Leadership, management and the part-time doctoral experience for ‘second career researchers’

End-of-Funding Report

Dr Pauline Couper
Dr Julie Evans
1. Project Details

**Project Title:** Leadership, management and the part-time doctoral experience for ‘second career researchers’

**Project Leaders:** Dr Pauline Couper, Research Coordinator & Senior Lecturer  
Dr Julie Evans, Senior Lecturer

**Host institution:** University of St Mark & St John

**Steering group:**  
Prof John Sharp, Head of Research, Bishop Grosseteste University  
Dr Alisa Miller, Policy Officer (Research & Innovation) & CREST Research Network Co-ordinator, GuildHE  
Sue Lea, Senior Lecturer in Community Work and current doctoral student, University of St Mark & St John

**Summary:**

Meeting the needs of part-time doctoral students is a key issue in widening participation in the UK doctorate, particular concerns relating to part-time students’ engagement in institutional research cultures and access to appropriate skills development opportunities.

This project focused on the leadership and management of doctoral provision as experienced by part-time doctoral students who are already established in, or changing, careers (sometimes referred to as ‘second career researchers’). The project examined the facilitators and barriers to the development of research and researcher identities among this diverse group, attempting to identify good practice for the leadership and management of doctoral provision.

The project focused on the CREST (GuildHE) research consortium of small and specialist institutions. These are established ‘widening participation’ institutions, commonly with high proportions of doctoral students studying part-time. An online questionnaire enabled the identification of some significant themes and provided an indication of the variability of students’ circumstances. Fourteen respondents were then selected for a follow-up interview, ensuring that this sample included respondents with a variety of demographic characteristics and in a variety of circumstances. Workshops with CREST institutional Research Leads and with a further ten part-time doctoral students were used to generate and debate institutional practices to support part-time PhD students.

While data analysis is still underway, key themes emerging relate to: the part-time/full-time binary and life stage as a more significant influence on the student experience; the importance of the supervisory relationship; and time and money as barriers to progress.

The project is over-running in terms of time, but is on target to achieve its objectives.
2. Evaluation

2.1 Project Aim and Objectives

The overall aim of the project was to contribute to an improved understanding of how best institutions can support part-time doctoral students. With this in mind, the project was established with three objectives:

i) To listen to part-time ‘second-career researcher’ doctoral students’ experiences, identifying the facilitators and barriers they encounter through their doctoral degrees;

ii) To identify the role of institutional leadership and management of doctoral provision in these experiences;

iii) To develop and share relevant and innovative practice in the leadership and management of doctoral provision.

2.2 Principal Activities

Table 1 (overleaf) summarises the principal activities of the project against those originally planned. Two points are of note here:

i) Progress was delayed against the planned schedule of works by the introduction of an online questionnaire survey prior to undertaking any interviews. This survey, however, provided a valuable basis for all subsequent work, enriching the data considerably.

ii) Data analysis and dissemination works will be continuing beyond the end of funding, throughout the 2013/14 academic session.

A workshop with part-time doctoral students (24th June 2013) was designed to both meet the needs of the project and be of value to the participants themselves, mindful that they were giving up a day of their time. It succeeded on both counts, with informal feedback received from a number of participants thanking us for a useful day. One of the exercises led to a participant indicating that she intended to “take the initiative” and establish a support network and/or events for part-time students in her institution. The Research and Policy Officer (Higher Education) of the National Union for Students also contributed to this event.
Table 1: Planned and actual activities through the project

2.3 Outputs

The original project brief defined two forms of output:

i) Journal publication, e.g. *Higher Education Quarterly* or the *International Journal for Researcher Development*

ii) Good practice guidance and case studies of issues disseminated via workshops and conference presentations (e.g. CREST symposium, UKCGE and Vitae events), publications and on the CREST website.
To date, the interim findings have been presented at a UKCGE event (see Table 1 and Appendix 1 for details). Full analysis of the interview data is still on-going. It is intended that this will result in at least one journal article, as well as the development of good practice guidance. Projected dissemination activities are therefore:

- At least one journal article, e.g. submitted to Higher Education Quarterly or the International Journal for Researcher Development or the International Journal of Doctoral Studies (submission by July 2014);
- Good practice guidance / case studies disseminated to CREST Research Leads and online via the CREST website;
- Dissemination within the University of St Mark & St John via a supervisor staff development event (planned for the autumn term, 2013);
- Other ‘user-friendly’ written outputs, e.g. a contribution to Engage or to the Brains, Time, Money: Part-Time & Self-Funded Postgraduate Study blog (http://www.nadinemuller.org.uk/category/brains-time-money/);
- Workshop/conference presentations where opportunity arises, for example at UKCGE / Vitae / Society for Research into Higher Education events as appropriate.

2.4 Outcomes

The project as initially defined anticipated four outcomes. These are identified in here in bold, with accompanying commentary on the degree to which they have been met.

i) **Improvements in the leadership and management of part-time doctoral provision in the CREST institutions.** It is too early to claim any improvements in the leadership and management of doctoral provision, as this is dependent upon full dissemination of the findings of the project. However, some sharing of practice through a workshop session with CREST Research Leads has occurred.

ii) **Further consolidation of the CREST Research Leads network through collaborative sharing of good leadership and management practices.** Arguably the project has served to further consolidate the CREST Research Leads network and, perhaps more so, the CREST Consortium in general. Professor June Boyce-Tillman (University of Winchester) and Dr. Kate Adams (Bishop Grosseteste University) contributed to the workshop with part-time research students but are not members of the Research Leads network. That workshop also served to highlight CREST to the part-time doctoral students who participated, several of whom said they intend to get to the annual CREST Symposium in the future. Feedback from the CREST Research Leads following the workshop session with them was also positive, with several indicating that they look forward to hearing more of the project.
iii) Development and dissemination of innovative practice relevant to part-time doctoral provision across the HE sector. The UKCGE event in February provided opportunity for some early dissemination and discussion of our research findings with a variety of participants, including part-time doctoral students and managers of postgraduate research provision. This was a valuable exercise, enabling contacts to be made across the sector, again leading to a number of individuals indicating that they want to hear more as the analysis progresses. It is too early for us to specifically disseminate innovative practice yet.

iv) Identification of potential for further research to enhance understanding of the diversity of doctoral students’ needs. Our research findings are enabling the identification of areas that would benefit from further research. Section 2.5 provides some indication of these.

2.5 Indication of Research Findings

Analysis of the data so far has highlighted a number of key themes. While full analysis is still underway, we anticipate that these will feature in our dissemination.

i) The part-time/full-time binary. Within much of the academic literature on doctoral provision there is a tendency to normalise full-time study and problematize part-time study (e.g. Watts, 2008; Gopaul, 2010; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). This has been identified even in literature that seeks to better understand part-time provision. Similarly, the guidance that institutions provide on their websites about PhD opportunities often normalises full-time study, although there are some exceptions. While our research has focused only on part-time students, both the questionnaire and interview data indicate that part-time students’ concerns are little different from those common to full-time students.

ii) Life stage. Our data appear to suggest that ‘life stage’ is of greater consequence than part-time or full-time status in shaping PhD students’ experiences. In our questionnaire survey, respondents in the 46-65yr age group were significantly more likely to have both dependent children and other caring responsibilities than their younger counterparts, alongside their employment and doctoral study. They also have less frequent contact with other doctoral students, again with a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Insights into the circumstances of individuals provided by both the questionnaire and the interviews revealed just how complex the circumstances of some are. This raises a question about whether the now-standard expectations regarding maximum doctoral completion times (and increasing pressure on institutions to ‘perform’ well in this regard) may be indirectly discriminatory, age being a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.
At the same time, the workshop participants highlighted that older students can bring greater professional expertise, experience and established networks to their studies, and this can be an enabling factor in making research possible. This suggests that diversity among doctoral researchers is likely to be an asset to UK research, enabling different kinds of questions to be asked and different kinds of data to be accessed, particularly in social and policy research. This warrants further attention. While there have been discussions of, and attempts to support, diversity among UK researchers, this tends to be from a position of equality legislation compliance rather than considering the research produced.

iii) Supervision. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the role of the supervisor is absolutely crucial to PhD students’ progress, in terms of both the feedback and validation the supervisor provides. This came through strongly in the interview data.

The questionnaire survey revealed a statistically significant gender difference in the frequency of contact that students have with their supervisor, although there was no significant difference in their level of satisfaction with frequency of contact. This appears to suggest that a gender difference in behaviours may be underpinned by a difference in expectations, and this is one area that would benefit from further research (particularly noting that our questionnaire survey did not ask for supervisor gender). Gender aside, 1 in 5 of the questionnaire respondents identified that the frequency of contact with their supervisor is not sufficient, and 43% would not know where to access advice on problems with supervision.

Both the questionnaire data and the workshop with part-time PhD students appear to indicate a variety of supervisory relationships: some students would consult their supervisor on almost anything (regardless of how peripheral it may be to their studies), while others are more narrowly focused. Most of the workshop participants expressed reservations about the idea of discussing their lives beyond the PhD with their supervisor. Among these individuals there seems to be a sense that this is a purely professional relationship. That said, all would welcome opportunities to actively engage in their supervisor’s professional networks, and supervisory encouragement and support to develop their own networks.

In sum, the supervisor is key to part-time doctoral students. While the initial analysis has identified some areas for further research and hinted at good practice, full analysis of the data is likely to strengthen these and reveal much more.

iv) Time and money. The biggest barrier to students’ progress is undoubtedly time. This was strongly evidenced in the interviews and the workshop with part-time students. This has implications particularly for higher education institutions employing staff from professional backgrounds and then requiring completion of a PhD. As one participant put it, these individuals are “absolutely working to
capacity”, with no scope to adjust or respond to unanticipated changes in circumstances, whether in their personal or professional lives. Funding is also an issue, but this is not just about ‘tuition fee’ funding; incidental expenses such as travel (including travel to supervision meetings) can be equally problematic. It was noted that some institutions have small bursary funding available for part-time students to apply for when the need arises.

2.6 Summary Evaluation

While progress has not been quite as anticipated in terms of timescale, the project is directly on target to meet its three objectives:

i) We have listened to part-time ‘second-career researcher’ doctoral students’ experiences through the questionnaire, the interviews and the workshop with students, and data analysis is enabling identification of the facilitators and barriers they encounter through their doctoral degrees;

ii) The role of institutional leadership and management of doctoral provision in these experiences is gradually coming to light as data analysis continues. Section 2.5, in outlining some emerging themes, hints at aspects of institutional provision that help or hinder progress, and/or ideas for good practice. A number of further ideas not reflected in this summary were discussed in the workshop with students. In addition, some questions around national policy, its emphasis on completion rates, and the diversity of the UK research base may be emerging.

iii) The third objective was to develop and share relevant and innovative practice in the leadership and management of doctoral provision. Leading from point ii) above, as our data analysis progresses it will lead to more concrete establishment of ideas for, and examples of, good practice in provision for part-time doctoral students. These will be shared via the CREST Research Leads network and CREST online resources, as well as via other avenues.

In addition to meeting these three aims, the project has been of significant benefit in strengthening links across the CREST consortium and making contacts elsewhere.

3. References


Appendix A: Programme for UKCGE event

Meeting the Needs of Part Time Postgraduate Students
8th February 2013
University of East London

Draft Programme

10.00 Registration with Tea & Coffee
10.30 Welcome
Professor John Joughin, Deputy Vice Chancellor, University of East London
10.35 Introduction to the day
Dr Alan White, Director of UEL Graduate School & UKCGE Executive Member
10.40 Findings and Implications from a survey of UCL part time postgraduate students
Dante Micaux, Medical & Postgraduate Students' Officer, University College London Union
11.00 Group Discussions – The findings of the UCL Study
11.30 Feedback and Q&A
Dante Micaux
11.45 Tea & Coffee break
12.00 Presentation title TBC
Professor Li Wei, Pro-Vice-Master & Director of Birkbeck Graduate Research School, Birkbeck College, University of London
13.00 Lunch
14.00 Breakout Session – Delegates Select Either Group
Group A - Supporting part time professional doctorate students
Professor Hilary Burgess, School of Education, University of Leicester. Former director of doctoral studies in CREED, the Open University and author of Achieving Your Doctorate in Education (2006, Sage)
Group B - The experiences of and supporting part time PhD students preliminary findings from a Leadership Foundation for Higher Education project,
Dr Julie Evans and Pauline Couper, University College Plymouth St Mark & St John
15.00 Tea & Coffee break
15.10 Group Discussions - How can institutions improve support for part time postgraduate students?
16.00 Plenary Feedback
Chair: Professor Rosemary Deem, Vice Principal (Education) Royal Holloway, University of London and UKCGE Executive Member
16.30 Close

Please note that this is a draft programme and is subject to change.

(Note: this is a screenshot. At 15/07/13 the programme is still online at http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/pdf/mtnPT13%20prog%20draft%20v2b.pdf)
Managing part-time doctoral study
A one-day event for part-time PhD students.
Mon 24th June 2013, Woburn House, London

PROGRAMME

10.00  Tea/coffee available
10.30  Welcome & introductions
11.00  ‘Research environment’ and ‘research culture’: what do they mean for you?
11.45  CREST: supporting researchers in the small and specialist institutions (Rachel Brockhurst, GuildHE/CREST)
12.00  Tea/coffee
12.10  Supervision:
   • What you told us about supervision (Dr Julie Evans & Dr Pauline Couper)
   • A supervisor’s perspective on part-time doctoral study (Prof June Boyce-Tillman, University of Winchester)
   • Making supervision work for you
13.20  Lunch
14.00  Institutional support for part-time doctoral students: how can universities improve?
15.00  The NUS and doctoral students (Adam Wright, NUS)
15.30  Closing comments