

Deakin Research Online

This is the published version:

Neumann, Ruth and Rodwell, John 2008, Case study of satisfaction and completion of part time research students, in *QPR 2008 : Proceedings of the 2008 Quality in Postgraduate Research Conference*, The Centre for Educational Development and Academic Methods, The Australian National University, Canberra, A.C.T., pp. 195-196.

Available from Deakin Research Online:

<http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30019270>

Every reasonable effort has been made to ensure that permission has been obtained for items included in Deakin Research Online. If you believe that your rights have been infringed by this repository, please contact drosupport@deakin.edu.au

Copyright : 2008, ANU

Case study of satisfaction and completion of part time research students

Ruth Neumann and John Rodwell
Macquarie Graduate School of Management
Australia

Introduction and Context

Internationally the past decade has witnessed a stronger policy focus on research students. With the numbers of students undertaking research degrees continuing to increase, government and community interest in doctorates has grown. In 2006 more than 45,000 students were enrolled in a higher degree by research (HDR) in Australia (DEST, 2007). It is unclear how many of these HDR students are enrolled part time since the federal Department of Education, Science and Training's preference for reporting statistics in terms of Equivalent Full-time Student Units (EFTSU) makes it impossible to study trends in actual numbers of part-time enrolments, obscuring the significance of part-time research students as a distinctive category. Part-time research students were estimated at around 38% of research students in 2003 (Cumming and Ryland, 2004; Cervini, 2007). Part-time research students have been referred to as the "reserve army" for universities and as "invisible" and the "forgotten cohort" for government policy (Evans, 2002; Barnacle and Usher, 2003). It is however becoming clear that there is a specific category of research student that has been overlooked to the point that they are 'invisible', in both policy and research terms - part-time students. This paper reports on research on part-time research students and examines completion times relative to full-time candidates as well as satisfaction with their research experience on completion. The study utilises two national data sources from Graduate Careers Australia (GCA). Detailed discussion of the datasets, research approach and analysis has been reported in Rodwell and Neumann (2008).

Overview of Key Findings

In terms of satisfaction with their student experience (for full details see Neumann and Rodwell, in press) part-time research graduates are less satisfied with the infrastructure support provided and have a less favourable perception of the research climate of their department, than full-time research students. The level of satisfaction with other important aspects of research study, such as supervision, realisation of goals, skill development and the thesis examination process indicate little difference in satisfaction levels between full- and part-time students. Within the institutional case study this trend also holds although there is some fluctuation in the supervision scale in some years (2005, 2001, 2000) with part-time graduates more satisfied with their supervision than full-time graduates. Given the confidentiality surrounding individual institutional data the examination of potential institutional effects on full- and part-time graduate satisfaction remains speculative.

In terms of completion, part-time doctoral students were found to have faster completion times than full-time doctoral students, in equivalent-time terms. For the full-time students the key predictors of timely completion were residency, field of study and English-speaking background (NESB faster) (Rodwell and Neumann, 2008). Part-time students were more likely to complete in the standard target FTE time if they were 'younger' and/or had an honours degree. Importantly, 'younger' is an average of 43 years while 'older', slower completers had an average age of 47 years. One specific category represented the fastest completers: part time students who were non-resident and from an English

speaking background. Further investigation is needed to fully understand this group.

Implications

The analyses in the case study highlight the varying issues that are the best predictors of time to completion by mode of study for doctoral students. It is suggested that universities and departments can employ a two-stage approach where they (i) improve the contextual foundations that underpin the research student experience and then (ii) develop processes for student-tailored support. Improving the contextual foundations of research study at the institution includes tackling the research climate and infrastructure issues. For example, a minimum step is to make part-time research students a 'visible' category of study in the consideration of resource provision.

The second stage of intervention would concentrate on improving students' rates of timely completion by providing student-tailored support. In this case study institution there could be a focus on tailoring support activities to slower-completing students, whether the students are full-time or part-time. The demographic variables have been highlighted by the research and are known at the time of acceptance and commencement of research students.

Importantly, this study's findings substantiate challenges to the stereotypical view of research candidates as young, full-time and with few work or other commitments.

References

- Barnacle, R. and Usher, R. (2003). Assessing the quality of research training: The case of part-time candidates in full-time professional work. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 22, 3, 345-358.
- Cervini, E. (2007). Part-time PhDs don't fit the bill. *Australian Financial Review*, Monday 30 April, 2007, 33.
- Cumming, J and Ryland, K. (2004). Working doctoral students: Challenges and opportunities. Paper presented at the *AARE National Conference* December 2004.
- Department of Education Science and Training (DEST). (2007). *Selected higher education student statistics, 2005*. Canberra: DEST.
- Evans, T. (2002). Part-time research students: the 'reserve army' of research students for universities. In: Kiley, M and Mullins, G. (Eds). *Quality in postgraduate research: Integrating perspectives*, pp. 138-146. Canberra: CELTS.
- Neumann, R. and Rodwell, J. (in press). The 'invisible' part-time research students: A case study of satisfaction and completion. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34, 2, to appear April 2009.
- Rodwell, J. and Neumann, R. (2008). Predictors of timely doctoral student completions by type of attendance: The utility of a pragmatic approach. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*. 30, 1, 65-76.

Corresponding Author:

Ruth Neumann
Macquarie Graduate School of Management
ruth.neumann@mgs.m.edu.au