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Enhancing Support for Part-Time Doctoral Researchers: Supervision Challenges, and Inclusive Practice

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THE AIM :



To develop a richer, conversation-driven understanding of how part-time researchers access, experience, and contribute to postgraduate research culture.

THIS EDI PROJECT – FUNDED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF SALFORD DOCTORAL SCHOOL

(Friday @14.25: Empowered postgraduate research students can lead substantial EDI enhancement initiatives)

- **Focus group discussions with students and supervisors about their experience of being a part time doctoral student or supporting part time students.**
- **The discussion formed the basis for the questions asked on the online surveys sent to all the universities in the UK.**

Student survey - 257 responses from 36 universities

Supervisor survey - 69 responses from 13 universities

Reflecting on the preliminary results



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Issues raised by students:

Remembering I am part-time

“People remembering I am part-time and not imposing full-time expectations”

Knowing who other people are

“Knowing who the other people are. I am told this information cannot be shared and it makes the experience more lonely”

Late notice of events

“I often found that sessions were planned so late I couldn’t attend due to work and childcare.”

Flexible engagement

“options for flexible pace of learning / engagement.”

Wanting to be part of a community

“I would like to be able to feel part of the community, not an inconvenience.”

Issues raised by supervisors:

Support and belonging

“It is harder getting to know part-time students” and “It’s harder to make part-time students feel part of a cohort or a cohesive group”

Fixed university processes

“There isn’t much flexibility about how part-time a part-time student can be. It’s very fixed”

“Departmental processes presume the students are full-time; I have to translate that.”

Benefits

“It provides equity for students”

“Watching them grow, see them get confident in making their choices and seeing their writing really develop”

“The commitment and enthusiasm is inspiring”

Discussion points

At the beginning of the PhD journey



Learning Agreements/Expectations forms - structured supervisory tools

Provide a consistent framework for managing doctoral programs. Often not adapted to the specific needs of part-time students.

The learning agreement should be used to set expectations early on in the process.

Supervisor and student relationship

As the primary point of contact with the university, providing essential academic guidance, continuity, and personalised support in the absence of regular campus engagement. Structured guidance and regular check-ins are needed.

What happens if one of the supervisor changes university or retires?

Bespoke student training

Bespoke training is needed for part-time students before they fully commence their studies, so they are aware of the issues and requirements. To develop networks.

Student Union involvement needed.

During the Doctoral Journey

Belonging

Part-time doctoral students often experience a reduced sense of belonging due to remote study, competing work commitments, and limited participation in campus and social activities.

The need for planned in-person and online events and networking opportunities.

Should industry be part of any PGR conference?

Supervisor training

Supervisor training is largely generalised and lacks specific focus on the distinct needs of part-time doctoral students, leaving supervisors to rely on experience, general wellbeing training, and informal learning to support this group.

Developing a clear researcher identity

This can be challenging for part-time doctoral students. They must navigate and reconcile multiple competing roles, such as professional, practitioner, and student, which can limit their sense of belonging and identification as a researcher.

