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The Part-Time Researcher

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&

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The experience of the part-time researcher

- ‘Being part-time and employed full-time, 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!’

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The part-time cohort

- 3880 people graduated from a part-time doctorate (22% of the total number of doctoral graduates, HESA, 2007).

- Only 48% of part-time doctoral candidates have graduated within 10 years of starting. (In comparison to 76% of full-time, HESA, 2007)

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Question

What issues do you think that part-time researchers experience?

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The part-time researcher

Our starting point was to identify some issues that we felt part-time researchers often experience.

- Struggle to get into the discipline's culture
- Struggle to find out information – no grapevine
- Struggle to access support – much is campus based

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The part-time researcher outputs

- Workshops
- Training resources
- Video
- Research project

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Training part-time researchers

- Short(ish) day
- Icebreakers; one sought their views on supervision
- A chance to talk to academics outside of their
- supervision arrangements
- Two parallel training sessions
  - The pairs change at each of the 6 workshops
- Tips from a successful part-time researcher

providing
researchers
with opportunities
to develop personal
professional and
skills
• advice and
resources

researchers
courses

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How did the workshops go down?

- Overwhelmingly positive.
- Would you attend another one?
  - “Yes”
- Would you attend another one in a different university in the midlands?
  - “Yes”

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What did they get out of it?

- ‘Support and confirmation.’
- ‘More confidence that I am doing OK.’
- ‘Developed goals for next phases of work.’
- ‘Lots. I was stuck and now feel motivated.’
- ‘Encouragement to continue and re-energised.’
- ‘Heard some good tips.’
- ‘Feeling part of a community.’
- ‘Meeting other students. Swapping experiences.’
- ‘Reassurance that other part-time research students experience similar difficulties’
- ‘Hearing other experiences of part-time researchers.’
- ‘Insights from other students.’
- ‘Social networking.’
- Networking – don’t often get a chance.’

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Also lots of useful feedback

We have made changes as a result e.g.

- Provide access to both workshops within one day, rather than running the two simultaneously.
- Ice –breaker slot shortened.
- Introduction of areas of research early on, rather than just names.
- Tightening up of guidance and focus on section on ethos and process of research:

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Other developments

- Provide opportunities for ongoing peer support. Facebook?
- Catching what people arrive wanting to find out about, and encouraging them to talk with others both on the day and later.
- Video clips of successful PTs

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Coming soon!

- Hard copy training resource pack based on the workshops. Available from Vitae on request.
- DVD and online film extracts drawn from interviews with successful part-time researchers.
- All materials online on the Vitae website.
- New workshops running in the Midlands.

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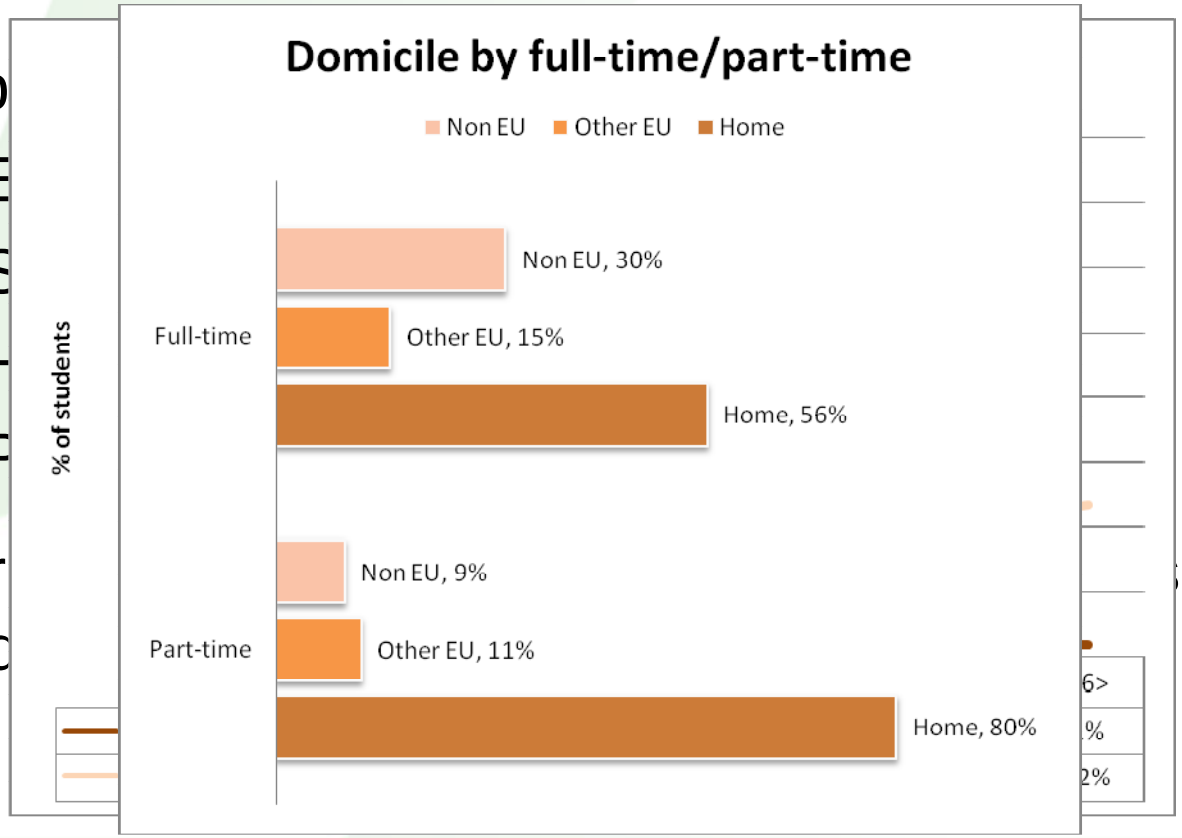
Research projects

Parallel to the training development we also ran a research project. Participants were asked to:

- Fill in an online questionnaire at registration
- Complete three short evaluation questionaires during the day. These evaluation questionaires asked participants to reflect on their experiences as well as to give direct feedback on the training day.
- We have also analysed the PRES results to provide a quantitative context for this project.

Profile of the cohort

- Pop
  - E
  - S
  - H
  - F
- Mor elf-
  func



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Key themes in the research

The research provided some useful illumination on a range of aspects of the part-time experience.

Three key themes

- Life of extremes
- Competing demands on time
- Academic and personal isolation

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Life of extremes

- ‘Lonely, isolated, absorbing, satisfying (but at the same time confusing …) and frustrating.’
- ‘Stress and enjoyment take turns. The bad thing is that I am currently more into my job than my research and this is worrying.’
- ‘Hell! But very interesting.’
- ‘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.’

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Life of extremes: PRES

- Despite these qualitative reports PRES suggests that general satisfaction with the programme is similar for full-time and part-time PhDs.
- Similarities in the PRES data suggest more consistency than difference between the two groups.
- Undertaking a doctorate is likely to be challenging however you do it!

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Competing demands: PRES

- Friends and family seem to be a bit less supportive of part-time students' research degree programme than of a full-time students' programme.
- Only 68% of part-time students agree that their employer is supportive of their degree, compared with 76% of full-time students.

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Isolation

- ‘Lonely. No one to benchmark my progress against.’
- ‘Lonely. Demoralising.’
- ‘LONELY. But have contacts in the department to assist with direction and motivation.’
- ‘Very interesting, fulfilling, demanding, requires tenacity, perseverance, sometimes frustrating, lonely.’

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Isolation: PRES

- Part-time researchers are slightly more satified with their supervisors than full-time researcher (3%).
- Part-time researchers are less satisfied with transferable skills training (5%)
- Part-time researchers are less satisfied with the research environment (6%) and marginally less satisfied with departmental seminar programmes.
- Part-time researchers feel less integrated into their departments community (10%).

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Competing demands on time

- ‘Juggling work (F/T), family and research very difficult.’
- ‘Difficult to fit in timewise! Fresh, as not looking at research all the time in some ways, but difficult to fit in with working full-time and other commitments. Takes a while to try to get in with academic way of thinking and know what is going on and what’s happening.’
- ‘Quite different to being a full-time student. Needs much more careful time-management. Much more frustrating – you feel like not much progress is being at times.’

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Questions

What could HEIs do to improve the experience for part-time researchers?

Should anyone other than universities (e.g. funders, QAA, NUS) be doing anything on this issue?

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Any questions?