

Supervising part-time research students



Historically part-time research students have been predominantly

- **On continuation following a spell of full-time study;**
- **Professionals seeking to further their careers, e.g. academics doing a PhD or medics. an MD.**

Recent global growth in part-time research students reflecting:

- **massification and a huge increase in the eligible population;**
- **a decline or less than matching increase in the opportunities for fully-funded research study;**
- **the shifting of funding from public to private sources leaving first degree graduates deeply in debt and unable financially to continue with full time study until a later stage in their careers**

Causes of growth (cont.)

- **the cachet of the doctorate in particular among what Evans (2002b):140) has described as ‘an increasingly credentialed population’;**
- **the development of new types of doctorates intended to have relevance to the ‘knowledge economy’, particularly of course professional doctorates (see for example Green and Powell 2005, Boud and Tennant 2006).**

Now...

% part-time research students (2004)

UK	49
Australia	39
Denmark	33
Brazil	30
Poland	28
France	10
Japan	20

Powell and Green (eds.) 2007

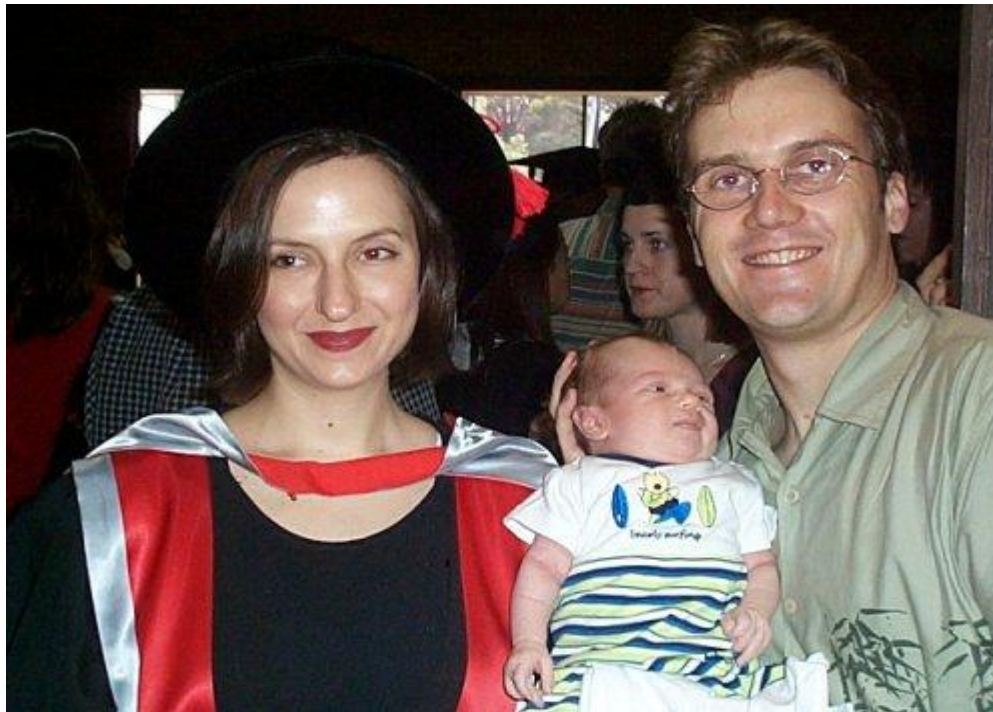
Part-time differ from full-time in:

Age	FT	PT
<24	62	11
25-29	17	17
>30	21	72

Source: McCulloch and Stokes (2008:6)

Part-time differ from full-time in:

- **family and career responsibilities (see Glaze 2002, Gattrell 2006, Watts 2008)**



Part-time differ from full-time in:

Funding (2003-4)

51% entirely self-funding;

12% had a full institutional fee waiver;

37% had mixed funding sources (e.g. combination of self-funding, partial institutional waiver, employer funding)

Source: Ramsden (2006: 104)

Aim: to look at the implications of this development for supervisors

Objectives:

- to look at the benefits of part-time study and part-time research students;
- to look at the key challenges for part-time research students which might lie within the remit of supervisors;
- to consider how supervisors may be able to support part-time research students to overcome the challenges.

Benefits

- **much of literature cast in terms of a deficit model;**
- **in one of few positive contributions, Manchester University (2007) has identified key benefits as:**

Benefits to students

- **maintain income while studying;**
- **retain professional contacts;**
- **continue in their work/professional environment;**
- **new research skills may benefit fulfilling roles in workplace;**

Benefits to students (cont.)

- **planning career change while maintaining income;**
- **achieving a PhD when not possible full-time despite commitment to discipline;**
- **bringing experience/work skills to a project post-retirement.**

Benefits to schools/departments

- **access to professional organisations/knowledge base;**
- **supervising people used to juggling work-life balance;**
- **goal focussed students;**
- **time-efficient students;**
- **no on-campus distractions;**

Benefits to schools/departments (cont.)

- **mature professionals who will be ambassadors to the wider world;**
- **overheads lower because using off campus facilities (Evans (2002a) has estimated the overhead at one-third of that for full time students);**

Economic and social benefits

- **knowledge economy benefits by continuum of interaction;**
- **contributing to tax while researching;**
- **contributing to wealth and well-being;**
- **more immediate impact of research in work.**

Challenges

- **many challenges;**
- **significant issues for institutions and departments, particularly in relation to access to resources;**
- **but are issues for supervisors as well.**

1 Building and sustaining a relationship

Where there is such minimal face-to-face contact, getting to know [each other], let alone developing a productive and engaged supervisory relationship, can be very challenging both for student and supervisor.

Watts (2008: 370)

2 Coping with disruption - life events affecting the research

During their programme of study, many [part-time students] will experience life-events which demand attention and take the focus away from academic work, meaning that keeping up to date becomes challenging...once out of 'synch' with their academic timetable, the challenge of 'catching up' becomes increasingly daunting.

Gattrell (2006: 120)

2 Coping with disruption - the research affecting life events

Leonard et al (2005) report one-third of respondents on part-time doctorates said being a research had had a detrimental effect on these relationships. Typical quotes from students (op. cit. 143) included:

It completely trashed domestic and social life for years on end.

My girlfriend came...to join me and the cramped flat and shortage of money led to enormous tension [and the end of the relationship].

3 Coping with isolation

- **Isolation identified as an issue for many research students, full- or part-time;**
- **Compounded for part-time students because of distance from campus and peers;**
- **Can act as ‘barrier to their progress’ (Watts 2008: 370)**

4 Sustaining motivation

Many part-time postgraduate students experience a sense of frustration mid-way through their programme...This may be because they fall behind and find it difficult to pick things up again due to changes in their private or business lives [or]...find that the daily grind of managing part-time study alongside other aspects of their lives is wearing them down.

Gattrell (2006: 117)

Example

Everything I do is rushed...Fighting fatigue is a constant theme in my dairy round...This whole research experience is rather like a marathon or a cross-channel swim...As usual everything is being done in double quick time, i.e. do not take time to look at that butterfly in the garden, ignore the dust on the carpet, put off eating, postpone everything, even living...Knowing how much time this study is taking I am constantly weighing up potential costs and benefits against a possibility of an early demise...

Glaze (2002: 159, 162)

5 Writing

As a part-time student, even if you are keeping to your timetable and writing regularly, the problem of picking up the threads and remembering where you had got to when you are in the middle of a lengthy and complex piece of work can be challenging. If, however, you have stopped working on your thesis altogether for any period of time, the thought of picking up where you left off can seem almost impossible.

Writing (cont.)

At such a point, it is not unusual to feel really stuck, and unable to begin writing, or even reading, again. This sets off a downward spiral – the more disheartened you feel, the less able you feel to get yourself started. The more weeks that go by without your having written anything, the more disheartened you feel, and the more difficult it becomes to start writing again, and so on.

Gattrell (2006: 122)

Consequences of challenges

	FT	PT
Withdrawal in 7 years	18%	38%
Completion in 7 years	71%	34%

Source: HEFCE (2005: 3)

Supporting part-time research students

You should spend a few minutes thinking about how supervisors can best support part-time research students to overcome these challenges, discuss your ideas with the group, and then report back to the workshop as a whole.

Building and maintaining relationships with part-time research students

- **Negotiating expectations at the start of the studentship;**
 - **Brown-Atkins questionnaire;**
 - **Flinders questionnaire.**

Building and maintaining relationships with part-time research students (cont.)

- **Establishing a research supervision agreement**
 - Provide a structure within which students can plan their work
 - Commits them to regular writing and submission
 - Commits supervisor to regular meetings and feedback
- **Example of Charles Darwin agreement**

Building and maintaining relationships with part-time research students (cont.)

- **Supervisor policy for contact**
 - Regular contact between supervisions to be initiated by supervisor;
 - Monthly rather than weekly:

Too frequent contact may convey an expectation of the requirement of ‘measurable progress’ on a week-by-week basis. E-mail or telephone contact every month is more helpful and more likely to accord with the comfort values of the student trying to develop an appropriate pattern of integrating doctoral study with the rest of life. (Watts 2008: 271)
 - Adhered to over the course of the project.

Supporting part-time students to cope with disruption to their studies

- **Expect some disruption to studies due to life events or the impact of researching on life events as part and parcel of supervising part-time research students;**
- **Few supervisors would dispute that, where such events occur, they have a role to play in supporting the student academically.**

Supporting part-time students to cope with disruption to their studies (cont.)

In the space of three years, in mid-life, I lost my parents suddenly; my belief that those I love would be left untouched by serious illness and dreadful events beyond their and my control; any sense, however limited, of justice in life or a “balancing out”; interest in my career and in my field; any sense of progress in and control over my PhD studies; my self-confidence; any sense that I had anything meaningful to contribute; my capacity and desire to write; my sense of self; and my own voice.
Johnson (2001: 59)

Supporting part-time students to cope with disruption to their studies (cont.)

But issue as to whether should go further and offer personal support:

Is [the supervisory role] to maintain a pedagogical focus offering guidance and advice only on academic matters rather than life issues, thus seeing students only in terms of membership of the research community? Or is the supervisor role (especially with respect to part-time students) more complex, with an expectation on the part of students that their supervisors will take an interest in their other life?

Watts (2008: 372)

Supporting part-time students to cope with disruption to their studies (cont.)

One view is that:

...good practice will respond to the life needs of part-time students, in part at least, to acknowledge that life is bound to intervene and get in the way of part-time doctoral research at some point, if only because of its longevity (Watts 2008:372)

Supporting part-time students to cope with disruption to their studies (cont.)

But can be dangers, as in case of respondent to Hockey's (1995) survey who reported:

I was sucked right into the black hole of this thing...she had all kinds of family problems and, of course, health problems, and all the time she was having these problems, her schedule was slipping, you know...I mean I was in the water there with here and I needed somebody on the bank shouting instructions and I didn't have it (Ibid. 205).

Supporting part-time students to cope with disruption to their studies (cont.)

...the combination of institutional obligations and personal commitment to students experienced by many supervisors means that the pastoral dimension of supervision, unless firmly regulated, has the potential to undermine its intellectual counterpart, with negative consequences for academic standards, to say nothing of the emotional costs for supervisors when they experience the consequences of such over-involvement.

Hockey 1995: 208

Supporting part-time students to cope with disruption to their studies (cont.)

- **Possible solutions**
 - **Separating academic and pastoral roles**
 - **Allocating former to principal supervisor and latter to second supervisor**
 - **Following US practice of a separate pastoral mentor for doctoral students outside their advisory committee.**

Socialising the student experience – group supervisions

- **Advantages;**
 - supervisor saves time by giving general information to the group rather than to each candidate individually;
 - candidates can support each other, e.g. by sharing research materials, working their way together through 'blocks' in their research projects, collectively problem-solving, and meeting socially to encourage each other to keep going;
 - and that some of the supervisory roles can be shared with the peer group.

Socialising the student experience – group supervisions

- But
 - **Heavily dependent upon candidates undertaking research projects in closely related areas probably most appropriate in the early stages (before their work becomes too specialised for collective comment);**
 - **requires organisation on the part of the supervisor in terms of booking rooms for meetings and finding a time when candidates can make it, which is not always easy particularly where they are part-time.**

Graham and Grant (1997: 12-13)

Socialising the student experience – reading groups

...the reading group is very useful as it builds confidence...The group helps me to get used to the technical language of my subject and learn fresh approaches...It is very important to build social networks, essential for new ideas, references, to find out what others are doing and the intellectual bouncing of ideas...it is also very important as being part-time I often feel isolated.

Deem and Brehony (2000:159)

Encouraging participation in departmental research events

- Often an issue for part-time students because of distance;
- Imaginative programme pioneered by Diane Beale at the Institute for Work, Health and Organisations at the University of Nottingham with aim:
...to integrate [part-time] students more effectively into the Institute, and to combine supervision, skills development, and networking so as to provide maximum returns for each of their visits. This was particularly important for students living at considerable distances from the University.
- Detailed account on p 13 of handout

Motivating students

Signs of de-motivation can include:

- **constantly changing the topic or planned work;**
- **avoiding communication with their supervisor;**
- **avoiding submitting work for review.**

Manathunga (2002)

Motivating students

Strategies for motivation can include:

- **Praise**
- **Negotiating stepping stones**
- **Re-focusing the research project**
- **Incentivising**
- **Encouraging a short and finite break from studies**

Supporting writing

- **Encouraging students to develop writing strategies, e.g. interspersing ‘snacking’ and ‘bingeing’;**
- **Organising face-to-face writing groups**
- **Organising virtual writing groups**

Conclusions

- **Part-time research students are becoming the norm, at least outside the sciences;**
- **Confer many benefits;**
- **Students have to overcome challenges, and at present many fall by the wayside;**
- **Support needed from institutions, departments, and supervisors**

Conclusions (cont.)

- **Supervisors can support in terms of**
 - **establishing and maintaining a good relationship;**
 - **supporting students to cope with disruption to their studies;**
 - **socialising their experience;**
 - **motivating students;**
 - **and supporting writing.**

Thank you