Learning at a Distance but not a Distance Learner: Meeting the Needs of a Diverse Body of Students Post COVID-19.

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Abstract.

Researchers have a significant role to play in addressing the challenges that COVID-19 presents for example, to our health, education, psychological, economic and social wellbeing. The aim of this ongoing PhD study is to learn from the experiences of graduates who completed a PhD on a part-time basis within the university sector in Ireland. The preliminary research findings shed light on how we might support future generations of researchers, who may not "*fit the mold*" (Gardner, 2008) of the traditional full-time research student, situated in the academic institution. In line with recent findings from the UK PRES Postgraduate Researcher Experience Survey (Higher Education Academy, 2017) respondents preferred face-to-face contact over interaction through remote or digital communication media. This article raises the question of how face-to-face and digital technology can complement each other for future learners and what can we (e.g. academic and support staff and postgraduate researchers) learn from our own experiences of learning in a socially distanced climate.

Keywords: Digital technology; Online and remote learning; Postgraduate studies.

1. Supporting Learners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the present climate of social and physical isolation in order to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, we are all currently experiencing what it is like to learn and communicate remotely without the opportunity for face-to-face interaction. Higher Education

Institutions (HEIs) in Ireland are responding proactively to the situation by moving all teaching and learning from classroom-based delivery to online platforms and providing flexible solutions regarding exam and assessment formats to meet different learners' needs (Irish Universities Association, 2020). Technology has been recognised as providing a way to facilitate teaching and learning and reach a large number of learners (Fumasoli, 2019). However, it is questionable whether the potential of technology has been realised in terms of supporting learners who are at a distance but are not signed up to an online or distance learning programme: for example, physically or socially at a distance or with limited time and opportunity to access academic and personal campus based supports due to balancing studies with employment responsibilities, such as part-time doctoral candidates (Watts, 2008).

Policy makers and practitioners within the field of education have identified the goal of providing flexible educational support and provision to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse body of students: for example, part-time, mature, working and online learners (e.g. Department of Education and Skills, 2011). Therefore, I think that the current situation, in the context of supporting learners without the means to communicate on a face-to-face basis, provides an opportunity for exploring how technology might facilitate or impede social connections, learning, interaction and sense of belonging.

1.1 The rationale of exploring part-time candidates' experiences of navigating a PhD.

I am a part-time doctoral candidate in the School of Education in Trinity College Dublin. My (ongoing) PhD research explores the experiences of learners who have completed or are currently carrying out a PhD on a part-time basis within the university sector in Ireland. The reason why I am focusing on PhD candidates rather than learners undertaking other types of doctoral programmes such as the Doctorate in Education or Professional Doctorate is that the PhD as outlined in the Salzburg Principles (European University Association, 2005, 2010, 2016) tends to recognise and support full-time doctoral candidature over a 3-4 years programme. This is the model of doctoral

education which has been adopted in most European countries, including Ireland (European Commission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2018).

Part-time candidates have been identified as experiencing barriers to communication and sense of disconnection from the academic institution over the duration of the doctoral programme, often up to 6 years. This is due to a tendency for part-time doctoral candidates to balance studies with other employment and caring roles (Watts, 2008). In contrast Professional Doctorates, such as the Doctorate in Education, tend to be designed to facilitate part-time learners who are in employment, in addition to studying (Wildy, Peden, & Chan, 2015). Learners on Professional Doctorate programmes are often recruited within a cohort for the duration of the qualification which can provide an opportunity for peer learning and socialisation (Bourner, Bowden, & Laing, 2001). The European University Institute (2017) recommends that academic institutions provide equity of academic support for part-time as full-time PhD candidates but recognise that some educational institutions may not have the resources to fulfil this goal.

1.2 Increase in part-time doctoral candidates.

Part-time doctoral candidates have been described as invisible in policy and practice despite an increase in enrolments worldwide (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009). Based on a review of statistical data (Higher Education Authority, 2009, 2013, 2018b) part-time doctoral enrolments in Ireland have increased by over 70%, over the last decade, from 920 to 1625 candidates (O'Regan, 2018). According to a recent report, part-time candidates account for almost a fifth (19%) of doctoral enrolments in Ireland (Higher Education Authority, 2018a) Over 80% of part-time PhD candidates are studying within a university in Ireland, and of these, 67% are based within an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) discipline (Higher Education Authority, 2018b). Part-time and non-science based doctoral candidates have been found to experience greater barriers to accessing research communities than many full time or science-based learners (Deem & Brehony, 2000).

1.3 The goal of the current PhD research.

The goal of my ongoing PhD research is to explore the experiences of candidates who completed a PhD on a part-time basis within an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) field in one of the universities in Ireland. Unlike other stages of the undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum, the PhD is not based predominantly on the completion of coursework but is assessed on the candidate's ability to generate original research and knowledge (Lovitts, 2008). I am interested in understanding how part-time PhD candidates complete a qualification, traditionally understood in the context of the full-time learners' needs (European University Institute, 2017) while balancing studies with work and other family commitments (Watts, 2008). The aim of the research is to provide insights to policy makers and practitioners on providing flexible education solutions (face-to-face and online) to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse body of learners, potentially in the context of limited access to the campus environment and academic and pastoral support services.

2.   Research Methods and Participants

Eighteen individuals (13 females and five males) who completed a PhD within an AHSS discipline on a part-time basis participated in this phase of the research study. Respondents from five universities contributed to this study, which was conducted following a preliminary research phase to develop the data generation tools (questionnaire and semi-structured interview). The purpose of the questionnaire was to identify the sources of doctoral programme information, training and support that the participant had accessed from the academic institution (face-to-face and online) during candidature. The methodological framework for the questionnaire was underpinned by Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) which acknowledges the role of non-humans (e.g. technology, documents and artefacts) as well as humans in the acquisition and transfer of knowledge. The semi-structured interview questions were influenced by Theories of Agency (Archer, 2003) which explored whether participants experienced any barriers or

enablers (either institutional or personal) to progression with studies and whether participants demonstrated agency or sought help to navigate the PhD to completion.

2.1 Preliminary Findings from the study.

What the preliminary findings from the study suggest is that dynamic interaction between the learner and others took place in the context of face-to-face communication and that technology was often viewed as an adjunct to learning but not the first port of call. In general, participants commented on the richness of face-to-face interaction (for example, with supervisors, self-generated peer networks and work colleagues). Access to document-based guidelines, web-based and online doctoral information and support was often deemed to be a one-way process with the institution providing the information to the student, without opportunities for the learner to engage in communication or respond dynamically. Participants cited difficulties in accessing information out of business hours based on their own needs or in response to specific academic or personally relevant queries.

2.2 Quotes from participants (Pseudonyms used).

Both male and female participants cited the pressures of juggling studies with family and employment commitments.

> *"I describe being a part-time PhD student as a perpetual state of guilt in so far as I should be spending more time with my family and I'm not. I should be spending more time with my job and I'm not and you feel like you are doing everything badly including your PhD studies, so you are a perpetual state of guilt"* (Shane).

Lack of opportunity to engage with academic and peer networks or access training and events within the academic institution during office hours, due to working full-time was identified as impacting on progression with studies.

> *"Training days that are 9am to 5pm are no option for part-time learners. So that's another thing that could be improved, offering training courses online, pre-*

> *recorded so they can be accessed 24/7 - whether you are in Dubai, Sydney or San*
> *Francisco."* (Mike).

Participants demonstrated creativity, resilience and ingenuity, both in seeking out support from people (e.g. academic contacts, work colleagues, peers, family and friends) and by engaging with online doctoral forums and support networks.

> *"What got me through was the kindness of strangers. Online support networks*
> *from people I'd never met and who were going through the same thing as I was or*
> *professors on the other side of the world who just wanted to help PhD students*
> *who needed help"* (Elaine).

2.3 Preliminary recommendations and relevance to designing teaching and learning support post COVID-19.

In summary, in the present climate, we are all dependent on technology for interaction in the absence of opportunities for face-to-face contact outside of our own homes. This provides educators with an opportunity to assess how technology can support (social and personal) interaction between people and where it falls short as a means of communicating, belonging, connecting and learning. The preliminary findings from this research illustrate how dynamic interaction and the availability of information and support that is timely and meets the learner's personal circumstances was key to academic progression and satisfaction for participants. The question now is how to harness the advantages of face-to-face communication, in terms of "the human touch" with the capabilities of technology to provide information, teaching and learning support to a large number of individuals (Fumasoli, 2019).

In the current unprecedented context of a global pandemic, educators have responded proactively by moving teaching and learning to online platforms (Irish Universities Association, 2020). This has highlighted the need to move beyond thinking of learners in the context of a situated learning environment (e.g. within the academic institution) to consider where learners are (temporally and geographically) and what else is going on in their lives such as work, family and commuting (e.g. Thomas & Jones, 2017). Let's

design educational systems and learning environments (face-to-face and online) that support and meet the needs of different learners, rather than expecting "*one size fits all*" technology solutions to work for people with different communication styles, capabilities, need for personal interaction, expertise and diverse demands on time (e.g. work/life balance).

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