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Supervising part-time doctoral students

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Part-time doctoral students are not exceptions, unusual or aberrations in UK universities or in many universities internationally (China is a notable exception). Green (2008: 50) reports that of those commencing postgraduate research degrees (masters and doctorates) in the UK academic year 2002-3, about one-third were enrolled part-time. Similar proportions can be found in most ‘developed’ nations (see, for example, Evans et al. 2008). In education, the proportions are often reversed in such nations, with about two-thirds being enrolled part-time. Despite the significant proportion of part-time doctoral students, there is a strong tendency for people in universities, government and the media to think and write of doctoral students as people who are in their mid-20s and studying full-time in a laboratory or library somewhere on-campus. In the UK, the mean age of commencing doctoral students is nearly 30 years and for part-time doctoral students in education it is about 42 years. Contemporary circumstances suggest that supervising doctoral candidates in universities is likely to include a significant proportion of part-time candidates, especially in professional disciplines such as education. For the purposes of this chapter, part-time students are those who complete their doctorates principally or wholly as part-time enrollees. Typically, they are mid- to late career and working in a profession or workplace that will influence both their candidature and their topic. Of course, there are some whose family, personal, health or other circumstances necessitate or dispose them to undertake their doctorates as part-time candidates. Part-time students tend to be concentrated in the professionally related disciplines (education, health, social and behavioural sciences, IT, business).

This chapter explains the ways in which part-time students’ various qualities and circumstances can be marshalled to good effect by supervisors to help them produce good doctorates that are of significant benefit beyond academia. It considers the approaches that supervisors can use to help candidates enhance the ways their employment and doctoral study work for each other. It discusses the ways in which planning and monitoring the five to six years’ part-time study helps increase the benefits and reduce the effects of workplace, family and other pressures on doctoral life. This chapter presents a sequence of strategies that supervisors may adopt with part-time doctoral students to position themselves for a successful future. Such strategies include: establishing productive and effective supervisory relationships; planning the times and spaces for study; helping
candidates select a topic and research design that blends with their work or other circumstances; identifying and planning for research dissemination and publication that is effective for their work and other contexts; and helping to form productive relationships with other doctoral candidates.

The benefits of supervising part-time doctoral students

Supervisors of part-time candidates may experience particular benefits over supervising full-time candidates, although there also may be some difficulties. There is, however, a considerable diversity amongst part-time students, but there are some characteristics we can generally expect. Although there are some disciplinary differences, in general, they are equally likely to be male or female. They are typically aged, at commencement, anywhere between their mid-30s and mid-50s. (So supervision is likely to involve dealing with people who are typically from mid-30s to late-50s.) They are usually employed full-time in a responsible position, sometimes in their own business. They earn a good salary, sometimes higher than their supervisors! A significant proportion of students are likely to work in a university, sometimes in the university in which they are enrolled. Some may have a job that requires travel or posting overseas. Most typically live in their own home, often with a partner or spouse. They often have obligations or responsibilities to children and/or to elderly parents. These aspects are all likely to be marked contrasts to most full-time candidates, with the exception of family responsibilities or obligations that may also affect some full-time students. Part-time students, therefore, bring to their candidature significant resources, skills, knowledge and experience that they have developed during their lives and careers. In these respects, they may be more strongly placed than, especially, the younger and least experienced supervisors. Good supervision requires recognition of, and respect for, the part-time students' strengths, and for supervisors to guide them accordingly.

One important piece of supervisory guidance is to assist part-time students with professional interests to undertake research that is related to such interests and is of direct or indirect benefit to their employer. Often part-time candidates enrol with this in mind, but there are benefits if their supervisors can ensure and endorse this approach. The consequence is that candidates are well-placed to ensure that their research has an impact in their professional or workplace context, and/or in the community. They may not appreciate this potential at the outset and they can benefit from their supervisors’ encouragement to consider effective ways to inform their profession and/or workplace of their findings. A major benefit for supervisors, departments and universities is the potential for these graduates to have an impact through their research on professional and workplace contexts. By so doing, supervisors, departments and universities are able to show that these doctoral graduates have an impact in the ‘real world’, something which is less common for full-time students.

There are other benefits to universities having part-time students. These students tend to demand and consume fewer university resources to support their candidature than do full-time, especially international, students. Often they provide their own facilities and sometimes their employers directly or indirectly provide some resources for their study. Part of the reason for the lesser demand on university resources is that part-time students are often ‘off-campus’ and, therefore, provide their own office and other facilities. In addition, full-time candidates usually require scholarships for living expenses that can
SUPERVISING PART-TIME DOCTORAL STUDENTS

amount to £30,000–50,000 over the period of a PhD. Although part-time candidates have lower completion rates (that is, they are less likely to complete their doctorates than full-time students), they generally complete in slightly less equivalent time to full-time students (if we assume part-time study is half-time). On this basis, it can be said that part-time doctoral candidates are 'good value', so it is very important that we supervise them well (Evans 2002).

Considering supervision

Establishing a good working relationship with any doctoral student is essential, so it is important to do so with a new part-time student. Instead of a doctorate being akin to paid work for a full-time scholarship-holding candidate, for the part-time candidate it is usually an activity they have to squeeze-in alongside their work. In this respect, they may be part-time students to their universities, but they are far from part-time in their commitments in their lives, indeed, they are often working very long hours. In effect, they typically undertake their study in their leisure time and it is something that will occupy them (partly, but persistently) for about six years. Therefore, the university also makes a similar commitment to the candidate in terms of its physical and human resources for this period. In particular, it undertakes to provide appropriate supervision.

An implication of part-time doctoral students' six years or so of doctoral study is that they may not necessarily have the same supervisor throughout. Although it is not unusual for university staff to spend six years or more within their university, resignations or retirements (even deaths) do occur. Therefore, arrangements sometimes need to be made for a change of supervisor, which means that some new supervisors may be assuming responsibility for an existing (in this case, part-time) student.

Deciding to supervise a (new or established) part-time doctoral student is a matter that should be considered in the same terms when supervising a full-time candidate. For a potential supervisor, there are advantages and disadvantages with either mode of enrolment. Indeed, some full-time candidates change to part-time, and some part-time candidates change to full-time, so it pays not to be too fixed in one's thinking on these matters. Therefore, it is a good idea to have a phone (or face-to-face) conversation with the candidate about their proposed (or actual) doctorate before you agree to supervise. In effect, the supervisor is not only testing out the topic and personal compatibility, but also one of the main ways by which supervisors will be communicating during candidature. Of course, email is probably the main way in which many ideas and drafts will be transmitted and comments provided, as happens with full-time candidates.

However, sometimes a conversation is required to discuss ideas, problems and suggestions and voice communication by phone, audio-link (or audio/video) by computer or in person is required. Supervisors need to establish early who will organise the call and the frequency of the expected communication. After the initial conversation the potential supervisor will be in a position to determine if sufficient rapport has developed and the groundwork has been laid for the next few months of candidature.

It is a good idea in this initial conversation to discuss what is involved in completing a doctorate and the sort of commitment the student will need in order to do so. In particular, a part-time doctorate is not just a matter of adding what might be seen as another part-time job to their normal working life. It is something that they can expect to intrude into their minds and, occasionally, even take over! This means that the other
important people in their lives will be affected whether they like it or not. It is worth suggesting that, if they have not done so, they consult their family and even the friends they may be ignoring for a few years. They may even consult colleagues and their employer, but this may be something they are reluctant to do, depending on the circumstances.

It is also important to establish whether they have the ideas that you can work with to help them produce a good doctorate. Do they understand the impact the doctorate will have on their lives? And do you both seem to be able to work together? Crucially, it is the impact on their lives that is particularly different from working with full-time candidates. Assuming these three aspects are adjudged in the affirmative and that the other requirements for enrolment are met, then the next matters to consider are after the initial enrolment has been completed.

**First steps**

Given that, typically, part-time candidates are mid- to late career professional people, it is important to recognise and respect their experience and expertise. It can be counter productive for a relatively junior supervisor to adopt time-management and goal-setting strategies that they may well find useful with new full-time doctoral students who have just completed their honours degrees. Many part-time candidates know how to manage time and budgets, achieve goals and schedules, and get the kids to tennis or swimming. It is often said that to get a job done on time then give the task to a busy person. It is, therefore, important that the supervisor and the university treat part-time candidates as professionals. A more likely problem for part-time candidates is prioritisation. Work pays the bills and parenthood has personal, moral and legal imperatives, therefore, it is obvious that their doctorate is not going to be first priority. Nonetheless, it is the supervisor’s job to ensure that the doctorate becomes first priority sufficiently often to be completed.

Given that it is important to respect the student’s expertise and experience, a useful way to commence the first supervision engagement is with a conversation about how the candidate works and what sorts of assistance they will need from their supervisor. Some candidates are very well-organised, task-oriented and will keep themselves on schedule. They may say that what they want is advice about reading, comments on their work and ideas, and assurance that what they are doing is of a sufficient doctoral quality. In a recent study of Australian doctoral students, Pearson et al. (2008: 23) found that doctoral students transferred capabilities from work to study, and from study to work, during their doctorates. In particular, about 60 per cent transferred time-management and IT capabilities to their doctoral work, and over 50 per cent transferred library and writing skills to their employment. The importance and usefulness of the inter-relationships between doctoral and professional capabilities, and their development and transfer during doctoral study should not be underestimated.

Some supervisors report that written work comes in clearly, even elegantly, written and the supervisors’ experiences are relatively pleasurable. Others may say that part-time students need prodding and nagging to keep their work going. This enables this type of student to say ‘I have to get this done for my supervisor’ (and that’s why they can’t go to the theatre, take the kids to football, entertain a colleague’s client or paint the house). In effect, the supervisor is portrayed to others as a bit of an ogre for whom the candidates have to do work, when really it is a ruse constructed for their mutual benefit! There will
be other styles of working, but these two examples indicate the subtlety that is required to manage supervision effectively and professionally.

It is expected that supervisors keep their students on schedule. Therefore, irrespective of students’ approaches to their doctoral work, it is essential that supervisors monitor progress and intervene where necessary. Such intervention needs to appreciate the students’ circumstances, and so flexibility is often required. However, it can be a difficult judgement to make with new students. They may say that things have been busy at work and that they will catch-up, but how does the supervisor really know that both parties similarly understand the magnitude and nature of the work involved? If the student does share their supervisor’s understanding, and successful efforts are made to return to schedule, then there is a basis for the supervisor to trust the student’s judgement with subsequent matters. If not, however, it is important that supervisors do not allow the problems to escalate to levels where it is difficult, or even impossible, to remedy the situation. In essence, a judgement is made about part-time candidates’ competence versus their confidence. As fellow professionals, candidates should respect the supervisors’ judgements and realise that supervisors have a responsibility and the expertise to exercise it.

It is useful to understand the student’s family circumstances and how these may affect candidature. Some may have a spouse or partner who is most supportive and who has skills and expertise that may be brought to bear. For example, some students may come from a family with academic and/or graduate research credentials. Not only should they understand what the candidate has to do, but they may well be a useful mentor, proof-reader or stats adviser. Others may have a partner who is an English teacher or a librarian and their skills may help at particular stages. Of course, it may work the other way. There may be children who resent dad doing his doctorate instead of helping them with their homework, or husbands who think that a doctorate is an indulgence that their relationship could well do without. Depending on how things evolve, the supervisor may experience being positioned as something of a confidant or family counsellor, or at least as a sympathetic ear.

Despite the shifts in gender relations over the past decades, there remain some significant gendered differences in family and work relations that may make the balancing of work and family priorities different for men and women. It is also the case, that while we tend to think of family responsibilities as those of a parent doctoral candidate for their children, with part-time students it is common to have to deal with a student (as a son or daughter) having to cope with their elderly parents. At this point it is worth distinguishing between family and work matters that are relatively constant or regular responsibilities and priorities, and those that are unexpected or episodic to which one has to respond at the time sympathetically and flexibly. In the case of the former, the supervisor can help the student understand what needs to be negotiated so that their doctorate can be inserted and managed successfully. Essentially they need to find about 16–18 hours per week for about 45 weeks of each year in order to study. If there is no overlap or support from work, then this will mean working about two evenings per week and one day at the weekend, or working for two hours or so early mornings and a good half day at the weekend, or a few hours during the week and full-time during their holidays.

Similar to the family matters discussed above, part-time doctoral candidates’ paid employment can be viewed as something that comprises regular responsibilities and priorities that need to be negotiated so that their doctorate can be inserted and managed successfully. Many candidates choose a topic that is related to their profession or workplace. In these circumstances, a supervisor may be able to help the candidate make some
useful strategic decisions that ensure that some of their paid work (for example, thinking, reading, writing) may overlap with their doctorate. Every equivalent hour per week or day per month is time saved from the 'private' doctoral candidature time. Some employers will encourage (or even require) employees' further study. Although a few of these are not as helpful as they might be, often they do provide some regular study time: even as little as half a day per month is useful. Occasionally, employers may offer blocks of time, such as one or two weeks, or even one or two months. Usually this is offered later in study, after sufficient progress has been demonstrated. Particular students may arrange for unpaid leave or holidays at a time that suits their candidature and financial circumstances. It may help financially to span any unpaid leave across two tax years.

**Integrating work and study**

Some students have jobs that require them to work irregular hours, or travel nationally or internationally for days or weeks at a time. Supervisors can help students to see the advantages that can come from these circumstances, rather than the hindrances. For example, there is often 'time off in lieu' that can be used for study, or the time in planes and hotel rooms can be used for doctoral reading, thinking and writing. Having a laptop computer is a great advantage for any student, but especially for the highly mobile part-time student. Nowadays, universities have arrangements with publishers so that journal articles can be downloaded, data can be stored and analysed on a computer and, of course, writing is a computer art! Therefore, a laptop computer enables a part-time doctoral student to work almost anytime, anywhere they get the opportunity in their busy lives. It is essential that supervisors impress upon their students that regular back-ups are required and stored independently and separately from the laptop computer. For example, a back-up of an EndNote library, the data or a thesis draft should be on a separate drive or disc at university, work and/or at home, and not with the computer when it gets stolen. Ideally, all work should be stored as two independent back-up copies.

Another way in which students' employment may be of benefit is where the topic can be of benefit to the workplace, then some really good mutual benefits and efficiencies may occur. There may be matters of research and professional ethics, and of intellectual property that arise which need careful consideration. However, there are important advantages in sharing findings with colleagues, or potentially improving work-practices, quality, services and/or productivity. Several questions can be raised: If the student's research can be of direct benefit to their work, can some of their doctoral work be done at work? Is some of their paid work useful for their doctorate? Does the student read things for work that may also form part of their literature review? Can the workplace be a/the site of research? Can equipment and other material resources at work be used for the research? Often, there is an affirmative answer to these questions and the part-time student is much better-placed than their full-time on-campus peers to complete their doctorate efficiently and for it to be useful outside of academe.

**Doctoral 'afterlife'**

Part-time students generally rely less on their former supervisors after graduation than do their full-time peers. The latter often need help to find a job or a postdoctoral research
placement and require advice on networking and finding work, as well as references from their supervisors. The former typically have jobs, networks and other referees they need to use, depending on the nature of any new position they are seeking. Also, part-time graduates are more likely to be useful to their supervisor through their professional links and new research skills. For example, in pursuing research funding opportunities with industry, commerce, the public sector or community organisations, supervisors may have very useful strategic allies in their part-time doctoral graduates who are well-placed within (even own) the businesses or organisations concerned. Likewise, when the graduates are looking for consultants, advisers or keynote speakers, their doctoral supervisor may well come to mind.

Concluding comment

From the first phone conversation or meeting, supervisors and their (potential) part-time students embark on a journey that will take about six years. The nature of part-time students, their work and their doctorates is such that supervisors are going to experience and learn things from outside of their university that most full-time candidates are unable to provide their supervisors. The value of part-time doctoral students is often unrecognised, but it something that is becoming increasingly appreciated by those 'in the know'.

References