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Understanding the part-time researcher experience

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Contents

'Understanding the part-time researcher experience' was written as part of a suite of resources developed and led by Vitae Midlands Hub to help HEIs to enhance the experience of part-time researchers. In addition to this report the following resources are now available:

- a resource pack for training professionals charged with supporting part-time researchers
- a DVD offering tips and advice gathered from successful part-time researchers.

For further information on 'Vitae's part-time researcher programme' visit the Vitae website at www.vitae.ac.uk/parttime_researcher or email enquiries@vitae.ac.uk.

The external links provided to other resources and websites are no responsibility of Vitae.

Introduction:
Key findings and recommendations

Tristram Hooley (Vitae)

Every year large numbers of people successfully complete doctorates through part-time study. They combine their research with work, family and other commitments and go on to develop new skills and make a contribution to the knowledge base of their discipline. For those who have completed a doctorate full-time, the idea of combining doctoral research with something else represents a fantastic achievement. Full-time researchers rarely complain that they don't have enough to do, and yet around a fifth of all doctorates are awarded to those who have studied part-time. For example, if we look at the cohort of part-time researchers who started their degree in 1996/1997 we can see that 2,333 went on to graduate with doctorates, representing around 22% of the total number of doctoral graduates from that year's cohort[1].

Part-time doctoral graduates finish their doctorates with a piece of original research conducted at the boundary of knowledge. They probably also complete with time-management skills and an ability to multi-task that outstrips their full-time peers. They have certainly demonstrated a tremendous resolve and personal commitment to a project and the experience, despite its ups and downs, is likely to stand them in good stead for whatever they go on to do next.

The fact that the UK universities can deliver these many part-time doctoral success stories is a testament to the system's flexibility, support systems and developmental traditions. The supervisory relationship, supplemented by appropriate training and institutional resources make the impressive feat of combining cutting-edge research with work, family or other commitments a commonplace and, for many, highly rewarding experience.

Studying for a doctorate part time represents an important way to widen participation in doctoral study. Part-time researchers are likely to be older, with starters having a mean age of 37.6 (27.3 for full-time)[2]. They are more likely to have spent time outside of higher education and to have a longer gap between their previous degree and their doctorate. 14% of UK domiciled part-time researchers completed a degree in the year before they started their doctorate in comparison with 44% of full-time researchers[3]. Key to their ability to appeal to a more diverse cohort and to enable the widening of participation, part-time doctorates are far more likely to be undertaken on a self-funded basis: 60% of UK domiciled part-time researchers begin their doctorate unfunded in comparison to 20% full-time[4]. Part-time study clearly enables a different cohort to undertake doctoral degrees; offering opportunities to combine research with work, to undertake high level professional development or to return to education after a period in the workforce.

Despite the positive experience of those who finish it is clear that part-time study poses a number of challenges. Completion rates frequently grab the headlines, and it is easy to see why, when only 48% of part-time doctorates are completed within 10 years compared to

76% of full-time doctorates[5]. However, completion rates are a symptom rather than a cause and we wanted to use this study to dig deeper into part-time researchers' experience by asking: what are the issues that part-time researchers are encountering; how might these impact on indicators like satisfaction and completion; and, perhaps most importantly, how should higher education institutions respond to them?

We start the report by presenting some key findings and recommendations. Recommendations have been grouped into the following themes that emerged from the research:

- recruitment
- understanding the cohort
- support and flexibility
- communication, integration and peer support
- training and skills development.

Throughout the report we have indicated where research findings have led us towards these recommendations. We hope that stakeholders will find these recommendations useful in considering how the experience of the part-time researcher can continue to be improved.

The thinking around the part-time research experience takes place in a context where there has been a strong emphasis on the training and professional development of researchers[6]. Following the report 'SET for Success' (2002)[7] a funding stream (known as the Roberts' funds) has been developed to support career and skills development for researchers and this has led to an energetic response around the agenda within HEIs. Vitae is central to this agenda and works with both national organisations and HEIs to support engagement with policy, practice sharing and the development of resources and research. The sector response to the Roberts agenda has typically focused on full-time doctoral students. Appendix C sets out the exceptions to this and demonstrates innovative training and development practice that has been developed around the needs of part-time researchers.

In recognition of a need to develop further research, thinking and practice around the experience of part-time researchers led the Vitae Midlands Hub to initiate the project that has resulted in this project and related resources[9]. A training programme was organised by the 19 institutions participating in the Vitae Hub. This programme piloted the training materials discussed in chapter three and identified a cohort of part-time researchers to participate in the research described in chapter two. Vitae then worked with the Higher Education Academy (HEA) to analyse the results of a national survey and examine what this revealed about the experience of part-time researchers as can be seen in chapter one.

Chapter one examines the part-time researcher experience using the 'Postgraduate Research Experience Survey' (PRES, 2008)[9] undertaken

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[1] Figures derived from HEFCE (2007), 'PhD research degrees: update - Entry and completion'. Retrieved 30 March 2009 from www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2007/07_28/, 14.

[2] Figures for 2004-2005. HEFCE (2009) 'PhD Study: Trends and Profiles 1996-1997 to 2004-2005'. Retrieved 30 March 2009 from http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_04/, 20-22.

[3] Figures for 2004-2005. HEFCE (2009), 'PhD Study: Trends and Profiles 1996-1997 to 2004-2005'. Retrieved 30 March 2009 from www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_04/, 33-34.

[4] Figures for 2004-2005. HEFCE (2009), 'PhD Study: Trends and Profiles 1996-1997 to 2004-2005'. Retrieved 30 March 2009 from www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_04/, 39.

[5] HEFCE (2007). 'PhD research degrees: update – Entry and completion'. Retrieved 30 March 2009 from www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2007/07_28/, 13.

[6] See the Vitae website's Policy section (www.vitae.ac.uk/policy) for further details.

[7] SET for Success (2002) www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/ent_res_roberts.htm

[8] See the Vitae website's 'Part-time researcher' section (www.vitae.ac.uk/part-time_researcher) for access to all related resources.

[9] See Kulej, M and Park, C, 'Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2008: Final report (2008)'. Retrieved 21 April 2009 from www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/surveys/pres/PRES2008.pdf

by the HEA. This large scale survey analysed the responses of 16,524 doctoral researchers from 73 higher education institutions. According to this survey the level of satisfaction is remarkably similar for both part-time and full-time researchers. However, there are a number of issues that the survey raises where there are differences. These issues include financial support for research activities, integration into departments' communities, career development and teaching opportunities.

Chapter two picks up many of the issues raised by PRES and examines them through a qualitative research project undertaken by the Vitae Midlands Hub. This research consisted of qualitative surveying of 87 part-time researchers who registered to attend dedicated workshops. The research draws out rich data which reveals much about the part-time experience. Echoing PRES, this research found that despite its challenging nature there were a clear majority of respondents who found the experience of studying a part-time research degree absorbing, satisfying and stimulating. However, they also reported difficulties with managing competing demands on time, academic acclimatisation and intellectual isolation. Participants also raised issues relating to funding and their access to teaching and training.

Chapter three describes the development of this course and draws out some wider issues for staff involved in the training and development of part-time researchers. In particular it raises researchers' requests for specific academic skills training and the opportunity to form peer support networks.

The report finishes with appendices to provide further detail. Appendix A shows the training programme developed by Vitae for the first iteration of the 'Part-time researcher' programme. Appendix B shows how this programme was developed and changed following piloting and feedback. Appendix C details other entries on the Vitae database of practice that demonstrate practice that has been specifically developed for part-time researchers.

Key findings and recommendations

The part-time doctorate offers a wide range of people an important opportunity to develop high level skills and experience of research. The flexibility of this mode of study means that professionals at various points in their career can engage in cutting edge research that enhances their practice or allows them to transition to new areas. The researchers who contributed to this project were highly motivated, able people who had a vast amount to offer to their research areas, the institutions where they were studying and the wider economy. Furthermore, they generally reported the experience of being a part-time researcher to be demanding, with some using words like 'frustrating', 'wretched', 'lonely, 'tiring' 'daunting' and 'overwhelming'.

These findings about the experience of part-time researchers when examined alongside concerns about submission rates suggest that it may be valuable for universities to consider what support is in place and how the experience can be developed.

Recruitment

Many part-time researchers reported being surprised by how demanding their experience was. They report that they underestimated the amount of time required, the level of isolation they experienced and the amount of resilience needed.

Recommendation 1 – Recruitment
Universities should review recruitment practices from the perspective of part-time researchers. Are prospective doctoral candidates encouraged to think through the personal implications of their decision to undertake the doctorate[10]? Providing opportunities to meet existing part-time researchers before they start might be an effective way to ensure that everyone starts with a realistic understanding of what is involved.

Understanding the cohort

This project has confirmed some anecdotal evidence about the experience of part-time researchers, but it has also raised a number of new issues. Looking at differences that exist between the full-time and part-time cohorts can be extremely illuminating when considering any feedback or evaluation data.

Recommendation 2 – Understanding the cohort (Higher Education Institutes)
Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) should ensure that they are aware of specific issues with their part-time researcher cohort. This could involve setting up specific mechanisms to gather part-time researchers' feedback, eg a dedicated part-time representative on departmental or institutional committees. It is also important to examine existing and available data (eg course evaluation data, institutional PRES results, etc) from the perspective of part-time researchers.

Recommendation 3 – Understanding the cohort (national organisations)
National organisations should continue to investigate differences between the part-time and full-time cohorts. This could involve commissioning new studies, but more immediately should mean that existing data and information gathering (eg Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) institutional audits, PRES results, Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) cohort reports and destination data) are examined with specific reference to part-time researchers.

Recommendation 4 – Review of Higher Education Statistics Agency classifications
HESA should investigate whether it is possible to review the way part-time and full-time researchers are coded in order to enable clear differentiation between writing up status and researchers who have had part-time status throughout their degree.

Recommendation 5 – Investigate completion rates
Funders should commission a study to investigate further what factors impact on part-time researchers' abilities to successfully complete their degrees[11].

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[10] This is a key message in Simon Felton's (ex-Chair of the National Postgraduate Committee) chapter 3 in 'The Postgraduate Companion' (Hall, G. and Longman, J., SAGE 2008)

[11] For a previous study examining this issue see Wright, T and Cochrane, R. (2000) 'Factors Influencing Successful Submission of PhD Theses', Studies in Higher Education, 25(2): 181-195

Support and flexibility

Many part-time researchers felt that their lives were stressful and that they had to constantly juggle competing demands. An additional finding was that part-time researchers are significantly less satisfied with the financial support that is available to support their research than full-time researchers.

Recommendation 6 – Flexibility

HEIs should examine regulations and practices to ensure that they offer sufficient flexibility for part-time researchers. Part-time researchers are likely to be highly committed in all areas of their life and therefore may need a greater amount of support and flexibility in their academic study.

Recommendation 7 – Support for research activities

HEIs should investigate why there is a perception of inequality around the level of financial support for research activity.

Communication, integration and peer support

Many part-time researchers do not feel well integrated into their university or with their department and peers. Their experience of the university is frequently mediated to a great extent through their supervisor. They frequently find it challenging to understand the wider range of support offered by institutions. Many researchers talk about experiencing isolation during part-time study and this is compounded by limited networks of peer support.

Recommendation 8 – Supervision

Supervisors and departments should review the way in which they communicate with researchers. In particular supervisors may wish to examine how they could develop supervision practice through a range of different communication tools, eg telephone, synchronous chat, video/audio conferencing. HEIs may also want to consider including ways of communication with part-time researchers in their training for supervisors.

Recommendation 9 – Isolation

HEIs should recognise part-time researchers' concerns about isolation and actively support part-time researchers to build stronger academic and peer support networks. This may be achieved by revision of induction programmes, by looking at the timings and amount of notice given for seminars and training events and by targeting part-time researchers as a specific cohort.

Recommendation 10 – New technologies

HEIs and sector bodies such as the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) should explore the potential that new technologies offer to create more effective communication and interaction between researchers and their peers, supervisors and the wider university support services.

Recommendation 11 – Facilitating wider networks of peer support

Part-time researchers' integration into wider academic and peer-support networks could be addressed by encouraging greater levels of interaction between different institutions. This integration could be at a range of levels, geographical areas and organised to coincide with activities such as conferences and training. The National Union of Students (NUS) also has a role to play in ensuring that part-time researchers are well integrated into peer support and representative structures.

Training and skills development

Part-time researchers are less satisfied with transferable skills training than full-time researchers. Part-time researchers typically bring more life experience to their doctorate and many feel that transferable skills training needs to be pitched in a different way to make it appropriate. Conversely, many have had a break from academic study and are seeking training that develops academic skills and supports them to engage with the academic community.

The participants in the Midlands 'Part-time researcher' workshops were very positive about training that was organised with them in mind and which offered the opportunity to meet other researchers in the same position.

Recommendation 12 – Training and development

HEIs should consider whether offering specific provision for part-time researchers would increase part-time researchers' engagement in skills training. In particular it may be worth considering how training can contribute to academic enculturation and in the formation of peer communities. This would also be dependent on each HEI having a better understanding of their part-time researcher cohort (see recommendation 1 – Recruitment).

Recommendation 13 – Collaborative training provision

HEIs should consider how they can collaborate with other HEIs around training and development provision for part-time researchers. Collaboration may offer a useful way for HEIs to share resources, provide researchers with opportunities for peer support and gather together viable cohorts.

Recommendation 14 – Scheduling of training

HEIs should consider the needs of part-time researchers when scheduling training and development activity. Of key importance is providing sufficient advance notice to allow part-time researchers to rearrange work or family commitments.

Chapter one:
Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2008: part-time researchers

Chapter one:

Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2008: part-time researchers

Malgorzata Kulej (Higher Education Academy)

This chapter focuses on the 'Postgraduate Research Experience Survey' (PRES, 2008) results for part-time researchers, particularly on differences in experience between the part-time and full-time cohorts.

PRES data shows that there is a great deal of consistency between the experience of full-time and part-time researchers and that part-time researchers are generally happy with their doctoral experience. In particular it should be noted that part-time researchers demonstrated the same level of overall satisfaction with doctoral programmes as full-time researchers. Furthermore, despite the fact that actual completion rates are much lower, part-time researchers also have the same level of confidence as full-time researchers about completing their doctorate more or less on schedule.

See recommendations 1 – Recruitment and 5 – Investigate completion rates

Nevertheless some issues that may benefit from further consideration or investigation have been identified. Part-time researchers tend to agree significantly less than their full-time colleagues that there is appropriate support for research activities[12] . They are also less satisfied with the research environment and integration into their departmental community is an issue. In general part-time researchers are less satisfied with the statements relating to teaching opportunities. Development of transferable skills rated lower by part-time researchers and they also stated they are less encouraged to think about the range of career opportunities that are available to them.

PRES methodology

Seventy three higher education institutions (HEIs) across the UK took part (on a voluntary basis) in PRES 2008. Between March and May 2008 over 57,000 postgraduate researchers were surveyed via an online questionnaire. During this time 16,526 replies were collected, and 16,524 replies were analysed by the Higher Education Academy (HEA).

The online questionnaire asks about six broad areas of postgraduate researchers' experience: supervision, skills development, infrastructure, intellectual climate, goals and standards, and thesis examination. There are also some extra items informed by the 'Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education' (Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes)[13] asking about feedback, career progression and development needs. The questionnaire also covers teaching opportunities and personal factors affecting the study. The full questionnaire, as well as the final PRES 2008 report, can be downloaded from the PRES website[14].
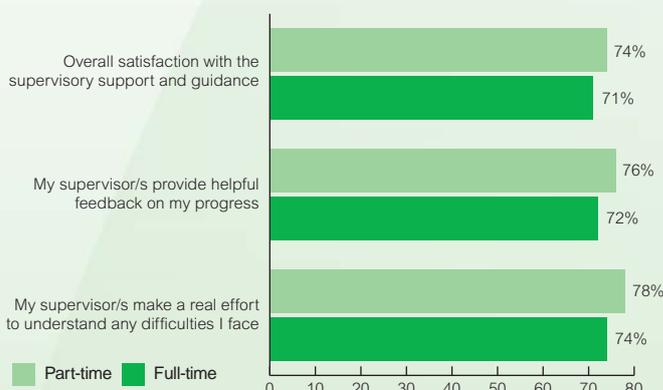
Part-time researchers

There are 3,462 part-time researchers in the PRES dataset which is 22% of all respondents. When compared with Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data part-time researchers appear significantly under-represented in the PRES survey[15]. The main reason for this could be that part-time researchers are 'harder to get' and tend not to reply so readily to online surveys. But at the same time HESA classifies researchers 'writing-up' as part-time while researchers may still perceive themselves as full-time. According to figures reported by Department for Innovation Universities and Skills (DIUS) 30% of doctoral researchers are studying part-time[16] while the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) reports 21% of doctoral starters in the UK as part-time[17]. This means that despite apparent discrepancies with HESA numbers PRES data are still a rich quantitative source of information on the part-time researchers' experience. All figures cited in this chapter were taken from the analysis of the PRES 2008 data and refer to PRES respondents only.

See recommendation 4 – Review of HESA classifications

Supervision

In general there are no large differences between full-time and part-time researchers when it comes to their views on supervision.

Figure 1.1 Differences between part-time and full-time researchers with regards to supervision

	Part-time	Full-time
Overall satisfaction with the supervisory support and guidance	74%	71%
My supervisor/s provide helpful feedback on my progress	76%	72%
My supervisor/s make a real effort to understand any difficulties I face	78%	74%

[12] All differences reported in this chapter are statistically significant (at least p<0.02).

[13] Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2004). 'Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education: Postgraduate research programmes'. Retrieved 30 March 2009 from www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section1/postgrad2004.pdf

[14] The Higher Education Academy (2009), 'Postgraduate Research Experience Survey' (PRES). Retrieved 30 March 2009 from www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/surveys/pres.

[15] HESA manual 'Students in Higher Education 2004-05' reports 48% part-time students, Table 1c and Table 1g from the CD-ROM

[16] 'DIUS, Higher Degrees: Postgraduate Study in the UK 2000/01 to 2005/06'. DIUS Research Report 08 16, p.34

[17] Figures for 2004-2005. HEFCE (2009), 'PhD Study: Trends and Profiles 1996-1997 to 2004-2005'. Retrieved 30 March 2009 from www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_04/, 6

In general part-time researchers are slightly more satisfied with supervision as a whole and they also think that their supervisor was more supportive than full-time researchers do. The above differences are statistically significant (p<0.000 and p<0.002) but they are quite small. As a rule, differences of 5% or more can be considered as substantial.

There are no differences between part-time and full-time researchers in their views on supervisors' availability.

Skills development

Both groups of researchers report the same level of satisfaction with opportunities to develop a range of research skills (over 60% are satisfied). Part-time researchers are significantly less satisfied with opportunities to develop a range of transferable skills than full-time researchers (by 5% points), especially communication skills – 64% of part-time researchers agree they have developed their communication skills, this is 6% points less than full-time researchers. At the same time part-time researchers are slightly more confident about managing a research project.

One reason for these differences with regards to transferable skills may be that part-time researchers are usually older than full-time researchers (Figure 1.2, page 6) which means they are probably better equipped in transferable skills and they do not seek developmental opportunities in this area. Also, being a part-time researcher requires good organisational and management skills which may explain why part-time researchers are more confident about managing a research project.

See recommendation 12 – Training and development

Infrastructure

In general part-time researchers are only very slightly less satisfied with their access to appropriate facilities. That includes access to specific equipment, suitable working space, provision of computing resources and technical support. There is no difference in opinion about library resources.

The first substantial (in percentage points terms) difference between the two groups of researchers can be noticed when they refer to the appropriate financial support for research activities. Only 39% of part-time researchers agree there are appropriate resources, while over a half of full-time researchers (55%) agree with this statement. In the light of all other subtle but statistically significant differences this one should be treated as an indication of a potential issue.

See recommendation 7 – Support for research activities

Research environment and intellectual climate

Part-time researchers are moderately less satisfied with the research environment than full-time researchers (53% and 59%). Part-time researchers agree slightly less (difference smaller than 5% points) with the statement that their department provides a good seminar programme for researchers and that the research ambience in their department or faculty stimulates their work.

The second considerable difference between part-time and full-time researchers can be seen with regard to their feeling of integration into their departmental community. While almost 49% of full-time researchers agree they feel integrated into their departmental community, this is the case for only 39% of part-time researchers (10% less).

See recommendations 9 – Isolation, 12 – Training and development

Goals and standards

Part-time researchers seem to be (although only slightly) better informed on institutional standards and expectations than full-time researchers. They tend to agree slightly more with statements like: *'I know who to approach, or where to find this out, if I am dissatisfied with any element of my research degree programme[18]'; 'my institution values and responds to feedback from research degree students[19]'* and *'I am aware of my institution's responsibilities towards me as a research degree student[20]'*. Although statistically significant, these differences are smaller than 5% points.

Career development

Items in this section have been informed by the 'Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education' (Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes). Again, opportunities to develop transferable skills have been scored lower by part-time researchers than by their full-time colleagues (52% agreement that there were adequate opportunities available to further develop transferable skills among part-time researchers and 60% among full-time researchers).

Part-time researchers also report that they feel less encouraged to think about the range of career opportunities available to them (31%) than full-time researchers (36%) and less encouraged to reflect on their career development needs (37% part-time versus 40% full-time).

See recommendation 12 – Training and development

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[18] 57% of part-time researchers agree while 54% of full-time researchers agree (3% points difference)
[19] 49% of part-time researchers agree while 45% of full-time researchers agree (4% points difference)
[20] 59% of part-time researchers agree while 56% of full-time researchers agree (3% points difference)

Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2008: part-time researchers

Teaching opportunities

Around 67% of all PRES 2008 respondents reported that they were given an opportunity to gain experience through teaching. Part-time researchers agree less with the statement that they have been given adequate support and guidance for their teaching than full-time researchers (39% and 44% respectively). Also, part-time researchers agree substantially less than full-time researchers that the experience gained through teaching has been a worthwhile aspect of their research degree programme (only 52% of part-time researchers while 64% of full-time researchers).

There is a high correlation ($p<0.000$) between age of respondents and their opinion on whether their teaching experience was a worthwhile element of their research degree programme. The higher the age of researchers, the less worthwhile the teaching element – 70% of researchers who are 25 years old or younger agree with this statement but the agreement drops to only 40% in the oldest group. Part-time researchers tend to be older (Figure 1.2) and therefore tend to respond more negatively around satisfaction with teaching. This may be because they have less interest in staying in higher education or because their broader life experience, possibly already including experience of teaching, means that they have less to gain from the experience of teaching as part of their degree.

Another explanation may be the source of funding. The majority (58%) of part-time researchers are self-funded. Self-funded researchers are the least keen on teaching (only 55% agree this was a worthwhile element of their programme) compared to research council (72%) or institution (68%) funded researchers. This may be because for self-funding researchers teaching is seen as a financial necessity rather than a developmental opportunity.

Personal factors

Friends and family seem to be slightly less supportive, (difference below 5% points) of part-time researchers' research degree programme than of a full-time researchers' programme[21]. Also, part-time researchers agree substantially less that their employer is supportive of their research degree programme than full-time researchers. Only 68% of part-time researchers agree with this statement, compared with 76% of full-time. The PRES data does not make it clear who the employer is. However, it is likely that for many full-time researchers the university where they are registered is the most common employer.

The differences in perception of employer's support may be explained by funding. Those who are self-funded tend to agree the least with the statement about employers (60% agree their employer supportive) while institution funded researchers (for whom the institution may also be the employer) tend to agree more strongly with the statement (78%). Although there is the same proportion of institution funded researchers in full-time and part-time cohorts (around 23%) a much bigger proportion of part-time researchers are self-funded and this may affect the above results.

There is no difference between part-time and full-time researchers in terms of strain on personal finances that financing the programme can place.
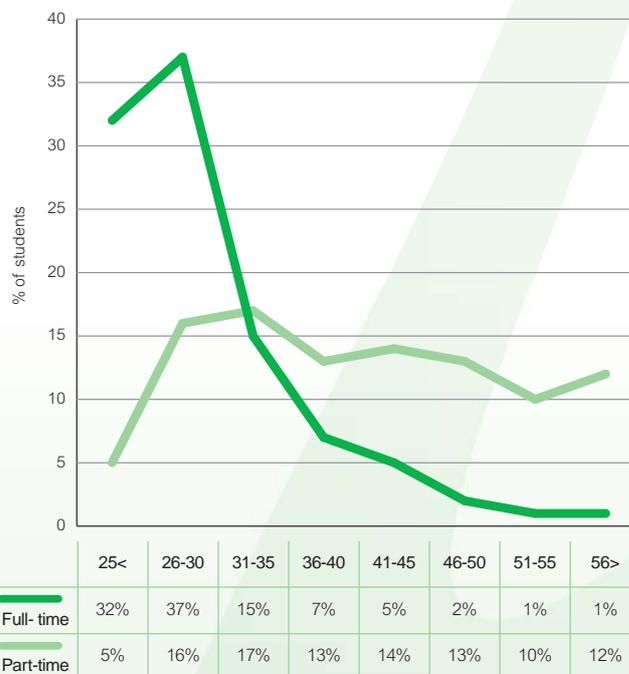
See recommendation 6 – Flexibility

Demographic profile of part-time researchers

It is clear from the analysis of demographic variables that part-time researchers are different from full-time researchers in a number of ways. The biggest differences can be noticed in age, domicile, ethnicity and funding.

Figure 1.2 below illustrates the relationship between age and mode of study. It is readily noticeable that full-time researchers are much younger (69% of them are 30 years old or younger) than part-time researchers (only 21% are in the same age group). The relationship between age and mode of study is statistically significant.

Age by full-time/part-time
Figure 1.2 PRES 2008 respondents by age and mode of study

	25<	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51-55	56>
Full-time	32%	37%	15%	7%	5%	2%	1%	1%
Part-time	5%	16%	17%	13%	14%	13%	10%	12%

There is a very small correlation between gender and disability and mode of study. Females and researchers who consider themselves to have a disability (5% of all PRES respondents consider themselves to have disability) are slightly more likely to study part-time. Although this is statistically significant the difference is only around 2% points.

As shown on Figure 1.3, page 7, only 56% of full-time respondents are UK domiciled and 45% are from outside the UK. At the same time 80% of part-time respondents are UK domiciled and only 20% are from outside the UK.

Similarly, a full-time cohort is more mixed in terms of ethnicity – 30% of researchers are non-white, almost twice as many as in a part-time cohort (Figure 1.4, page 7).

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[21] 84% of part-time researchers agree with the statement that their friends and family are supportive of their research degree programme while 88% of full-time researchers agree with this statement (4% difference)

Domicile by full-time/part-time

Figure 1.3 PRES 2008 respondents by domicile and mode of study

Legend:
- Non EU
- Other EU
- Other EU

Full-time:
- Non EU, 13%
- Other EU, 15%
- Home, 56%

Part-time:
- Non EU, 9%
- Other EU, 11%
- Home, 80%
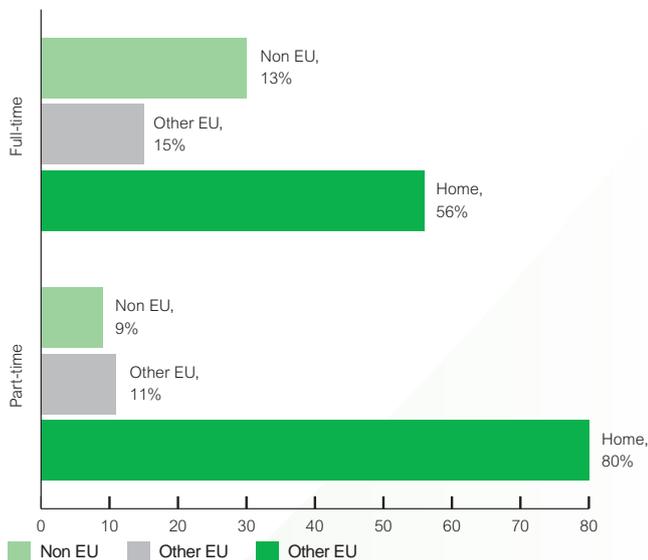
Ethnicity by full-time/part-time

Figure 1.4 PRES 2008 respondents by ethnicity and mode of study

Legend:
- Other
- Chinese
- Black
- Asian
- Mixed
- White

Full-time:
- Other, 7%
- Chinese, 9%
- Black, 3%
- Asian, 8%
- Mixed, 3%
- Home, 80%

Part-time:
- Other, 3%
- Chinese, 2%
- Black, 2%
- Asian, 4%
- Mixed, 2%
- Home, 86%

Not surprisingly, almost all full-time researchers are primarily face to face learners (93%), while over a half of part-time researchers (51%) are primarily distance learners (still, it is worth noticing that almost a half of part-time researchers are face to face learners).
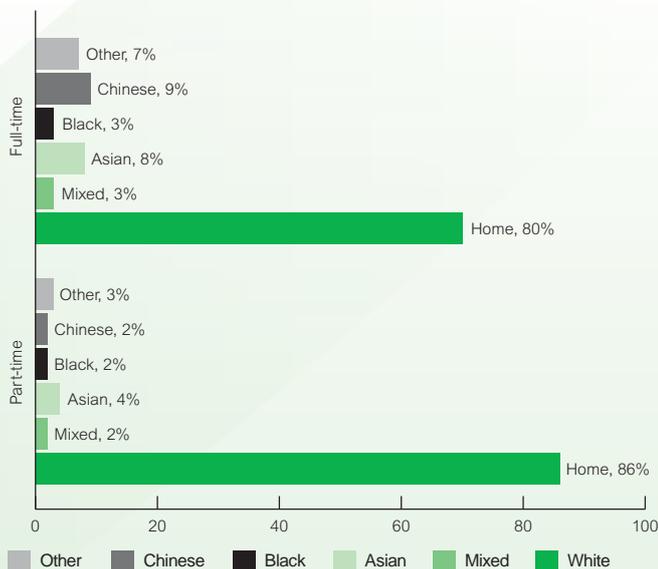
There are also substantial differences between the two groups when it comes to their route to a postgraduate research programme. Full-time researchers either completed their undergraduate studies (21%) or completed their postgraduate studies (37%) before starting their postgraduate research programme. This suggests that they have gone straight to the next level of their education. Conversely, part-time researchers before starting their programme worked in the same

organisation that they currently work in (32%), completed postgraduate studies (22%) or worked in a non-research role (21%).

See recommendations 2 – Understanding the cohort (HEIs) and 12 – Training and development

The motivations cited for pursuing a research degree are similar for both full-time and part-time researchers. Part-time researchers are more likely to be motivated by their interest in the subject (39%) than full-time researchers (33%) but improving career prospects is important to both groups of researchers to almost the same extent – it was the main motivation for 33% of full-time researchers and 29% of part-time researchers.

PRES also demonstrates that there are differences between full-time and part-time researchers in their subject of study. Full-time researchers are more likely to study biological sciences (17%), social studies (12%), engineering and technology (12%) and physical sciences (12%). Subjects popular in the part-time cohort are education (15%), social studies (13%) and historical and philosophical studies (11%).

The two groups of researchers vary considerably when it comes to source of funding. More than a half (58%) of part-time researchers are self-funded. In comparison, only 23% of full-time researchers are self-funded. Full-time researchers are also more likely to be funded by the research councils (33% full-time and only 4% part-time) and funded overseas (11% versus 2% in the part-time cohort).

There are also noticeable differences with regards to the type of postgraduate research programme between full-time and part-time researchers. While almost four in five registered as full-time are studying on a PhD course (78%) this is the case for only 59% of part-time researchers. Part-time researchers are more likely to study on professional doctorate programmes (10% of part-time researchers are registered on these programmes and only 1% of full-time researchers).

Because of the differences in demographic profile between part-time and full-time researchers more in-depth statistical analysis could be conducted to establish whether a single demographic variable, eg age or domicile, could affect researchers' experience to a greater extent than mode of study. Although there are noticeable differences in experience between various demographic groups, these are not systematic (ie there is no particular group scoring consistently lower or higher on all PRES items). Hence it is highly unlikely that differences in experience described above are due to a single demographic group rather than mode of study.

Recommendation 3 – Understanding the cohort (national organisations)

Chapter two:

Understanding the part-time researcher experience

Carol Edwards (University of Leicester)

The data presented in this chapter were collected from postgraduate researchers who had signed up to attend a dedicated programme of workshops developed by the Vitae Midlands Hub. On registration participants were invited to complete an online questionnaire. This asked about broad, contextual topics such as their pattern of communication with fellow researchers and staff, and about whether life as a part-time researcher was what they had anticipated. The questions offered mostly pre-coded responses, with space to record extra free-text comment.

Eightyseven of the 100 participants completed an online pre-course questionnaire. During the training participants were also encouraged to feed back on the day and to provide further reflection on their experience as a part-time researcher. The responses collected during the workshop were mainly free-text responses. This chapter discusses the ideas expressed, and presents quotes from participants that exemplify their views.

What is it like being a postgraduate researcher?

The most frequently voiced summary of their lives as part-time researchers was that there were extreme highs and extreme lows. *'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.'* It is heartening that, while this group of respondents reported that there were very low points, they were also keen to let us know that there were also extreme highs. An equal number of responses related only to one extreme or the other.

Among those participants who gave only positive responses, a clear majority reported the great pleasure they got from their research, using

words like: 'absorbing', 'satisfying', 'stimulating', 'interesting', 'self-indulgent', 'a privilege', and 'dream of a lifetime'. However, the negative extremes were also vividly described: 'frustrating', 'wretched', 'lonely', 'tiring', 'a bit of a guessing game', 'quite expensive!!', 'daunting', 'overwhelming', alongside feelings of loneliness and stress owing to having so much to fit into limited time.

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!'

There is clearly much emotional energy involved in the process of part-time doctoral study. This is in addition to the demands on time and energy of employment, academic study, personal and family life, and other activities.

Support for this cohort needs to extend routinely beyond an academic focus to involve a wider pastoral support.

See recommendation 6 – Flexibility

How does the experience of being a part-time postgraduate researcher fit with expectations?

There was some variation in how the actual experience of being a part-time researcher aligned with the expectation. However, only two people said that it was easier than they had expected. Around half of the participants said that the experience of part-time doctoral study was similar to what they had expected. Most of them added a clarification that they had expected it would be very difficult and it was. Some participants had already been working in research before they began their doctorate, and this group tended to say that it was pretty much as they had expected. None of the difficulties mentioned, however, related to the level of academic study required. They related predominantly to the anticipated difficulties of managing competing demands on time, isolation, lack of sense of community, level of resilience needed, and contact with supervisors.

'…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.'

See recommendation 1 – Recruitment and recommendation 9 – Isolation

Findings on communication patterns

Contact with supervisors

Figure 2.1 shows that email is the most frequently used form of communication with supervisors, with 69 respondents (79%) using it at least once a month, and 16 of these more than once a week. Face to face communication is the next most common method of communication, with 42 respondents (49%) saying they speak face to face with their supervisor(s) at least once a month, and a further 29 saying roughly every three months.

Figure 2.1 Distribution of frequency of contact with supervisor(s)

Estimate of frequency by mode of contact	Telephone	Email	Face to face	Web	Video
>1 per week	3.5% (3)	18.6% (16)	4.7% (4)	1.15%(1)	0% (0)
>1 per month	9.2% (8)	34.9% (30)	15.1% (13)	2.3% (2)	1.1% (1)
1 per month	8.0% (7)	26.7% (23)	29.1% (25)	0% (0)	0% (0)
1 per 3 months	16.1% (14)	15.1% (13)	33.7% (29)	0% (0)	0% (0)
2 per year	10.3% (9)	1.2% (1)	8.1% (7)	1.15% (1)	0% (0)
1 per year	11.5% (10)	1.2% (1)	5.8% (5)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Never	41.4% (36)	2.3% (2)	3.5% (3)	95.4% (83)	98.9% (86)
Total*	100% (87)	100% (86)	100% (86)	100% (87)	100% (87)

>25% of respondents	15-24.9% of respondents	0-14.9% of respondents

* Totals vary as sometimes individual questions were left unanswered.

While email is useful, face to face meetings can provide something extra, but are more difficult to arrange:

'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.'

Patterns of communication can change over time, given the often long period over which part-time doctorates are conducted:

'I have had less contact and supervisions as time has gone on. I am now in my sixth year and see her less frequently as she lives and works 100 miles away. I meet with my Director of Studies more locally about once or twice a year.'

Use of web-based or video-based modes to communicate with supervisors is minimal within this sample. Use of the telephone was relatively low with 36 respondents (41%) saying they never used it and only 18 people saying they used it more than once in three months to contact their supervisor. There were some anomalies with regard to contact with supervisor, for example:

'I am in the unusual position of being a close colleague (working on some of the same courses/projects and within the same department) as my three supervisors. … So I see one or other of them pretty well every time that I am physically in the office - which due to the nature of the Open University is around two to three times a week. This is not to say that we are talking about my supervision in any formal way. :-) '

See recommendations 8 – Supervision and 10 – New technologies

Communication with university

Figure 2.2 shows that electronic communication with their university (email, website, and library at a distance) is the most common method of communication used. Face to face communication understandably takes a lower profile.

Some part-time researchers seem to be relatively frequent attendees at seminars and training sessions, but a significant minority report either no attendance, or attendance only once a year.

Figure 2.2 Contact with university

Estimate of frequency by mode of contact	Meetings	Seminars	Email	Website	Training courses	Library at a distance	Library in person	Central support services
>1 per week	1.2% (1)	2.4% (2)	13.9% (12)	30% (26)	1.1% (1)	16.5% (14)	2.3% (2)	0% (0)
>1 per month	6.9% (6)	10.3% (9)	16.3% (14)	40.1% (35)	5.7% (5)	18.8% (16)	20.9% (18)	1.2% (1)
1 per month	29.9% (26)	27.6% (24)	27.9% (24)	12.6% (11)	11.5% (10)	36.5% (31)	32.6% (28)	1.2% (1)
1 per 3 months	10.3% (9)	23.0% (20)	22.1% (19)	6.9% (6)	40.1% (35)	10.6% (9)	25.6 (22)	12.8% (11)
2 per year	6.9% (6)	5.7% (5)	5.8% (5)	4.6% (4)	8.0% (7)	3.5% (3)	5.8% (5)	6.9% (6)
1 per year	10.3% (9)	9.2% (8)	4.7% (4)	1.2% (1)	16.1% (14)	1.% (1)	4.7% (4)	16.3% (14)
Never	34.5% (30)	21.8% (19)	9.3% (8)	4.6% (4)	17.2% (15)	12.9% (11)	8.1% (7)	61.6% (53)
Total*	100% (87)	100% (87)	100% (86)	100% (87)	100% (87)	100% (85)	100% (86)	100% (86)

>25% of respondents	15-24.9% of respondents	0-14.9% of respondents

* Totals vary as sometimes individual questions were left unanswered.

Respondents described feeling on the outside of a system that is hard to get to know and hard to become involved with.

'It seems to be impossible to know who or what is available - a part-time researcher is apparently not given the same level of remote access as a 'distance learner', despite most of us being in exactly the same situation.'

'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.'

As a result part-time researchers considered provision for them was tacked on as an afterthought by the university.

'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.'

See recommendation 9 – Isolation

Communication with peers

Respondents were asked to state how many fellow postgraduate researchers they knew at a) their own institution and b) at other institutions. Figure 2.3 'Number of fellow researchers known in own institution' (page 10) shows a summary of the responses. The main messages are:

42 respondents (48%) knew at least three fellow researchers from their own institution, but 27 recorded either '0' or no figure.

31 respondents (36%) knew at least three fellow researchers from other institutions; 51 (59%) knew at least 1; but 34 (39%) said they did not know any.

A total of 13 of the respondents (15%) recorded that they knew no other part-time doctoral researchers at all. A further 14 (15%) recorded knowing a total of two or fewer peers including both own and other institutions.

The pattern of communication with their peers shows that a significant proportion of those respondents who do contact fellow researchers socially online do so relatively frequently, with only 27 (31%) making contact at least once per month, and eight (9%) more than once per week.

Similarly, many of those respondents who contact fellow researchers socially either face to face or by telephone do so relatively frequently, with 29 (33%) making contact at least once a month, and 13 (15%) more than once per week.

Figure 2.3 Number of fellow researchers known in own institution

Number of fellow researchers known in own university	Respondents	Number of fellow researchers known in other universities	Respondents
No answer	3	No answer	2
0	24	0	34
1 or 2	18	1 or 2	20
3 to 5	16	3 to 5	19
6 to 10	17	6 to 10	9
>10	9	>10	3
Total	87	Total	87

There are high proportions of this sample who say that they never meet fellow part-time researchers at seminars, meetings, training events, and conferences. It was therefore reassuring that one aspect of the Vitae 'Part-time researcher' programme was that participants particularly enjoyed being with other part-time doctoral researchers.

'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.'

See recommendations 9 – Isolation and 12 – Training and development

Summary of the findings about the experience of being a part-time researcher

Much of the negative feedback given above could be addressed, by HEIs, by implementing administrative changes that would not be costly or particularly time-consuming.

The main findings from this research into the experience of being a part-time researcher are presented below.

- The lives of part-time researchers tend to have extreme highs and extreme lows
- A clear majority of respondents reported the great pleasure they got from their research
- There is clearly much emotional energy involved in the process of part-time doctoral study as opposed to the academic content

- The difficulties related predominantly to the difficulties of managing competing demands on time and loneliness
- Around half of the participants said it was even more difficult than they had anticipated
- They wanted to meet others going through a similar process, so that they can discuss generic issues relating to life as a part-time researcher
- There was gratitude and relief that something was being provided specifically for them

Issues that HEIs and other stakeholders could/should consider

Participants were asked specifically in the pre-course questionnaire:

'Briefly, please give details of things your university could do/provide that would improve your experience of being a part-time researcher.'

Many examples of responses are used below, as the words of the researchers are more eloquent than a list of suggestions.

More notice of all relevant events

'I think my university is great really - they would do what I needed I'm sure. My only complaint is that I could do with a bit more notice. I tend as a freelancer to work at least three months ahead.'

'Difficult to say at this point - maybe a fixed calendar of 'gatherings' of other part-time people. We are all too busy to organise it ourselves but, I think, would respond if it is in the diary soon enough.'

'Better general communications and information about what is going on in general within the university. The one problem with being part-time is that I do not always attend on a regular basis and it is easy to miss out on things.'

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

See recommendation 9 – Isolation, 14 – Scheduling of training

Administrative suggestions

'Sending interlibrary loans by post to my address, allowing more time for long library loans.'

'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…'

'Reply a bit more promptly!'

'Shared workspace, eg: part-time postgraduate computer cluster.'

'Ensuring administration is capable of dealing with researchers who may not be able to visit the university that often'

'Better library opening hours during holidays as often only open during office hours when at work. More journals online.'

Proactive, relevant induction process and information

'Getting details when you started at different times is difficult, you seem to fall out of the expected routine, for example my original form was lost under piles of other researchers starting later in the year. I finished up having to re-apply.'

'… a really good online 'guide' to the university which gives really basic info such as who to see about what, what the general procedures for each stage of the game are, and what the whole pecking order of staff is….. Pretty basic stuff!!!'

See recommendations 9 – Isolation and 12 – Training and development

Specific skills training

'I would like training in research principles.'

'More training on different methodology and academic writing.'

'Information about additional sources of funding for conferences would be really helpful. Also more training geared towards more experienced researchers, rather than at recent graduates or people beginning their careers. I am sure part-time PhD researchers are less likely to be younger, unsalaried etc than would be the case for full-time researchers.'

Continuing the research training past the first year

'More sensitive timing of relevant seminars and meetings.'

'I am not sure that they could improve, they try to include all postgraduates including taught MAs who are timetabled, so the timing of seminars is always later in the day which clashes with school hours and childcare, meaning I can't attend.'

'The experience of part-time researchers would be improved at my university if courses and events were provided specifically for them, with sensitivity towards their particular needs, eg fitting around childcare.'

'More workshops at the weekend so that it does not interfere with work time.'

'Timely training in year 1. Acknowledge the needs and existence of part-time researchers.'

'Seminars which are not always at lunchtimes.'

'Meetings for part-time researchers after 17.00 or 18.00 hours.'

'More regular contact.'

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

See recommendation 9 – Isolation and 12 – Training and development

More support for part-time researchers to feel part of a community

'… Part-time researchers frequently do not have the time to attend 'generic' courses or reading groups and therefore the provision of events - even just once a semester - which were strictly relevant, and enabled them to meet other researchers in similar positions, would be enormously helpful. It would also help if the postgraduate community did not appear to be dominated by full-time researchers; I would suggest that a postgraduate part-time network might be a good innovation (indeed, my previous university department provided an online message board for the purpose of facilitating communication and the sharing of ideas between distance learning researchers.)'

'University treats part-time researchers very differently. When you visit, apart from seeing your supervisor, there is little community to be offered.'

'More opportunities to network within the institution. More research seminars.'

'Offer opportunity to get together as a group - not necessarily for delivered sessions but just to talk to other PhD researchers - maybe from other cohorts.'

'Would be useful for all researchers to meet at least monthly for support and sharing.'

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

See recommendation .9 – Isolation and 13 – Collaborative training provision

Better monitoring of the supervision process

'Better monitoring of the supervision process. I'm lucky to have a good supervisor, but I can see how it can easily go wrong with a supervisor who is not there for you when you need them.'

See recommendation 8 – Supervision

Commentary

There are some useful pointers here to practical changes that HEIs could implement to improve the part-time researcher's experience.

It is possible, however, that not all of the needs can realistically be addressed by each individual HEI or department within it. There will be some, for example the provision of training sessions/days and the sense of belonging to a research community, that may be better tackled collaboratively.

Collaborations could occur between HEIs, between departments, with external agencies, or on an individual interpersonal basis, and could be at varying levels. The current project is an example of an external agency working collaboratively with many universities within one geographical area to provide a training programme to participants from an even wider collection of HEIs.

A benefit of having various kinds of collaboration, and making training open to participants from other universities, is that they will be exposed to a wider range of fellow researchers, and a greater pool of experience and ideas than they would if they were just in contact with people within their own university and department.

See recommendations 11 – Facilitating wider networks of peer support and 13 – Collaborative training provision

Chapter three:

Training part-time researchers

Kate Mahoney (Vitae)

The Vitae Midlands Hub, and its member institutions, had acknowledged that supporting the development of part-time researchers was a complex challenge[22]; with little possibility for one type of provision providing a successful outcome in all cases. Furthermore, the costs of providing a diverse range of development opportunities through numerous channels and at all times of the day are extremely prohibitive.

Often, because of not being able to offer unlimited flexibility in accessing these opportunities, part-time researchers can be disadvantaged in engaging with and helping to shape the research community in which they hope to belong in comparison to full-time researchers who are more likely to be able to access these opportunities. Therefore, after much debate about the experiences of part-time researchers and the barriers they face in accessing an academic career, the Vitae Midlands Hub concluded that action by individual institutions was insufficient. Furthermore, when part-time researchers access provision they are often alone amongst well supported full-timers with whom they struggle to connect. It was decided to redress this balance with something new, innovative, collaborative and 'just for part-time researchers'.

Collaboration between the 19 Vitae Midlands Hub institutions enabled the development of a flexible training framework to recognise the diversity of part-time researchers from a range of institutions. A series of workshops, geographically spread across the region so that any part-time researcher from any university could attend were designed alongside a dedicated online group using Facebook[23] to provide a mechanism for attendees to interact and offer each other support and hence build a community.

See recommendations 11 – Facilitating wider networks of peer support and 13 – Collaborative training provision

The workshops had two aims:

■ to give part-time researchers the time and space to share and discuss what research is and how its quality is assessed with peers and academics from outside their supervisory arrangements

■ to get some succinct training in a range of key areas[24] for part-time researchers; each workshop had two parallel sessions.

These aims are similar to those of dedicated part-time researcher training seen at individual universities such as the University of Durham, where part-time and distance researchers are brought together and provided with an intensive three-day training course covering research management, communication skills, personal effectiveness, library and IT resource and career development[25].

The project sought the views of participants at the workshops to determine the mechanisms that universities could implement to:

■ cost effectively provide the development opportunities they need

■ integrate them more fully into the wider research environment.

The regional workshops

Set-up and running

The regional workshop series was open and free to any part-time researcher from any Vitae Midlands Hub university. The workshop series was advertised as a package in November 2007 with all dates, venues, organiser contact details and workshop content detailed. This allowed possible attendees to choose a workshop using any or all of the following criteria about which to attend:

■ minimise travel (part-time researcher can live/work at considerable distance from their 'home' university)

■ the day or date that is best for them

■ the actual content of the workshop.

Leaflets were delivered to 19 Midlands universities, in hard and soft copy format. The workshops were also listed on the UK GRAD Programme (now Vitae) website and on the websites of the hosts and co-host institutions. Supervisors were encouraged to add the workshop advert to their email signature. The six one-day workshops had an innovative mix of academic enculturation and varying pastoral and process support sessions. They took place in various geographical locations on different days of the week. This variety of content, location and day gave the maximum opportunity to attend. Six universities chose to host a one-day workshop; some agreed to 'buddy' with neighbouring universities to share expertise and administrative duties. The host and co-host universities agreed to organise; venue and room bookings, food and refreshments, registration (linked from an online booking form), joining instructions, provision of facilitators and workshop leaders, provision of some printed materials, provision of academics to discuss their approach to research and provision of a part-time doctoral success story.

The researchers were able to attend one or more workshop(s), indeed of the 100 participants who registered for the workshops, 85 signed up for one workshop, 10 for two workshops, four for three workshops and one for four workshops. However, attendees were also encouraged to use the online support and local provision of their home institution. The participants represented 15 of the 19 member institutions with a small number from outside the region. The overall approval rating, from all participants, was well over 80%.

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[22] Views expressed at the Hub's Good Practice event focussing on part-time support (May 2005). Event write up retrieved 30 March 2009 from www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/Microsoft%20Word%20-%20Part-time%20provision%20in%20the%20Midlands.%20Good%20Practice%20Takeaway%20May%202006.pdf

[23] Facebook (2009). Retrieved 21 April 2009 from www.facebook.com/

[24] Structuring the thesis, getting the best from your supervisor, accessing information, planning to manage time more effectively, understanding academic writing styles, making progress

[25] Loughlin, E (2007) 'Researcher Training for Part-time and Distance Doctoral Students (3 day)'. Retrieved on 30 March 2009 from www.vitae.ac.uk/policy-practice/34837/Database-of-practice.html

Programme

Four universities collaborated to develop the design and ethos of the course and workshop learning materials. The course was designed to have an identity (a series of workshops designed by local universities for part-time researchers), so that participants had a feeling of continuity but could also 'stand alone' in content. The one-day programme was designed to be short to facilitate travel, starting at 10am and finishing at 4pm. It was intended that each host university should recruit different presenters and facilitators, so that if a participant had attended a previous workshop, the input from speakers/facilitators would be from a fresh perspective. This also meant that volunteer academics, for example, would not have to commit too frequently, or be asked to travel inconvenient distances. Each workshop was designed to run with approximately 40 participants in attendance. However, attendance ran at an average of 20 participants per workshop.

The nature of the activities delivered through the course was mixed. See Appendix A for the full programme. In the 2008 workshops the focus was to bring part-time researchers together and to gather information from participants about their experiences of working remotely or part-time. The morning focused on participants experiences of part-time study and provided opportunities to speak to other researchers in similar situations. A considerable amount of time was spent 'breaking the ice' and on building relationships between participants. The 2009 workshops have moved away from the extended icebreakers of 2008, instead providing more skills sessions, extended facilitated discussions and objective setting opportunities.

The skills sessions (in both the 2008 and 2009 courses) vary from information giving to opportunities to network and make connections. The 'Nuts and Bolts' skills sessions – 'Structuring your thesis', 'Accessing information and writing styles' - provide participants with practical information about the doctorate and the thesis writing process. These sessions are suitable for both part-time and full-time researchers. However, the 'Motivation and management' sessions – 'Getting the best from your supervisor', 'Managing time' and 'Recognising and making progress' – focus more on the additional skills a part-time researcher needs to successfully complete his/her project.

Feedback and development

Researchers attending previous workshops were asked for their feedback on the course and suggestions for development. These suggestions could be used in the development of all training offered to part-time researchers. The content of the skills sessions were seen to be important, however, participants' greatest benefits were meeting other part-time researchers and having a dedicated networking opportunity. The researchers felt that the one-day programme provided an opportunity to take a day to dedicate to their research and to take 'time out for reflection'. When asked about the timing of skills sessions participants often commented that evening and Saturday sessions, although useful, were not as 'part-time' friendly as first thought. Participants commented that taking a day off work to attend a training course was often easier, especially if child care was already in place. Saturday training could interfere with 'family time' and other pre-arranged commitments. Arranging childcare at a weekend could be difficult. The most important feedback regarding the scheduling of training for part-time researchers was to ensure that training days were advertised with advanced notice. This advance information, ensures that participants are much better able to plan work cover or childcare cover to be able to attend.

See recommendations 2 – Understanding the cohort [HEIs] and 14 – Scheduling of training

The specific suggestions for workshop design were themed around:

- the design of the workshop programme – bearing in mind participants not able to attend both skills sessions

- inclusion of other visual aids

- the time provided for talking and networking with other part-time researchers

- a need to relate the workshop more to the needs of part-time researchers.

As a result of these comments the 2009 programme has been amended. The full programme can be seen in Appendix B. It may also be useful for other institutions to note these recommendations when considering provision for part-time researchers.

It has been recognised that time for discussion should be factored in to any training for part-time researchers. Despite the usefulness of ice breaker activities, it is important to keep these to a minimum to enable more 'skills type/information providing' sessions to run. The discussion elements of any part-time training should have a clear brief to ensure the discussions are led by informed and proactive facilitators, especially during the peer support to facilitate de-briefing but curtail lengthy stories. These sessions can also serve as ice breakers, and ways of learning others' names, subject areas, stage of study, and current concerns, which could be followed up in the informal time of coffee breaks and lunch as people wish.

Feedback was received from participating HEIs who said that they had found sourcing part-time researcher success stories challenging. A DVD was therefore developed based on a series of short interviews with former part-time researchers to alleviate this pressure. It also provides added value in that it enables researchers to access the stories of eight successful part-time researchers rather than one. It was felt that providing content on film would help those delivering the workshops to vary the format of their delivery and avoid too much 'chalk and talk' or 'death by PowerPoint'.

Chapter three:
Training part-time researchers

By taking into account these general recommendations the programme for the 2009 part-time researcher workshops now has a stronger part-time focus, with every session drawing out the key part-time issues.

A summary of the training ideas asked for by part-time researchers who attended

Participants were invited to suggest training ideas to be included if they had the chance to direct the focus of a workshop. There was a huge range of responses, resulting in almost as many different suggestions as there were participants.

A large number of responses concerned ideas for specific skills sessions, but almost as many concerned more nebulous ideas relating to the process of part-time doctoral study. The third main group of responses related even more generally to the broad support needed when studying part-time.

A large number of examples are provided below with the aim of better characterising the three main groups of support that appear to be needed.

Ideas for specific skills sessions such as:

'Focus on the phases immediately after literature review.'

'Dealing with supervisors.'

'The fear of writing'. Actually committing your ideas/arguments to paper – how to start.'

'… something on the basics of research 'tools'. EndNote: using EndNote as a research tool; using EndNote as a tool to write up.'

'Ethics. Keeping motivated. I might separate the qualitative researchers from the quantitative, as they don't always know what the other is talking about! Although that does put us on the spot to explain it to the Martians!'

'Short skills-based sessions, eg, keeping track of your reading, writing journal articles and getting published.'

'The transfer report.'

Ideas relating to the process of being a part-time researcher such as:

'Tips for keeping on track.'

'Common problems/difficulties/mistakes.'

'How to manage time. Keeping things in perspective. Achieving your goals not those of special interest to your supervisor.'

'How to keep motivation going when trying to fit in research around family and a full-time job.'

Ideas relating to broader support for part-time researchers such as:

'Anything that gets us together and talking.'

'Networking and swapping stories and contact details with other part-time researchers.'

'Stress management.'

'Positives and negatives of part-time research.'

'How to integrate into a university's research culture while being part-time.'

'Anything that would help people to go away feeling inspired/motivated/enthused, eg opportunity to talk about why they started, what they want to achieve long term etc.'

Training is perhaps more usually thought to refer to specific skills sessions, and this is understandable in the case of full-time researchers who are more likely to be in frequent contact with each other and their supervisors. In the full-time case, there are inevitably more opportunities to talk socially, to share concerns, to swap experiences, and to support each other.

If part-time researchers come together simply for an academic skills session, this may be a wasted opportunity to provide the broader support that we are being told by the researchers in this project is needed. Indeed many of the participants commented that part of the enjoyment of these workshops was to meet other part-time researchers '[I am] looking forward to meeting other part-time researchers. Hope to learn from each other. May help to put own problems/studies into focus'.

If part-time researchers are making the effort to take time out of their other commitments to attend a skills training event, it would therefore make sense to add on to the skill session further support regarding the process of part-time research, and some peer support element as well if possible.

The three key areas of need seem to be:

■ specific academic skills training – on a huge range of topics

■ opportunities to talk through and learn about the process of part-time research

■ broader peer support over the whole experience of part-time research.

Appendix C provides further information about how a range of HEIs have responded to these needs through dedicated provision.

See recommendations 2 – Understanding the cohort (HEIs) and 12 – Training and development

Appendices

Appendix A

Part-time researcher programme (2007/2008)

Time	What	Detail
09.30	Arrival and registration	Refreshments available
10.00	Welcome	Outline for day
10.10	Ice breaker activities	
11.00	Coffee break	
11.15	The ethos and process of research: a discussion on research perspectives	Four breakout groups, grouped by broad research interests, each group led by a research active academic.
12.30	Lunch	
13.30	Parallel skills sessions Participants to choose one of two offered skills sessions	Two skills sessions run, one from each of the theme groups 'PhD nuts and bolts' 'Motivation and management'
15.00	Coffee	
15.15	Success story	Previous part-time researcher talking about achievement – the how's and the after life
15.45	Questions, summary and evaluation	Evaluation forms and time for final Q&As
16.00	Close	

Appendices

Appendix B

Part-time researcher programme (2008/2009)

Time	What	Detail
09:15	Arrival and registration	Refreshments available
09:30	Welcome	Outline for day
09:35	Part-time success stories	DVD of previous researchers completing doctorates on a part-time basis
09:50	Ice breaker activities Objective setting for part-time researchers	Getting to know you icebreaker Introducing the learning wall
10:15	The ethos and process of part-time research	Facilitated discussion about part-time research
11.15	Coffee	
11:30	Part-time researcher skills workshop session 1	Skills session 1
13:00	Lunch	
13:40	Post lunch energiser	
13:45	Part-time researcher skills workshop session 2	Skills session 2
15.15	Coffee	
15:25	Objectives session 2	Reviewing the learning wall
15.40	Action planning for part-time researchers	Postcards
15:50	Questions and evaluation	Evaluation forms and time for final Q&As
16:00	Close	

Appendix C

Meeting part-time researchers needs through dedicated courses

The use of online provision for part-time and distance learners is available at a number of universities in the UK. A search of the Vitae 'Database of Practice' illustrates that support for part-time and distance learners is based mainly around the timing of provision. The timing of the courses varies from Saturday and evening courses to shorter lunchtime sessions.

All-in-one PhD Saturday course, Universities of York

www.vitae.ac.uk/dop/534.html

Despite the University of York having a relatively small population of part-time PhD researchers, in 2007, an out-of hours one-day training course was introduced. The course is seen as an amalgam of several courses related to research management which negates the need for researchers to attend the shorter day-time courses.

Saturday schools and evening classes, University of Swansea

www.vitae.ac.uk/dop/360.html

The University of Swansea has expanded its evening provision and started Saturday school provision by either repeating or presenting a summary of courses delivered during working hours. The courses are also customised according to the disciplines of the researchers booked to attend them.

Lunchtime and twilight training sessions provided for postgraduate researchers and postdoctoral research staff, Kings College London

www.vitae.ac.uk/dop/578.html

A series of skills training courses provided at lunchtimes and after main working hours when researchers feel that they may have more time to attend training. The two hour sessions have been designed to complement the existing one-day and half-day provision already provided by the university for its researchers, with the intention of engaging more part-time researchers with the skills training agenda.

Meeting part-time researchers needs online

Online courses are becoming more popular. A number of universities have developed online provision which enables researchers to access out-of-hours provision. The online provision varies from a series of online lectures and e-tivities, to an online platform to discuss plans and provide feedback.

Reflecting on past experience: a course for mature PhD researchers, University of York

www.vitae.ac.uk/dop/684.html

A flexible, directed online learning experience for PhD researchers who have spent a minimum of two years in employment prior to commencing their PhD. The course is delivered online and not only recognises but rewards the unique experiences that each participant brings with them from their employment and encourages them to reflect on how those skills will help them with their PhD and with future employment.

Starting your PhD: an online course, University of Leicester

www.vitae.ac.uk/dop/365.html

An online course designed to encourage new PhD researchers to think about their skills and career development during the first term of their studies. The online teaching mode enables researchers to engage and network regardless of their physical location or availability.

A series of ten e-learning courses, at one and a half hours each, for postgraduate and post-doctoral researchers, University of Leicester.

www.vitae.ac.uk/dop/496.html

A series of online courses available to all researchers (doctoral and postdoctoral) which are part of a flexible learning programme that allows the courses to be incorporated into existing classroom courses, or used on an ad hoc basis on the researchers' own initiative. As with the 'Starting your PhD online' course the online teaching mode enables researchers to engage and use the course materials regardless of their physical location or availability.

Online skills workshop, University of Liverpool

www.vitae.ac.uk/dop/559.html

The University of Liverpool operates a compulsory training programme which has been adapted for overseas postgraduate researchers and those registered part-time or distance learners. The course enables researchers to acquire the generic skills for surviving the research environment. The online skills programme covers time and project management, research writing, presentation skills, critical thinking, and IP in a 12 week course using the university's online learning platform.

Vitae

Vitae builds on previous work by the UK GRAD Programme and UKHERD. Vitae is supported by Research Councils UK (RCUK) and managed by CRAC: The Career Development Organisation and delivered in partnership with regional Hub host universities.

The role of Vitae is to work with UK higher education institutions (HEIs) to embed professional and career development in the research environment. Vitae plays a major role in innovating, sharing practice and enhancing the capability of the higher education sector to provide professional development and training of researchers.

Our vision is for the UK to be world-class in supporting the personal, professional and career development of researchers.

To achieve our vision we have four aims:

- championing the development and implementation of effective policy

- enhancing higher education provision through sharing practice and resources

- providing access to development opportunities and resources

- building an evidence base to support the researcher development agenda.

For further information about the range of Vitae activities go to www.vitae.ac.uk or contact enquiries@vitae.ac.uk

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