

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

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**Abstract:**

*Discourse on student success has tended to emphasise academic attainment and retention (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015). However, influences such as globalisation, increasing diversity of student populations and the potential of digital technologies to support the student experience require redefining and expanding how success is understood in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) worldwide (York et al., 2015). The current paper will examine student success in the context of a sample of students' experiences of accessing academic and personal support during doctoral candidature.*

*This article focuses on a preliminary study which investigated if full and part-time doctoral candidates reported differences in terms of access to programme-based information and academic and personal support networks during the doctoral process. Outcomes from the initial exploratory phase of the research (completed in December 2018) are based on responses from eighteen doctoral candidates (11 full-time and 7 part-time) from a single research-intensive university in Ireland. Participants were undertaking studies in different disciplines and were at various stages of the doctoral research journey.*

*The results suggest that "one size does not fit all" and different students can encounter various barriers and enablers to accessing programme-based information and participating in academic and personal networks during doctoral candidature.*

*The current paper explores how HEIs might harness both face-to-face and online resources to enhance access to programme-based and social support to meet the needs of different learners. The findings from this study can provide insights to policy makers and practitioners on supporting a diverse body of students within higher education in Europe, not just within the doctoral process, but at different stages within the Bologna Qualifications Framework.*

## **1. Introduction**

Discourse on student success has tended to emphasise academic attainment and retention (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015). However, influences such as globalisation, increasing diversity of student populations and the potential of digital technologies to support the student experience require redefining and expanding how success is understood in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) worldwide (York et al., 2015). The current paper will examine student success in the context of a sample of students' experiences of accessing academic and personal support during doctoral candidature.

This article focuses on a preliminary study which investigated if full and part-time doctoral candidates reported differences in terms of access to programme-based information and academic and personal support networks during the doctoral process. Outcomes from the initial exploratory phase of the research (completed in December 2018) are based on responses from eighteen doctoral candidates (11 full-time and 7 part-time) from a single research-intensive university in Ireland. Participants were undertaking studies in different disciplines and were at various stages of the doctoral research journey.

The results suggest that “*one size does not fit all*” and different students can encounter various barriers and enablers to accessing programme-based information and participating in academic and personal networks during doctoral candidature.

The current paper explores how HEIs might harness both face-to-face and online resources to enhance access to programme-based and social support to meet the needs of different learners. The findings from this study can provide insights to policy makers and practitioners on supporting a diverse body of students within higher education in Europe, not just within the doctoral process, but at different stages within the Bologna Qualifications Framework.

## **2. Policy recommendations**

Educational reforms in higher education in Europe have been largely influenced by the Bologna Process which has helped to increase transparency, accountability and standardisation within undergraduate and postgraduate programmes within HEIs in Europe (González Geraldo, Trevitt, & Carter, 2011). In a review “*The European Higher Education Area (EHEA): 2018 Bologna Process Implementation Report*”(European Commission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2018) globalisation, e-learning and increased diversity of student enrolments were identified as significantly influencing higher educational policy and practice and the quality of the student experience.

Policy initiatives at a national level, for example the National Strategy for Higher Education in Ireland for the year 2030 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011), have identified the importance of providing flexible, online and distance learning options to support diverse learners needs, including distance and part-time students and learners who are in employment.

Varwell (2018) recommends broadening the scope of student engagement in quality assurance processes which tends to be represented by full-time undergraduate students, to ensure that a more diverse body of student voices are heard, and that online and postgraduate students are included as partners in quality and that student engagement reflects the full experiences of an institutions student profile.

In summary greater diversity of student populations (e.g. part-time, mature, international and online learners) and changing patterns of access and entry to higher education has presented challenges to policy makers and practitioners to create more flexible entry pathways and modes of study within educational programmes such as part-time and online learning options.

## **3. Access to higher education**

*“Lifelong learning is slowly emerging as a new vision for education enabling individuals to continually update their skills to meet the constantly evolving market demand”* (European Commission et al., 2018 p193).

Discourse on educational policy and practice has been critiqued as tending to focus on the experience of the traditional, young full-time students in higher education including learners within the doctoral process. Researchers (Hopwood, 2010) recommend exploring the student experience from multi-faceted perspectives, such as external personal and social networks, family and employment responsibilities and other time and personal commitments

Traditional access into tertiary education is being challenged by students postponing entry into Higher Education in favouring of entering the workforce, or taking a gap year after finishing secondary level

education, potentially to capitalise on employment opportunities or as a result of limited financial support to undertake studies (European Commission et al., 2018).

This trend may require higher education institutions to design programmes to meet the needs of learners who are older on entering education than previous generations of students and who are balancing study with work and other commitments

### **3.1 International students**

An international student is defined as a person who has left their country of origin and moved to another country for the purpose of study (OECD, 2019). According to reports (European Commission et al., 2018) the majority of international students participate in education programmes at postgraduate and doctoral level. International students have reported challenges in accessing research networks and opportunities to disseminate research in English language publications, which is the standard language of publication within academia (Curry & Lillis, 2010). The role of research communities has been identified as enhancing academic progression and the doctoral student experience (Pyhältö, Stubb, & Lonka, 2009) however, certain groups of students have been found to experience challenges to accessing research networks. Part-time, international and non-science based (e.g. Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) students have been found to have less access to research networks than their full-time and science-based peers (Deem & Brehony, 2000).

### **3.2 Doctoral candidates**

Doctoral policy is governed by the Salzburg principles (European University Association, 2016) which acknowledge the difference between doctoral programmes and other levels of study within the first and second cycles within the Bologna process (European Commission et al., 2018), namely the production of original research and knowledge within an innovative research environment (European University Association, 2010). Loxley and Kearns (2018) have found that doctoral qualifications have increasingly become the entry level requirement to practice across a number of academic and industry settings.

Supporting doctoral candidates is a core strategy within higher education policy in Europe and aligns with goals to develop researchers to foster innovation and generate new knowledge and contribute to academic, economic and social reform (European University Association, 2016). There has been an 8% increase in doctoral holders over the period from 2013-2017. There were 276,800 doctoral holders in 2017 across OECD countries.

### **3.3 Part-time doctoral candidates.**

Literature on the experiences of part-time doctoral is sparse with the body of research focusing on the full-time doctoral student's experience. Although generally overlooked in current research studies (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) part-time doctoral candidates can provide valuable insights on the experience of navigating an academic programme at the highest level of the Bologna qualifications framework despite potentially limited ongoing access to the academic institution during candidature compared to full-timers (Watts, 2008).

Age is a factor which influences part-time study and according to statistics (European Commission et al., 2018) there are over twice as many learners within an older rather than younger age group enrolled in part-time programmes across virtually all European Higher Education Area (EHEA) systems. The changing nature of student demographics has prompted researchers, educators and policy makers to acknowledge the role of learning support and communication mechanisms beyond the context of learning and socialisation within the classroom-based setting.

#### **4. Doctoral research environments**

Despite the fact that there are now doctoral schools in most EHEA countries only a quarter of doctoral candidates follow their programme in a doctoral school (European Commission et al., 2018). While doctoral schools can provide structure, guidelines for supervision and quality of provision at times they can be concentrated within certain programmes or units rather than embedded within doctoral programmes and structures across the university (European University Association, 2016). One of the goals of the doctoral process is to create inclusive research environments (European University Association, 2010) to promote the generation of original knowledge research by a diverse body of doctoral candidates (European University Association, 2016). Researchers have highlighted how research communities of practice can foster inclusiveness and sense of belonging for doctoral candidates (Christensen & Lund, 2014). However, doctoral candidates in certain disciplines (e.g. science-based) and enrolled full-time tend to have greater access to research communities than peers who are part-time or in an AHSS discipline (Deem & Brehony, 2000).

Researchers have identified the attention given predominantly to supporting doctoral candidates in Medicine and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) disciplines and recommend addressing the needs of doctoral candidates in the Social Sciences (European University Institute, 2017). The development of coherent and transparent admissions policies that recognises the needs of individual learners and different dimensions of research talent (European University Association, 2016) can help support doctoral candidates in making the transition from dependent to independent researcher (Lovitts, 2008).

#### **5. Defining student success – the role of socialisation and academic networks**

The term student success has been described as an ambiguous and multifaceted concept, primarily based around measures of student academic attainment and retention (York et al., 2015). Academic performance and retention can be useful ways to evaluate student success. However, levels of integration and quality of interaction between the student and the academic environment, faculty and peers can also influence student performance and decisions to stay or drop out of the institution (Angulo-Ruiz & Pergelova, 2013).

Socialisation of the student into the academic institution has been identified as influencing the quality of the doctoral student experience and academic performance (Jones, 2013; Weidman & Stein, 2003). The importance of the classroom has been highlighted as providing the opportunity and setting for students to engage in learning activities and meet academic staff and peers, particularly for students who work or attend courses on a part-time basis (Tinto, 2012).

Leander, Phillips, Taylor, Nespor, and Lewis (2010) recommend that researchers move beyond the tendency for discourse within educational research to focus on the role of the school or classroom as a bounded system to explore the role of technologies in transferring knowledge and information and connecting people across time, space and place, for example across both local and global settings.

##### **5.1 Face-to-face support versus digital technologies and online resources**

The value of online and distance learning options is gradually being recognised as providing a way to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse body of students participating in higher education worldwide (Leander et al., 2010). A review of progress with the implementation of the Bologna Process reforms (European Commission et al., 2018) has identified the potential of digital technologies in enhancing transparency of learning outcomes and course work load, providing flexible learning paths and meeting the needs of under-represented groups, such as distance and part-time students.

However, results from the Postgraduate Researcher Experience Survey (PRES) UK suggests that students prefer face-to-face rather than online communication and feedback (Slight, 2017). Researchers (González Geraldo et al., 2011) note that while technologies such as wikis, podcasts, blogs and emails can support learning, digital media should complement rather than replace face-to-face interaction and communication. Berry (2017) recommends further research into identifying social structures to support online students and suggests that universities extend existing technology and online support to enhance learning and social opportunities for online and distance-based learners.

## **6. Introduction to the current research study**

The current research study is an ongoing PhD project (2016- to date) comprising of two phases, a preliminary exploratory stage and a main study. The overall aim of the research is to explore how a sample of part-time doctoral candidates experienced access to academic and personal support networks within the academic institution during doctoral candidature. The research also explores if part-time doctoral candidates demonstrated agency to influence academic progression and completion of studies, for example seeking help for others, within and outside the academic institution via face-to-face and online communication mechanisms. The findings from a preliminary stage in the research are presented here. This phase of the research highlights similarities and differences, predominately between full and part-time doctoral candidates (who participated in the study) and draws some conclusions on students' experiences of accessing face-to-face and online doctoral programme information and support networks.

### **6.1 Preliminary phase of the research (full-time and part-time doctoral candidates)**

The initial stage of the study (2017-2018) was conducted to investigate if there was merit in exploring the part-time learner's experience of progressing through studies as significantly different to the full-time candidate's journey in terms of access to academic and social support networks within the academic institution during doctoral candidature.

This phase of the research was conducted in a single research-intensive university in Ireland and participants included full and part-time doctoral candidates at different stages of the research process and from different disciplines. Based on the results from the preliminary study the research tools (questionnaire and semi-structured interview process) were developed and refined to explore the experiences of candidates who had completed doctoral studies on a part-time basis within the university sector in Ireland.

The main phase of the research is currently in progress and initial perspectives on this phase of the study will be briefly discussed at the end of this paper.

#### **6.1.1 Conceptual framework and research design of study**

The research design for the (preliminary and main) study draws on Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) and theories of Agency. Actor- Network Theory acknowledges the role of non-human (Latour, 2005; Law, 1992; Sayes, 2014) as well as human sources of information and knowledge transfer for example via documents and technology-based communications. The role of distributed actors and networks is addressed by other researchers, for example (Hopwood, 2010) in terms of the multifaceted nature of the doctoral students' world, social networks and sources of knowledge (e.g. academic and personal contacts, documents and books).

According to Nespor (2002) some actors, for example students are often relegated and decontextualized rather than viewed as agents of change, which is assumed to take place within the institutional context. González Geraldo et al. (2011) highlight the unique opportunity that the

European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has to improve higher education systems in Europe and recommend ensuring teachers and students are included in consultations on reforming education and promoting student success. The role of the student in demonstrating agency such as seeking support and taking action to progress with studies is identified as a key aspect of the student experience (McAlpine, Paulson, Gonsalves, & Jazvac-Martek, 2012).

### **6.1.2. Theories of Agency**

The role of individuals in shaping and being shaped by their social context is developed by Archer (2003) who suggests that the individual constitutes a self who can interact socially and act reflexively to shape their external circumstances and reality. The ideas proposed (Archer, 2003) combine both psychological (agency) and social (structure and culture) influences on human behaviour and advancement.

Her theories seek to redress this imbalance by exploring how cultural and structural factors are perceived by individuals, and, in turn responded to in terms of personal agency. Thereby addressing deficits identified in other learning theories which have been critiqued as either too focused on the individual or the environment ((Mälkki, 2010) without looking at the dynamic interaction between both influences. Archer (2003) states that individuals are dynamic agents in their own lives, are not passive and can respond reflexively to shape their own lives and personal projects based on an evaluation of the constraints and enablers experienced through interaction with the social (structural and cultural) world.

Student agency, motivation and personal resourcefulness has been identified as key to persistence and completion of the PhD (McAlpine et al., 2012). Kahn (2014) identified the importance of reflexivity and responsibility and recommended that the student act as an agent mediating internal and social aspects of the learning environment.

### **6.1.3. Rationale for conceptual and methodological framework**

The combination of Actor Network Theory and Theories of Agency provided a way for the researcher to explore aspects of the external (e.g. academic environment and social interaction) and individual (student agency and actions) influences that can shape a student's journey. The inclusion of the online and document-based aspects of information, as well as human sources of communication provided a way to explore multi-faceted dimensions of the student's world across time, space and place rather than just within the context of face-to-face interaction, for example in the physical campus or academic environment.

## **7. Methodology**

A mixed methods research design was used in this study. The researcher developed a questionnaire, influenced by Actor-Network Theory to explore participants' experiences of accessing face-to-face and online doctoral programme information and support from the academic institution during candidature. The interview process was influenced by socio-psychological theories of agency (Archer, Hopwood, McAlpine) which accept that the person is part of a social system rather than just a single individual entity and finds a way to look at social and psychological (external and internal aspects of the students) world which influence academic progression and quality of the student experience. The interview process sought information on any enablers or barriers participants had experienced (environmental or personal) during the doctoral process and explored if participants demonstrated agency, for example drawing on their own resources or help from others to progress with studies.



### **7.1. Recruitment of participants.**

Participants for both the preliminary and (ongoing) main research phase were recruited via snowballing sampling methods (Creswell, 2012). This involved the researcher asking respondents to pass on details of the project to their own networks to recruit a wide sample of participants beyond the researcher's own personal contacts.

### **7.2. Data analysis**

The questionnaire was analysed using descriptive statistics (Pallant, 2005) and the interview responses were examined using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify common and individual themes within and across the participants' responses.

## **8. Results from the initial stage of research**

The findings indicated that there are similarities and differences between individual students in terms of enablers and barriers to accessing face-to-face communities and research networks within the academic institution. However, full-time candidates tended to have greater access to academic and personal support networks within the academic institution than their part-time peers (O'Regan, 2018).

### **8.1. Participants**

Eighteen doctoral candidates (11 full-time and 7 part-time) from a single university in Ireland took part in the preliminary research phase. Four additional participants were interviewed (academic staff and postgraduate representatives) to provide context and an additional perspective on support for doctoral learners. Of the 18 doctoral candidates who participated in this phase of the study 15 were from an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) and three were studying within the Health Sciences (HS). There were 15 female and 3 male student participants within an age range of 25-55+ on starting their doctoral studies. Two thirds of participants (12) were over 35 years of age on starting their studies. Participants include early, mid stage, completing and completed doctoral candidates.

As previous research studies have highlighted the potential disparity between science and non-science-based students in terms of opportunity to participate in research network, the researcher was particularly interested in the experiences of AHSS doctoral candidates. However, as this was an exploratory phase of the study the researcher endeavoured to recruit participants from as broad a sample from as diverse a range of disciplinary fields as possible. Participant recruitment will be addressed in more detail in this paper.

## **9. Key findings**

### **9.1. Employment**

70% of both full and part-time participants reported undertaking employment while studying. The high cost of living and need to supplement funded doctoral scholarships were cited by full-time participants as the main reason for working while studying. Financial responsibilities related to undertaking studies and managing on an often very restrictive budget was cited as a source of stress, particularly by full-time learners.

*"I am barely keeping my head above water"* (quote from full-time participant)

## **9.2. Access to the academic institution**

In line with existing research findings part-time respondents tended to work on a continuous and often full-time basis while studying. For some part-time learners this presented challenges in terms of accessing supports, training, seminars and peer networks from the academic institution during the predominantly 9am – 5pm working day.

## **9.3. Infrastructure and links between administrative and academic departments**

Both full and part-time respondents reported a lack of clarity on how administrative, financial and academic functions related to each other. Participants reported seeking support, often on a face-to-face basis, usually from supervisors to follow up on queries regarding the status of research funding applications, fee payments and expenses claims. Lack of transparency of systems and difficulty navigating, or sourcing information online was cited by participants as a barrier to accessing information and created a dependency on informal networks of academic staff and personal contacts familiar with or working in the university system.

## **9.4. Face-to-face versus online information sources and support networks**

In general both full and part-time participants tended to access doctoral programme and process information informally, *“over a cup of coffee”* or through *“knocking on doors within the academic department”* or through a small network of personal contacts within the university. Participants tended not to refer to more formal web sources or wider formal or official sources of information from the university. As one participant commented on the formal information relevant to the doctoral process available in document based and online form was:

*“It’s there somewhere -but it’s hard to find”* (quote from full-time participant).

The reliance on face-to-face informal networks and a dependence on *“word of mouth”* to source information could potentially result in doctoral students accessing inaccurate or incomplete information, or missing out partially or completely on information, support and training relevant to doctoral progression and quality of experience.

## **9.5. Access to academic staff and peer networks**

The tendency to depend on face to face information from a small sample of sources also acted as a barrier in terms of accessing academic information and social networks for some participants. These included participants who were new to the institution, part-time and non-traditional learners seemed to have greater difficulty navigating the doctoral process and taking ownership of their own success and progression than learners who were full-time or had completed a previous qualification in the university.

Part-timers tended to know other part-timers, and due to often limited shared time to interact within the academic institution, part-time networks often disbanded over time. Accessing a social network of peers was often dependent on a fellow PhD student (usually full-time and located within a shared study space in the university) acting as a catalyst and encouraging people to mix socially and go for coffee. Full-time participants also reported the importance of peer groups which was often dependent on working in a shared space that encouraged interaction with others.

*“You could be lucky or unlucky with your peer group or what type of study space you occupied in terms of meeting others and mixing with fellow PhD students”* (quote from a full-time international participant).



#### **9.6. Access to external research and professional networks (face-to-face and online)**

Students who had difficulty accessing academic information and support networks from the formal communication and information channels (face-to-face and online) often demonstrated agency in accessing and developing their own face-to-face and online networks outside the university. International (who tend to be full-time) and part-time doctoral candidates who had research careers or worked in the higher education sector (for example in their own country) prior to starting the PhD cited the benefits of having academic and personal colleagues to seek support from. They tended to draw on support from these colleagues (for example via email) rather than seeking face-to-face and online support from the academic institution. A supportive work-environment, line manager and organisational culture of supporting employees who are undertaking doctoral studies has been identified as a motivating influence on part-time doctoral candidates who are balancing studies with employment. (O' Regan, 2019).

#### **9.7. Access to online doctoral forums and discussion boards**

Participants, in particular part-timers discussed referring to external online PhD forums, discussion boards and thesis writing support groups in order to progress with doctoral studies. These findings suggest that there is a network of dynamic communication and support being developed in terms of face-to-face and online interaction between a broad community of PhD learners which is taking place independently of the formal infrastructure and communication networks operating within the academic institution.

#### **9.8. Agency and help-seeking behaviour**

Both full and part-time participants demonstrated agency and help-seeking behaviour to progress with doctoral studies, such as using strategies to manage time, seek contact with supervisors and access training, information and support to progress with doctoral studies where possible. Full-time candidates tended to benefit from frequent and ongoing access to the campus environment to participate in research training and activities and develop research and personal support networks with peers and supervisors.

Part-time candidates reported more limited access to research networks and activities within the academic institution but demonstrated agency by using time on campus as effectively as possible. This included use of resources, such as the Library, attending training and events, seeking guidance from supervisors and building up peer networks with other part-time students, and where possible full-time candidates.

#### **9.9. Isolation**

The issue of isolation and loneliness was mentioned by some respondents (both full and part-time) – despite being physically on campus often had no one else to talk to. Some participants commented that were not naturally extroverted so felt they were at a disadvantage terms of access to information and academic and personal support networks. Participants mentioned resilience as important in terms of needing to manage self, motivation and expectations and keep working often in the absence of much formal doctoral structure or social support to guide them. The theme of “*insiders*” and “*outsiders*” was discussed. Respondents who described themselves as outsiders tended to be first generation PhD students (first in their family to undertake doctoral studies) part-time and some international students and those without the previous academic experiences within the university.

*“If you want anything here you need to be an extrovert and I’m not”* (quote from part-time participant).

## **10. Discussion**

In general, full-time participants found it easier to access academic and social support within the academic institution than their part-time peers. The tendency was for participants to seek information and support relating to the doctoral process on a face to face basis from collegial networks comprising of supervisors and peers rather than referring to college or departmental website was reported by both full and part-time participants. Dependence on access to informal face-to-face networks within the academic institution may be a barrier to accessing accurate and timely information for students.

The findings from this preliminary stage research study illustrate the multifaceted lives of a diverse body of doctoral students, including full-time, part-time and international learners. Access to supportive individuals, resources, research networks and support services within the academic institution provided students with opportunities for academic, personal and professional development. The sense of community and well-being that the campus environment provided, especially a place (e.g. desk) within a community of fellow doctoral students and the time and space to engage in different activities for personal and professional development was highly valued by full-time participants.

Results from this research study highlight the importance of access to the physical and research environment of the academic institution providing the time, place and space for students to engage in research activities and access supportive networks and opportunities for personal and professional development.

The findings from the study indicate the need to provide doctoral programme information and social support for students, either with limited access to the academic institution (potentially due to managing other employment and family roles in tandem with studying) or with potential barriers to accessing social support on campus.

### **10.1. A note on participants in the study**

The majority, fifteen of the eighteen participants, were studying in an Arts, Humanities and Social Science field. While the aim of the study was to explore the experiences of non-science based doctoral candidates the low number of participants from Health Sciences (3) and lack of representation of participants from the science-based disciplines may have influenced the findings from the study. Further studies could explore in more depth differences experienced from students from various disciplines (science and non-science based) in terms of accessing doctoral programme information and support networks during candidature.

Four (full-time) international (EU and non-EU) doctoral students took part in the study. Although the goal of the study was to look more broadly at full and part-time doctoral candidates' experiences, rather than differences between domestic and international students, responses from international learners provided valuable insights into the experience of non-traditional learners. Themes such as difficulties accessing academic and peer-networks, lack of familiarity with the research culture and barriers to accessing doctoral programme information (face-to-face and online) were highlighted particularly by non-traditional learners (e.g. part-time and international students.). These themes require further exploration (beyond the scope of the current research) with a larger sample of participants.

### **10.2. Arts, Humanities and Social Science versus Science-based doctoral candidates**

An interview conducted with an academic staff member in a science-based discipline who participated in the study indicated that there tended to be very few part-time doctoral candidates in the Sciences

(or Health Sciences) due to the often team-based structures of the research environment and nature of funding (e.g. student research is often financed by an external research agency.) The focus on participants from AHSS may also have led to a bias towards higher levels of female than male participants. According to statistical data (Higher Education Authority, 2018a, 2018b) there are more females than males enrolled both full and part-time in AHSS disciplines at doctoral level in Ireland.

## 11. Recommendations

The recommendations given by participants to enhance doctoral programme information and personal support are summarised as follows:

- **Web-based and online support to compliment face to face learning opportunities:** all learners, but in particular students with limited access to the campus environment would benefit from greater access to online information and guidelines to help mediate, manage and navigate the doctoral process. Researchers recommend exploring the role of online communication and digital technologies to complement face-to-face interaction and promote socialisation and interaction for “hard to reach” students (e.g. part-time, commuting or distance learners).
- **Transparency and standardisation of expected outcomes and forms of assessment across each stage of the doctoral process:** Examples included initial and annual progress reports, requirements and available offerings for students in terms training and credit bearing modules, record-keeping in relation to the student’s progress and guidelines on mid-stage and final Viva/Thesis assessment and submission process.
- **Training for supervisors (in particular new supervisors):** on institutional procedures, milestones and forms of assessment during the doctoral process as well as information on the different administrative, financial, academic and student supports available to the student during the doctoral journey.
- **Promote sense of community and a positive research culture within departments and across the academic institution:** For example a “*meet and greet*” where new doctoral students can meet academic and administrative staff and other postgraduate and doctoral students to find out about the different research activities and interests being undertaken by colleagues.
- **Transparency and coherence between administrative, financial and academic functions (face-to-face and online)** to allow students to access information and take ownership of the doctoral process without depending on informal personal networks (e.g. supervisor or peers for information and support). For example registration process, claiming expenses and funding (especially when the student funding is coming from an external research agency), appeals process and formal guidelines and expectations of the student, supervisor and the academic institution during the PhD.

## 12. Conclusions

In conclusion the findings of this study support existing research on the role of socialisation of doctoral students into the academic norms and collegial culture of the faculty and academic institution as influencing doctoral student progression and quality of experience. The challenge for academic institutions may be to provide an equivalent experience for diverse learners who may have more limited physical (e.g. part-time) and social access (e.g. part-time and international learners) to the HEI environment.

This may lead to HEIs developing a combination of face-to-face and online learning supports to cater for students with various personal, academic, situational and lifestyle circumstances which can impact

on student success, both in terms of academic progression and completion and quality of the student experience.

### **13. Limitations**

The preliminary research was conducted in a single research-intensive university in Ireland which may lead to a potential bias in terms of the findings, which may reflect specific cultural and structural aspects of the institution, not generalisable to other universities. Based on the findings from initial research the main phase of the study (currently in progress) will expand the study to include part-time doctoral candidates (who are the main focus of enquiry in this PhD study) who completed studies within other universities in Ireland.

The main study will focus on the experience of completed part-time doctoral candidates as the findings from the preliminary study showed that completed or completing candidates (both full and part-time) had a greater sense of what worked and what didn't (retrospectively) at each of the doctoral process than those who were at early or mid-stages of the research journey. Researchers recommend further studies into the experiences of completed doctoral students (Devos et al., 2017).

### **14. Summary**

In summary this research has provided empirical evidence on a diverse sample of doctoral candidates (e.g. full-time, part-time and international students) experiences of accessing doctoral-programme information and support networks.

The majority of participants, (70%) both full and part-time reported working while studying and financial commitments and the cost of living and education were cited as stressors, particularly by full-time students. Balancing work with study may impact on the student's capacity to engage with face-to-face supports in the academic institution and this has been found to be an aspect of the part-time doctoral candidate experience.

The issue of isolation was addressed in this research study and personality factors, such as needing to be extroverted to access information and academic and social peer groups was cited as a barrier to progression and quality of experience. The dependency on face-to-face and informal networks of communication could act as a barrier to accessing timely and accurate information. Participants recommended the provision of more robust, user-friendly, accurate and timely information and communication from formal institutional sources, for example which could be accessed on line by participants 24/7 and outside of university working hours (9am-5pm).

This study has developed a conceptual framework (questionnaire and interview) to explore external (institutional) and internal (personal agency and circumstances) which can enhance or impede quality of the student's experience and progression and completion of the doctoral journey. The goal of the study is to provide insights to policy makers, educators and individual stakeholders (e.g. supervisors and students) on creating a dynamic and interactive relationship between the academic and the institution and providing a customised and supportive learning experience for a diverse body of students.

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