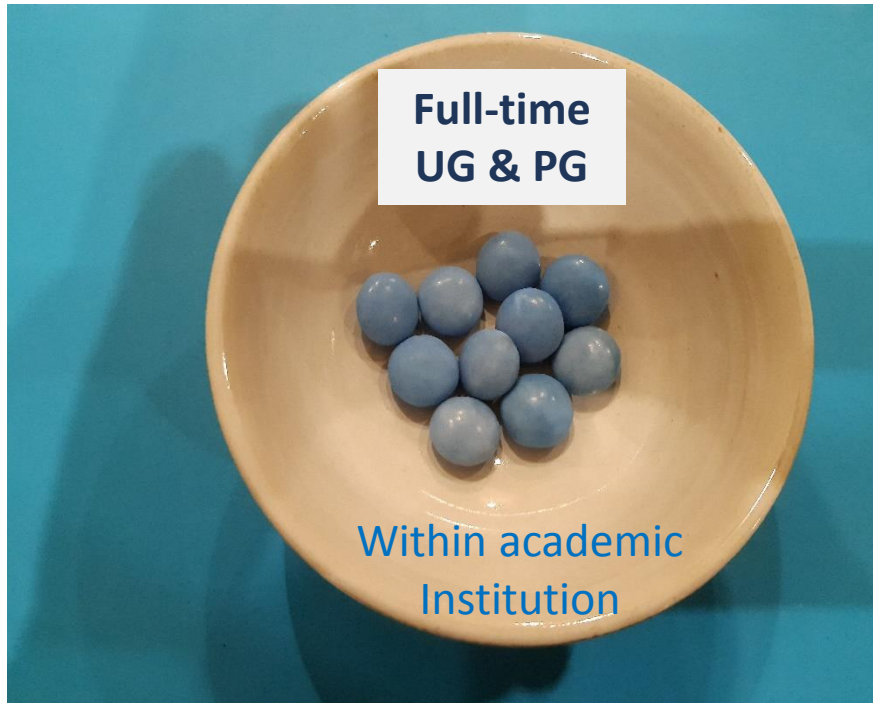
Influences on Higher Education

- **Digital Technology**
- **Globalisation**
- **Bologna qualifications framework**
- **Diversity of student populations**

(González Geraldo, Trevitt, & Carter, 2011)

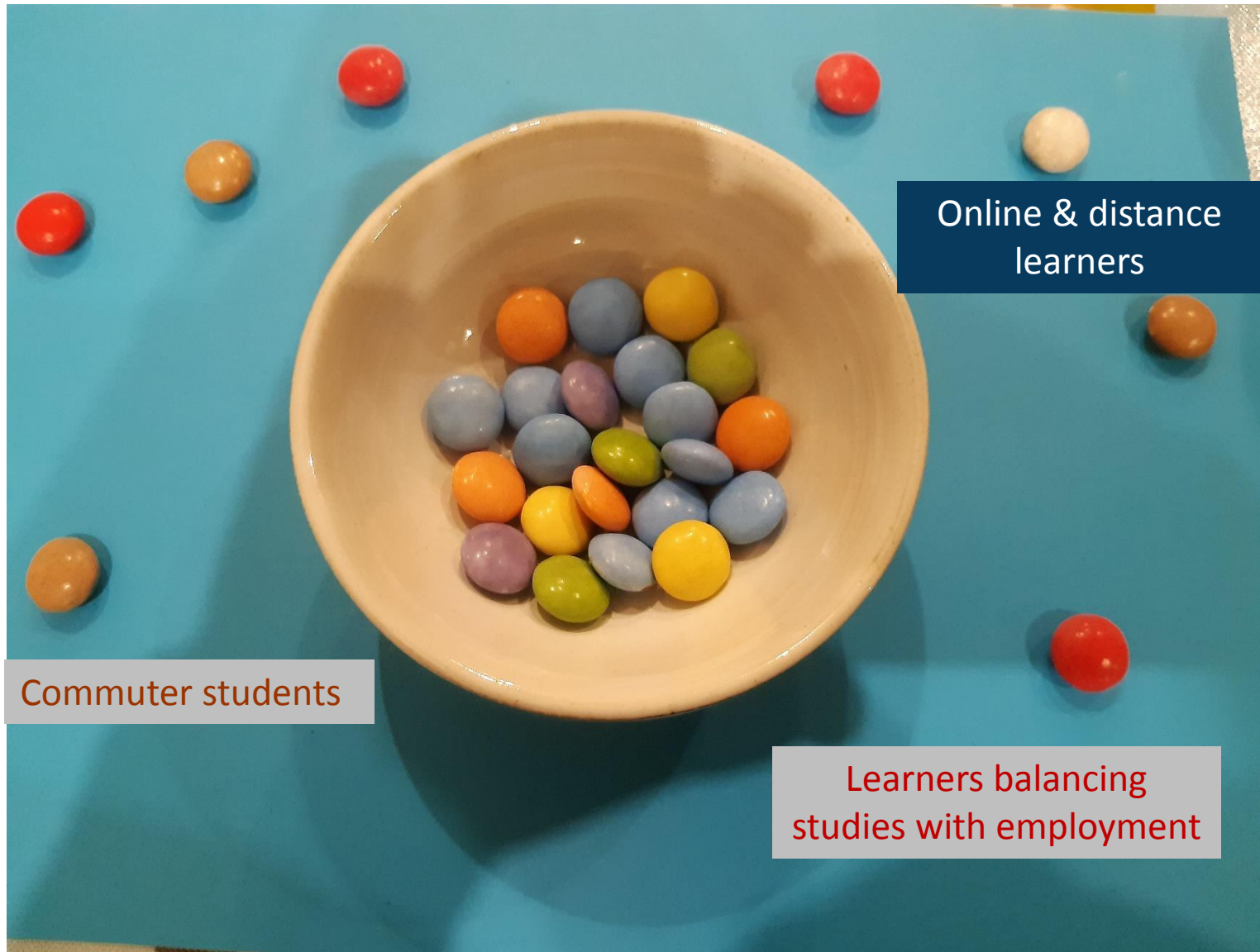


Diversity of student populations in HE



Twice as many older learners enrolled on a part-time basis within almost all EHEA systems. Majority of international students enrolled at PG level (European Commission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2018)

.....Another dimension of diversity



Enhancing HE access for diverse learners

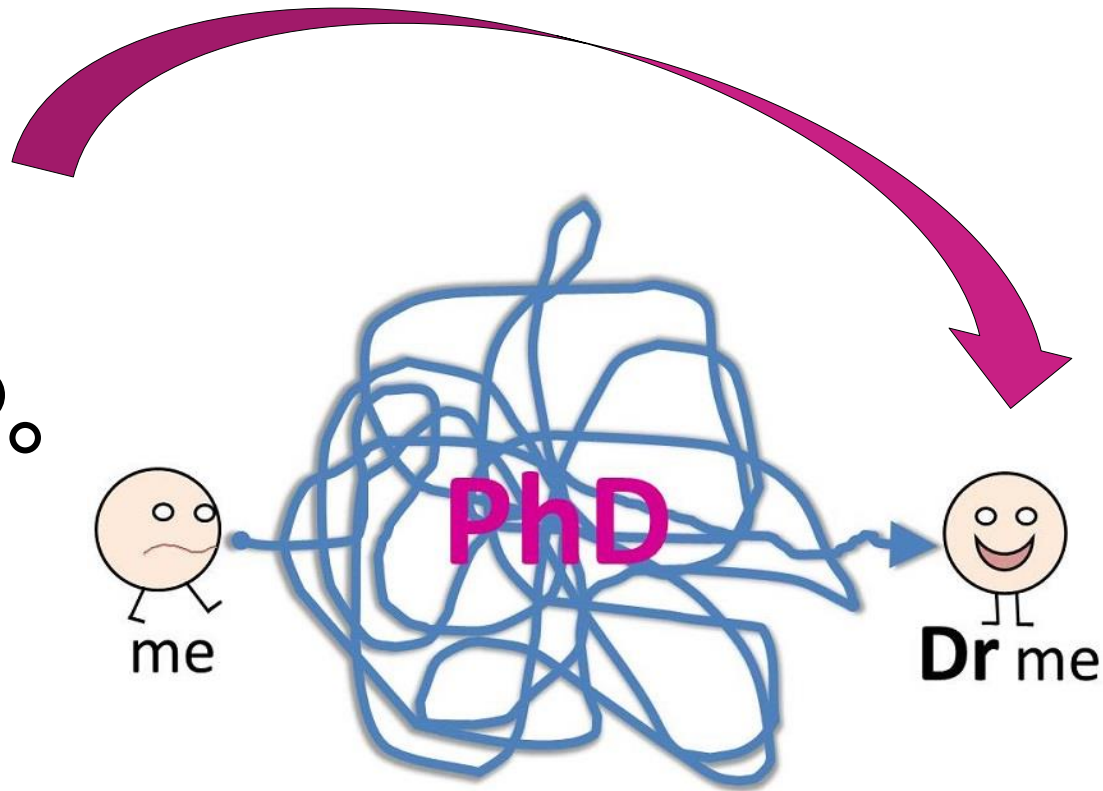
1. Increase enrolments at doctoral level to contribute to original innovative research and knowledge generation
2. Provide flexible learning opportunities to meet the needs of individuals including online, distance, mature, part-time and employed learners.

National Strategy for Higher Education 2030 Ireland (Department of Education and Skills, 2011)



Research Question

How do I
get **there**
when I'm
not **here**?



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...The part-time doctoral student, often

- **Limited access to academic institution**
- **Working**
- **Caring for family**

(Watts, 2008)

*“Invisible in policy and practice despite an
Increase in p/t doctoral enrolments worldwide”*

(Neumann & Rodwell, 2009)



Phase of current PhD research project



Research methodology



QUESTIONNAIRE: Closed Questions: **Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005).**

1. Demographic information
2. Who, what where, when and how (face-to-face and online) did you access information relevant to stages and forms of assessment in doctoral programme?

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW: Open questions: **Theories of Agency (e.g. Archer, 2003).**

1. Did you experience any enablers to progression?
2. Did you experience any barriers to progression?
3. What, if anything, would you recommend to a fellow PhD student and or the academic institution?



Participants in Phase 1

22 participants in a single research intensive institution in Ireland .

4 staff and 18 students (15 = AHSS and 3 = HS).

Age range on starting PhD = 25 – 55 with over 60% aged over 35 on starting PhD. 4 international students (EU and non-EU) participated.



4 Academic/Postgraduate support staff.



11 full-time PhDs (2 M/ 9 F). *



7 part-time PhDs (1 M/ 6 F).

*** F/t included in Phase 1 to avoid bias on p/t PhDs and to inform main research study.**

Findings from Phase 1 – Full-time



F/t (n=11) – 7 current students and 4 finishing/completed
All wholly or partially funded by university/external funding)

Experience of PhD

- 3-5 days per week on campus (during full 9am-5pm day)
- Located at desk within university in peer environment
- Access to research activities and collegial (mostly peer but also supervisors) networks on campus to develop researcher and professional skills
- ***“It’s great having a desk – I am with other PhDs and it feels like a proper working environment”*** (f/t quote).

Findings from Phase 1 – Part-time

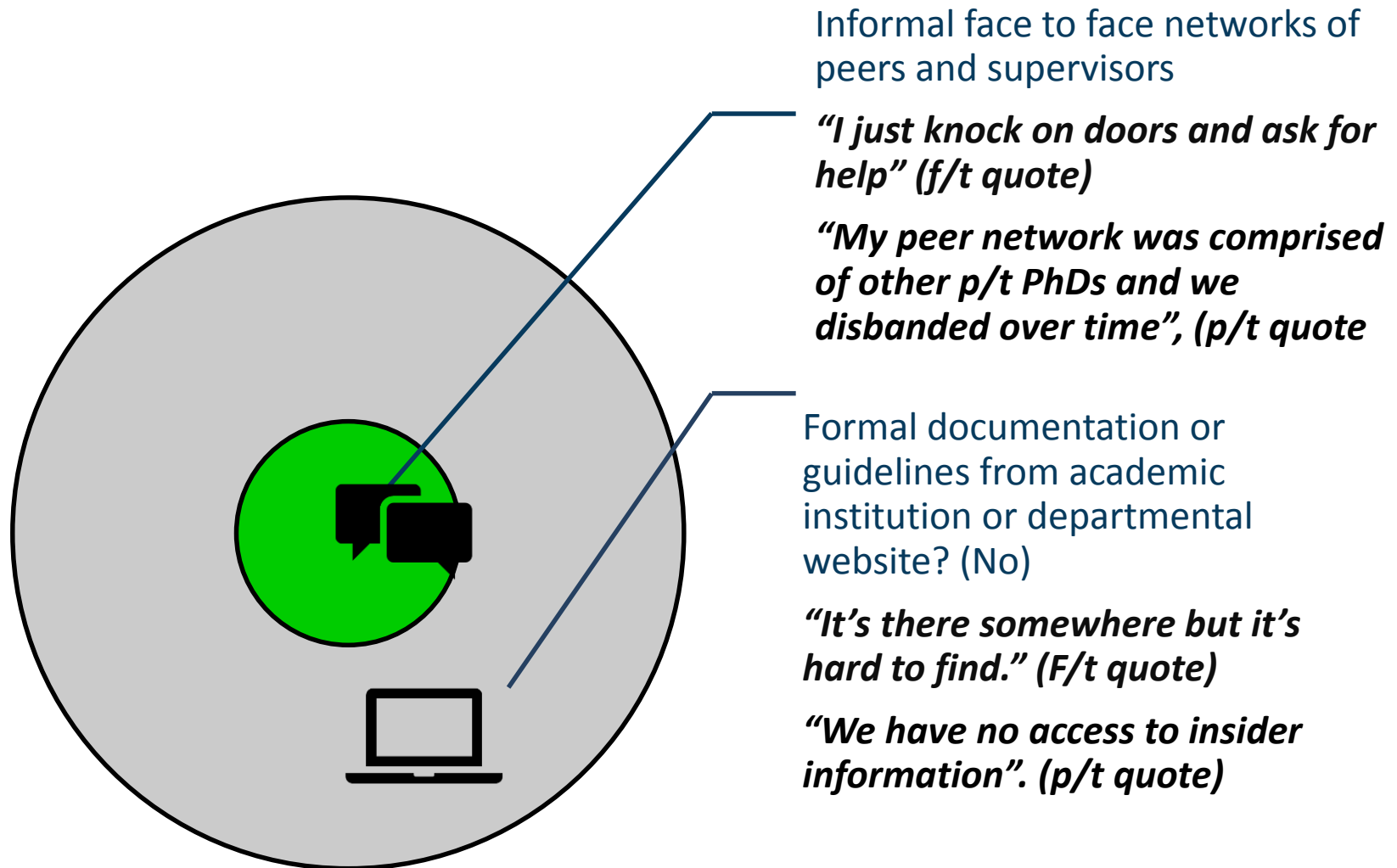


P/t (n=7) – 6 current students and 1 completed
All wholly or partially self-funded (2 had fees paid by employer)

Experience of PhD

- 1 day per week/fortnight – after 5pm for a fixed purpose (***e.g. “training, seminar or meet supervisor”***) up to 4 hours
- Limited opportunity to engage in university facilities, training, supports and college culture during 9am-5pm working day.
- High dependency on supervisors and peers (as did F/t) for accessing information, training and support.
- ***“Everything I have is because of my supervisor – except for my student card” (p/t quote).***

Accessing doctoral programme information, training and support from academic institution



Summary of findings

- **Structure:** Dependency of face to face informal networks versus online resources and information can be a disadvantage for students with limited regular access to campus environment and supports.
- **Culture:** difficulty in accessing information and staff and peer networks for some part-time and international students *“insiders versus outsiders”*.
- **Factors impacting on doctoral experience/engagement:** 70% of both full and part-time participants worked during doctoral process. F/t due to high cost of living and to supplement funding and p/t due to lack of funding opportunities for p/t students
- **Agency:** Both f/t and P/t demonstrated agency to progress with and complete doctoral studies. F/t tended to have greater access to campus environment and training and development opportunities than P/t. P/t often candidates demonstrated agency in use of time and making most of supervisor meetings and campus visits.

Personal agency and seeking help



Full-time participants' quotes

- *"I got that training/opportunity because of my own efforts and not giving up!"*
- *"I got involved in everything, clubs and societies, taking on employment in college – everything I could do to develop as a researcher and get the most out of this opportunity"*
- *"I knocked on doors I got to know everyone – I found my support networks and my tribe."*

Part-time participants quotes:

"You have to be an extrovert if you want to get anything – and I'm not!"

"I get all I can from my meetings with my supervisor to help me move forward and make progress between meetings."

"I used my down-time on my (long) commute to study, write and edit my thesis"



Recommendations

- Online and face to face support, training and information on forms of assessment and learning outcomes at each stage of the PhD process.
- Support for PhD students who *“drop off the radar”* or who may have less access to support (e.g. part-time & international PhD students).
- Identification and regular review of individual student’s needs and progress (e.g. research training needs) by supervisor (s).
- Financial support for F/T and P/T candidates to ensure that the PhD qualification remains viable and attractive as a course of study for future doctoral students.
- Encourage networking and supportive doctoral cultures (e.g. Orientation events, “meet and greet” information sharing sessions between academic staff and PhD students.
- Training on PhD systems, processes & regulations for supervisors, students & administrative departments (e.g. HR, academic & Finance functions).
- *“Avoid dependency on grapevine for academic and procedural info”*

Access and success for all learners in HE



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Please email me if you are interested in this project
I would love to hear from you!

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THANK YOU

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