

The part-time researcher

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What is it like being a part-time researcher?

Sometimes great. I'm very enthusiastic about my subject and it is such a privilege and feels so self-indulgent. Sometimes – more often – it is a great burden and I feel very guilty about spending time on this when there's so many other pressures on my time.

Overview

- ✔ Background
- ✔ PRES
- ✔ Film: “What have been the most challenging things about your part-time doctorate?”
- ✔ Qualitative data
- ✔ Recommendations
- ✔ Further work

Overview

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Background

- ✔ Part-time researchers make up a substantial (fifth to a quarter?) part of the doctoral cohort.
- ✔ Only 48% of part-time doctorates are completed within 10 years.
- ✔ HEIs can often find part-time researchers challenging to deal with (off-campus, time-poor, do not fit the standard profile).
- ✔ Vitae Midlands Hub event in 2005 provided an opportunity for HEIs to talk about these issues and share practice.

The project

- ✔ Project developed by the Vitae Midlands Hub.
- ✔ Combined training development and delivery with research into the cohort who attended.
- ✔ Led by myself, Ged Hall, Heather Dalgeish and Kate Mahoney
- ✔ Research assistant on the project was Carol Edwards.
- ✔ PRES analysis contributed by Gosia Kulej (HEA)

Outputs

- ✔ Pilot workshop programme across Midlands HEIs in 2008
- ✔ Revised workshop programme running 2009.
- ✔ Resource pack detailing workshop materials available free to HEIs via Vitae website or as a folder.
- ✔ Research report
- ✔ Film available on DVD, YouTube and the Vitae website.

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Postgraduate Research Experience Survey

- ✔ 73 HEIs across the UK surveyed
- ✔ Between March and May 2008
- ✔ Over 57,000 surveyed; 16,562 replies (29%)
- ✔ Sample broadly representative (against HESA data)

PRES 2008 dataset

- 3,462 part-time (22% of all PRES respondents)

Is it representative?

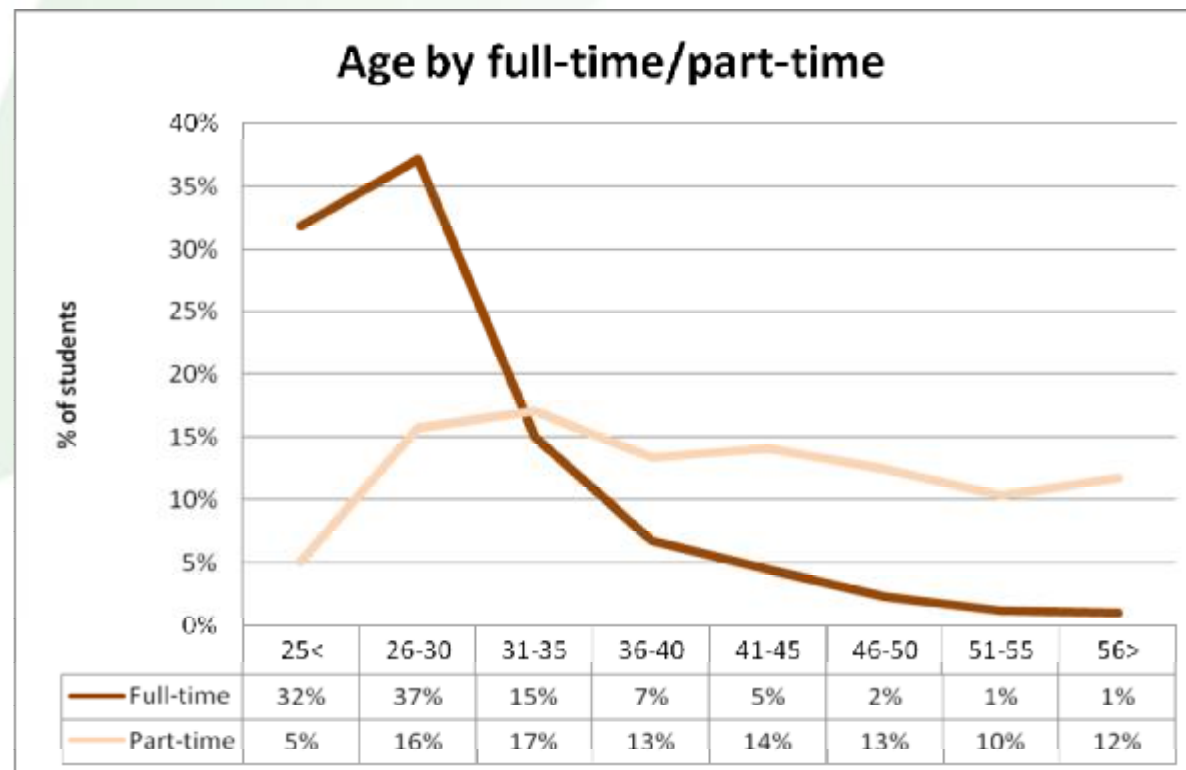
- HESA - 48% (writing up?)
- DIUS - 30%
- HEFCE (PhD starters) - 21%

Covered by PRES

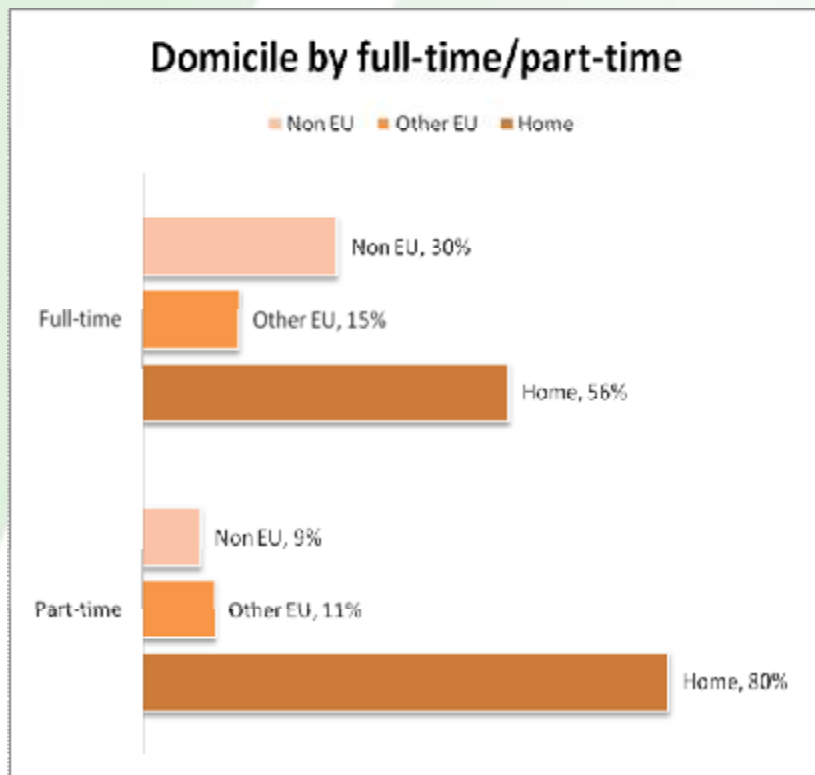
- ✔ Supervision, skills development, infrastructure, intellectual climate, goals and standards, thesis examination
- ✔ Students' feedback, career progression and development needs
- ✔ Teaching opportunities and personal factors

www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/surveys/pres

Demographic profile - age (PRES)



Demographic profile – domicile and ethnicity (PRES)



70% of full-time are White, 9% Chinese and 8% Asian

86% of part-time are White, only 2% are Chinese and 2% Asian

Demographics – other (PRES)

- ✔ 51% are primarily distance learners
- ✔ Motivations: interest in the subject and improving career prospects
- ✔ Popular disciplines: education (15%), social studies (13%) and historical and philosophical studies (11%)
- ✔ 58% are self-funded and only 4% funded by the RC
- ✔ 59% are registered on PhD courses and 10% are doing a professional doctorate

Supervision and standards

✔ Supervision

- Part-time slightly more satisfied with supervision in general (by 3% points) than full-time

✔ Goals and standards

- Part-time seem to be slightly (2-3 % difference) better informed about institutional standards and requirements. They know who to approach if they need help/advise/want to complain.

Finance and general satisfaction

❑ Finance

- No difference in terms of a strain on personal finances

❑ General satisfaction

- The same levels of satisfaction as full-time students
- The same level of confidence to complete more or less on schedule

Skills development

- ✔ Part-time are slightly more confident (by 4% points) about managing their research project
- ✔ Part-time agree less that they developed communication skills (6%)
- ✔ Believe they have less opportunities (7%) to develop transferable skills and are less satisfied with these opportunities (5%).

Research environment

- ❑ Part-time in general less satisfied with research environment than full-time (6%)
- ❑ Part-time researchers feel less integrated into their department research community (10%)
- ❑ Less likely to agree that they have appropriate financial support for their research activities (16%)

Personal factors

- ❑ Friends and family slightly less supportive according to part-time researchers
- ❑ Employer less supportive to part-time researchers (8%)

Teaching

- ❑ Less likely to teach than full time researchers (7%)
- ❑ Less likely to feel that they have appropriate support (5%)
- ❑ Less likely to feel that it was worthwhile (12%)

Summary

- ✓ Not many differences between part-time researchers and full-time researchers' experience. But there are some areas where PRES flagged up potential issues:
 - Financial support for research activities
 - Research environment – especially integration into department's community
 - Transferable skills
 - Career development
 - Teaching opportunities

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Methodology

- ✔ Data collected from an online survey of 87 course participants.
- ✔ A mix of questions with most pre-coding responses but some asking for unstructured free text answers.
- ✔ Questions explored the experience of being a part-time researcher.
- ✔ We also analysed some supplementary data collected on the training days themselves as part of the programme evaluation.

Key messages

- ✔ Part-time researchers have extreme highs and extreme lows
- ✔ A clear majority got great pleasure from their research
- ✔ Much emotional energy is involved in the *process* of part-time doctoral study
- ✔ Difficulties related to managing demands on time and loneliness
- ✔ Half of the participants said it was more difficult than anticipated
- ✔ They wanted to meet others going through a similar process
- ✔ Gratitude and relief that something was being provided specifically for them

Expectations

...I thought I would have more contact with my supervisor or academics in the department. Everyone said it would be isolating, but I was not prepared for the intellectual isolation.

- ✔ Almost half said the experience was more difficult than expected
- ✔ None of the difficulties mentioned related to the level of academic study required.
- ✔ They related to managing competing demands on time, isolation, lack of sense of community, level of resilience needed, and contact with supervisors.

Time management

Being part-time and employed full-time is challenging to say the least and that's just the time management issues. Intellectually it's very stimulating.

Very hard being part-time, juggling work and children so that research is third priority.

It adds another ball to juggle in my life, along with work, family and church. Somehow I survive by just doing the next thing!

Juggling

- ❑ Part-time researchers talk about stress and the extreme highs and lows in their lives
- ❑ Juggling the stakeholders in their lives, work and doctorates is clearly very challenging.
- ❑ Being short of time has a knock on effect on their relationship with their supervisor, with other researchers and with the university as a whole.

Isolation

As a part-time mature researcher, I feel isolated from the activities of my university and have experienced difficulties 'breaking into' the networks of my department.

- 44/86 see their supervisor face to face less than once a month
- 53/86 never use central university services
- 24/87 do not know any other PGRs at their own university

Communication with supervisors

‘The main method of communication is by email but constructive feedback and advice only tends to be received within the context of face-to-face meetings. This is disadvantageous for researchers living at some distance from their university and/or for researchers who have caring (eg parental) responsibilities, for whom most study is often conducted during the evenings, because such meetings are relatively rare.’

Pattern of supervision: Lots of email, slightly less face to face, much less telephone, very little web based communication

Communication with peers

'I feel great. This is a good opportunity for me to talk to people who are part-time PhDs. They have the same situation as myself. We can discuss and share the problems and how to make it right.'

- ✔ Contact with peers is often infrequent.
- ✔ Opportunities to mix with other researchers are often advertised late or are during working hours
- ✔ They would appreciate the opportunity to mix specifically with other part-time researchers

Communication with the institution

Training and provision is focused on full-time researchers with part-time researchers as an afterthought. I have been sent emails saying 'all researchers need to do this' followed by 'but not if you're part-time' or having to clarify things and it being assumed that I am on campus ('just drop into the office') so now I don't bother to respond to these things.

- ❑ The university is often perceived as a a system it is too complicated to penetrate.
- ❑ Training and other central activities seem to be set up with full-time researchers in mind.

Suggestions by part-time researchers

*Give details of training courses further in advance.
Provide training courses to suit researchers living at a distance from the university.*

...more training geared towards more experienced researchers, rather than at recent graduates or people beginning their careers.

Seminars which are not always at lunchtimes.

I would appreciate more regular contact as this would aid motivation. Whether that be events or with the tutors.

Suggestions by part-time researchers (ii)

I would suggest that a postgraduate part-time network might be a good innovation

As some researchers are geographically spread about the country, and if there were enough in one place, perhaps regional meet-ups could be arranged

Better remote access to library facilities, lower fees for remote supply services, better instructions for what is expected from us part-time researchers ... better online learning materials...'

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Recommendations

✔ Recruitment

✔ Understanding the cohort

- Understanding the cohort (HEIs)
- Understanding the cohort (national organisations)
- Review of HESA classifications
- Investigate completion rates

✔ Support and flexibility

- Flexibility
- Support for research activities

Recommendations II

Integration and peer support

- Supervision
- Isolation
- New technologies
- Facilitating wider networks of peer support

Training and development

- Collaborative training provision
- Scheduling of training

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Further work...?

- ✔ Disseminating the course/resources and findings

Also it would be interesting to...

- ✔ Look at the destinations of part-time researchers
- ✔ Investigate completion rates
- ✔ Investigate the impact of cross-cutting issues (funding, age, experience, discipline) on this cohort
- ✔ Find out what happens to those who do not finish