Reflections on part-time distance-based doctoral research in ICT4D

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Abstract. There is much demand for part-time distance-based doctoral research, but little has been written about the challenges facing such modalities of research, and even less on the strategies that can be used to help overcome them. This paper draws on seven years of experience in delivering postgraduate supervision in this way, focusing especially on seven key elements: the supervisory process, access to existing research knowledge, postgraduate training, seminar participation, field research, thesis preparation and submission, and examination. Many of these can indeed be overcome through careful and rigorous supervisory practices, but three main issues remain hugely challenging: engaging with the intellectual culture of the supervising institution; undertaking sufficient empirical field research; and balancing the need to gain an income whilst also undertaking the thesis.

Context

Much has been written on the potential of distance-learning to provide a wider diversity of access opportunities to higher education (Holmbery, 1989; Simonson *et al.*, 2002; Moore and Anderson, 2003; Veletsianos, 2010). For potential students, it can enable those who would otherwise not be able to attend because of the costs associated with physically studying away from home to gain a degree; for universities, it helps them to generate greater income by marketing their courses to those in distant places, often overseas. However, most of this literature has addressed undergraduate, and less frequently Master's programmes (Bayliss, 1995); rather little attention has yet been paid to the potential of distance-learning for doctoral research programmes (although see Terrell, 2002; Butcher and Sieminski, 2006). This paper therefore seeks to open up debate on the challenges faced by students and staff in delivering such postgraduate research programmes through evidence drawn from a seven-year case study. In so doing, it also raises interesting questions about the wider evolving character of doctoral research.

The dramatic development of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) has transformed the opportunities for distance learning, not only in terms of content or information sharing, but rather more so as a result of the new means of communication and networking that they provide. In 2004, I initiated a new doctoral research programme on the use of ICTs for development (ICT4D), focusing especially on how these technologies can be used to support some of the poorest and most marginalised communities in Africa (for wider literature on ICT4D see Weigel and Waldburger, 2004; Unwin, 2009). This generated many enquiries about the possibility of doing research 'at a distance' most frequently by people who wished to do so part-time. It therefore seemed to make sense to try to use these new ICTs to enable people to undertake their research in this way. At that time, our university had no formal regulations concerning the implementation of distance-based PhDs, and there was no internal expertise in delivering such programmes, although there were clear regulations concerning part-time degrees. Moreover, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (2004) guidance for postgraduate research programme, published at the time, made no specific mention of how distance-based research students should be supervised, other than one line touching on the need to assess the suitability of those working at a distance. I felt very much alone as I sought to implement good practices in this field, trying to offer distance-based students similar experiences to those that postgraduates on campus could benefit from. This paper seeks to share the experiences we gained in undertaking this, and in so doing to raise wider issues concerning distance-based and part-time PhDs. A key question that it raises is actually whether I should even have tried to give such students similar experiences to campus based students, or whether distance-based part-time PhDs should be considered and crafted as something completely different.

Distance-based and part-time: defining status

Students often undertake distance-based degrees because they wish to study a particular subject that is unavailable in their own countries or institutions, but for personal or financial reasons they cannot afford to leave their usual place

of residence. If they are unable to gain sponsorship or a scholarship for full-time study, some try to find ways in which they can work part-time to generate enough income to live on, and pay the additional costs of fees. It is, though, important to differentiate between the challenges faced by students doing research 'at a distance' and those trying to do so 'part-time'. Although related, both present fundamentally different constraints, and it is crucial to disentangle their separate implications.

The main constraints of doing postgraduate research at a distance relate to being absent from the university institution that is meant to be providing support in the form of supervision, libraries, training, equipment, and laboratories. In laboratory based sciences it is thus well nigh impossible to undertake doctoral research at a distance, unless researchers can utilise equipment at a surrogate institution, or experiments can be conducted 'virtually' through computer modelling. However, traditionally, it must also be recognised that in very many instances students who spent a year away 'in the field' undertaking empirical research overseas, were indeed at that time independently 'at a distance'.

In contrast, the challenges of part-time status primarily reflect those associated with the management and availability of time to undertake the research. There are many different types of part-time work, and each has distinct implications for doctoral research. The challenges for those working regularly for three of four days a week in paid employment with two or three days a week available for their thesis are thus very different from those of independent consultants who can block out several weeks at a time for their thesis, having built up sufficient money on which to survive over previous weeks when they concentrated exclusively on their paid employment.

Distance-based part-time postgraduate research in ICT4D
Adams and DeFleur (2005, p. 82) have highlighted some of the problems faced by students doing overtly online distance-based doctoral degrees, noting that 'Tentatively, the findings indicate that such degrees are not accepted as the equivalent of those earned in the traditional manner for those

seeking academic employment'. The programme I implemented therefore sought as far as possible to replicate the experiences of traditional PhD students, but mediated by new ICTs for those based overseas; it did not seek to create an entirely new concept of an 'online distance-based PhD'. In brief, it aimed to address what at the time I considered to be the most important aspects of such a programme (for a wider discussion of supervision see Phillips and Pugh, 2005; ESRC, 2008), and focused on seven key elements: the supervisory process, access to existing research knowledge, postgraduate training, seminar participation, field research, thesis preparation and submission, and examination. Whilst many undergraduate distance-based courses have until recently focused primarily on ways of distributing content and then supporting students in the learning thereof, the challenges faced by doctoral programmes are very different and have much more to do with facilitating engagement in academic debate and discussion. Learning how to do research is very different from simply acquiring content knowledge.

The supervisory process

Supervisory practice varies enormously across disciplines and between institutions (Phillips and Pugh, 2005; Sathye, 2005; Wisker, 2007; ESRC, 2008). In particular, a major distinction can be drawn between laboratory based research, where supervisors and postgraduate students are often working together in a laboratory on an almost daily basis, frequently bumping into each other for short discussions, and research in the arts, humanities and social sciences where there is less regular contact and formal supervisions are in some institutions held as rarely as every couple of months. It must also be noted that different students require varying amounts of supervision at different times during their research. Nevertheless, based on my previous experiences, I have always tried to see each research student formally once a month for a supervisory meeting, whilst being available at other times should a student require further discussion. Putting this into practice at a distance has been greatly facilitated through the use of new ICTs. Whereas previously, conversations with students at a distance, as for example when they were on field work, could be undertaken by telephone, the introduction of VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) and in particular the creation of Skype in

2003, through which conversations could be held for free, fundamentally transformed the ease through which such communication could take place. The more recent introduction of Skype 2.0 for Mac in October 2006, which provided support for video, made such communication much more sensitive, and the chance for supervisor and supervisee to see each other added greatly to the value of the experience. Hence, the plan was to try to hold an individual virtual supervision every month on Skype, which for those on half-time basis was equivalent to a fortnightly supervision for full-time students. In effect, part-time distance-based students were therefore given double the amount of supervision, in an attempt to make up for the opportunities that full-time campus-based students had to meet informally for additional research conversations. Significantly, we can report that Skype has worked as an effective means of supervision, albeit occasionally with some difficulties, in countries as diverse as Burundi, Kenya, Pakistan, Spain and the United Arab Emirates. More recently, as video conferencing technology has improved, we have also experimented with Adobe Connect, which some students prefer, and are considering exploring the usability of Cisco's WebEx software in the future. The costs of these solutions, though, are not insignificant and in practice no institutional money has been made available for such services, and we therefore had to resource Adobe Connect from other means.

The popularity of the ICT4D postgraduate programme has meant that at any one time between 12 and 15 students have been undertaking research. Given the expertise and diversity of backgrounds of such postgraduates, we have also introduced a system of peer supervisory meetings, which are again held monthly for a two-hour period. These provide an opportunity for experience sharing, problem solving, and information giving, and effectively mean that all students have two formal supervisory meetings each month. The dissemination of standard information to all of my postgraduates at the same moment, also saves considerably on the time that would otherwise be spent in saying exactly the same things to them one at a time during their individual supervisions. However, the real value of peer supervisory meetings is in the opportunity that these provide for interaction among the research students themselves, sharing their ideas and experiences, and proffering

advice to each other. We have experimented in various ways to try to enable distance-based colleagues to gain the same benefits, and to help them feel that they are part of the same community. Thus, we have tried to use Skype, combining several laptops in different parts of the room, and more recently Adobe Connect to involve them, but neither of these solutions has been particularly successful. Our peer supervisory meetings are complex and informal in structure, and the slight time lags caused by using VoIP made the discussions much more stilted and difficult than was otherwise the case. Trying to make them more formal also broke up the spontaneity of the conversations. Hence, we decided together that distance-based students could listen in on the conversations, and that we would then try to involve them specifically at certain points in the conversation. This required some considerable moderation, especially when the technology failed, which added to the disruption caused by involving the distance-based students in the first place. We also experimented with one of the participants taking notes, and then sharing these with the others, but after a few sessions no-one seemed particularly interested in taking on this task.

As well as trying to involve distance-based students in our peer supervisory meetings, we also experimented with creating a digital online environment where matters of mutual interest and concern could be shared. This was specifically intended to be a way through which distance-based students could benefit to and contribute from the environment in the same way as those based in the UK. In the first instance, we created our own experimental Moodle environment (http://moodle-ict4d.rhul.ac.uk), separate from our institution's main Moodle site (http://moodle.rhul.ac.uk), which after several initial design changes came to consist of the following sections: supervisory matters, social space, useful ICT4D resources, tools and practices in ICT4D research, and opportunities (including information on conferences, calls for papers, research funding and employment opportunities). Nevertheless, although a few postgraduates did indeed use this actively, it was not seen as being particularly valuable and gradually fell out of use. An opportunity to resurrect the idea of an ICT4D postgraduate digital environment arose as a result of Edulink funding for a collaborative

project in which we were involved with African and European universities. This led us to the creation of an ICT4D postgraduate group using our Elgg environment (http://ict4dconsortium.rhul.ac.uk/elgg/pg/groups/2523/royal-holloway-ict4d-postgraduates/, accessed 21st February 2011), but again traffic on this has been very limited. Our overseas postgraduates were perfectly able to access the online environment, and so bandwidth and connectivity were not particularly serious problems. The failure of such networking opportunities largely reflected a lack of perceived value therein.

A fourth element of our supervisory practice has been the holding of ICT4D days three times a year. These were designed with two main purposes in mind. First, there are many research related conversations that cannot be resolved in an hour's supervision or a two-hour peer supervisory meeting. The opportunity to discuss topics at greater length over a whole day seemed to be valuable. Second, though, I believe strongly in the importance of doing things socially together to build a sense of shared understanding in a research community. Our ICT4D days have thus included visits to museums, walks in the countryside, and pottery painting together. Where possible, we have ensured that these coincide with visits from distance-based postgraduates, but many have not been able to attend, and the only way in which we could involve them was by sharing feedback and photographs online after the days out.

Access to Existing Research Knowledge
Doctoral research is fundamentally about moving knowledge forward. It is therefore of crucial importance that research students can gain access to all of the existing knowledge in their field, engage with it, and build their research agendas upon it. Traditionally, this has been enabled primarily by access to quality libraries, but also through engagement with scholars working in their fields at seminars (see below) and conferences. By the mid-2000s increasing numbers of journals had already gone online, and over the last decade bibliographical databases and online search engines have become much more sophisticated and useful, particularly for articles published in journals. Although some of my distance-based research students had difficulty in

accessing journals in the early period under discussion here, this is no longer a serious issue.

What does remain more difficult, though, is access to books. Traditionally, one of the main reasons why research students needed to be on campus was so that they could read books and journal articles in the university library. Now that students can access most journal articles online from their own homes, there is much less of a tie to the actual university campus. This is even more so when libraries do not contain all of the books that a research student might be interested in, both as a result of the dramatic increase in the amount of material published, but also because of over-stretched library budgets. Hence, both distance-based and campus-based students have, as ever, actually to buy the key books for their research, or access information from the increasing number of free online resources.

At this stage, an important caveat needs to be injected into the discussion, because much excellent research material is not readily available online or in the form of Open Educational Resources. Hence, all too often, there is a temptation for distance-based students to focus their attention on material that they can access, rather than unavailable material that is nevertheless of good quality. Much online material is not subject to peer-review, or is 'grey literature' consisting of consultancy reports, working papers, and government material. Distance-based students in particular, thus need to be reminded regularly of the importance of accessing and engaging with the highest quality academic literature if they are to deliver high quality academic PhDs.

As a distinct way of assisting our distance-based research students, our online research environments were designed to provide opportunities for them to share research papers and ideas that they found interesting and thought others would also appreciate. Whilst some material was indeed disseminated this way, the process was sporadic, and the increasing ease with which online resources could be accessed has further eroded the use of this means of information sharing. Overall, though, access to existing

knowledge has not presented particular challenges for distance-based and part-time students.

Postgraduate training

Along with many other universities, our institution has a comprehensive programme of face-to-face training for postgraduates at College, Departmental and Research Group level. This is one of the areas where distance-based students are most disadvantaged, since it is not possible for them to attend on a regular basis. Where possible, I have therefore recommended that they try to spend some time actually on campus, and coincide their visits with elements of this training. Unfortunately, the timetabling of the training is usually spread over a term or longer, and therefore those who may have a part-time job to do at home, or cannot spend a lengthy period away are simply unable to participate. One option would therefore be to compress all such training into a two-week period at the start of their research, and insist that all distance-based research students attend. This is frequently not feasible, though, and training is often relevant at different stages in the three-year research process. Another option would be to provide all such training through video-conferencing, but again the costs of this mean that it is not available in our institution.

Where possible, therefore, I recommend that students identify those delivering the research training, and ask to have copies of any handouts or information that they provide. During supervisory meetings, we then briefly discuss matters that might not be clear, and sometimes also encourage students to engage directly with the provider by 'phone or VoIP. In some instances, it is also possible to deliver training using online video, and this has proven to be particularly useful for example with viva training. Materials from all training sessions are also made available on our online environments, but as previously noted these are not particularly popular.

The frequent inability of distance-based part-time students to attend research training courses raises important wider questions. First, if such courses are indeed essential, then it could be argued that people should not

be allowed to begin doctoral research on a distance-based part-time basis unless they have directly commensurate previous experience. This is not a route I have taken, but I do try and ensure that people are only accepted if they appear to be broadly qualified to undertake the research in which they are interested. In some circumstances, it is also possible to arrange for elements of training to be provided at universities or research institutes near where they live and work. However, second, there is also anecdotal evidence that some full-time students also avoid attending the research training courses provided for them, and still gain their doctorates successfully. This suggests that partaking in formal research training courses may not be as essential as some academics and Research Councils might like to think.

Seminar participation and the academic community
If participation in training is difficult for distance-based students, regular engagement with the academic research community is very much more so. A vibrant research-based university has frequent seminars, discussions, public lectures, debates, chance meetings in cafés and bars, corridor conversations and other means of cementing a particular sense of what research is about. Students who do not access this are severely disadvantaged. Given that many distance-based part-time students come from oversees, their lack of access to these cultural aspects of UK university life (Podgórecki, 1997; Gould, 2003) presents a very significant disadvantage. What is required for a PhD in different countries varies enormously, and if people are not immersed in the academic culture of the institution and country from which they are hoping to gain a doctorate, it can be very difficult for them to understand exactly what is required. Moreover, many applicants for such modes of doctoral research are embedded in different institutional cultures, often coming from private sector or civil society backgrounds, and this makes it even harder for them to gain a real feel for the rigorous requirements of high quality academic enquiry. Indeed, shifting from the one to the other on a daily or weekly basis requires very considerable skill and time management expertise that can be beyond the grasp of many people aspiring to undertake a distance-based part-time PhD.

We adopted four main ways to try to involve distance-based part-time students in our intellectual culture. First, as already described, our peer supervisory meetings were intended to help ensure that such students were as engaged as much as possible within the intellectual community that we were shaping. Second, all of the seminars presented in our research centre were videoed and made available through our web-site; this also provides access to undergraduate lectures in ICT4D and other resources that might be of interest. More generally, students are also encouraged to watch videos of seminars given by leading academics in our own institution and indeed elsewhere. Third, we have taken the lead in hosting and convening international conferences in the field of ICT4D, which bring our postgraduates into contact with leading academics in the field. Funding is sometimes available for attendance at these, and they provide an excellent opportunity for distance-based students to spend time with us. The convening of the IPID (International Network for Postgraduate Students in the Area of ICT4D) conferences in 2006 and 2009, as well as the hosting of ICTD2010 in 2010 were thus very deliberate choices to enable our wider postgraduate community to engage in the particular culture that we wish to promote in this field. The fourth main way that we encouraged the gaining of at least some engagement with academic discourse was through the development of partnerships with other universities. Although this is not yet as advanced as we would like, the notion of enabling distance-based students to participate in seminars and other academic activities in an institution near where they live can at least provide them with some active intellectual engagement on a face-to-face basis.

Field research

The fifth challenge for distance-based and part-time students is the need to undertake a sustained period of empirical research. For those working in the field of ICT4D this usually requires a period of between 6 months and a year 'in the field', but similar time requirements are still nevertheless required in laboratory work, as discussed above. Pressure to complete full-time theses within three years has meant that over the last 20 years the amount of time postgraduate researchers have spent in the field has often decreased;

whereas once I expected students to spend a year doing fieldwork, now I have to agree to rather less (Ferrer de Valero, 2001; Bell, 2005).

However, for part-time and distance-based students, even six continuous months in the field can be impossible. Employers are often not willing to permit those doing part-time research degrees to take that amount of time off work, even as unpaid leave. For those eking out sufficient money to pay the high fees required from international students doing UK degrees, taking six months without income from part-time work is likewise often not feasible. Those doing part-time distance-based degrees are usually poorer than those who can afford to do their doctorates full time, either from the award of scholarships or from their own resources, and they are thus even more at a disadvantage. The costs of travelling overseas, and for accommodation and maintenance while in the field create yet another burden. All of my part-time distance-based students have faced very real challenges in undertaking their field-work, and in one instance so far this has meant that the candidate chose to submit the thesis as a MPhil rather than a PhD; it was simply impossible for him to do the amount of empirical research that I deemed to be necessary for a doctorate. There is no doubt that he was intellectually capable of doing the research, but his financial situation and the logistics precluded it.

Various options nevertheless exist to try to overcome the constraints of undertaking empirical research at a distance, and three are particularly worthy of note. Several postgraduates have tried to undertake participatory research with organisations that are also paying them to work part-time on a particular project. This can work well, but it is absolutely essential to put in place a clear Memorandum of Understanding, that specifies the time to be allocated to particular tasks, and that the research student can indeed have the freedom to publish what they wish in their thesis. Experiences gained in this way can also be extremely beneficial for the future career prospects of the student. This solution, although opening up lots of interesting opportunities, is nevertheless not available for all types of research projects. A second approach is to use ICTs themselves to undertake interviews, focus groups

and surveys at a distance (for a wider discussion see Oringderff, 2004; Sade-Beck, 2004; and Shaw *et al.*, 2006). While online research methods can produce interesting results, the implications of this method of sampling for the conclusions drawn must be taken into careful consideration. Not least, those without access to the Internet are unable to complete such surveys, and yet they are often the very poorer and more marginalised communities with whom ICT4D researchers wish to engage. Moreover, undertaking telephone interviews or video conferencing with groups in poor areas where electricity is unreliable and digital connectivity haphazard can be extremely difficult (for a wider discussions of undertaking such online research see Crespo, 2011). Finally, though, it does also need to be recognised that doing research over the longer period of time associated with part-time status can be used to advantage. Much full-time doctoral research is based solely on a single lengthy period 'in the field' during which it is difficult to measure impact of an initiative over time. With part-time students, their empirical research can last over a three year period, or even more, and therefore it is ideally suited to detecting such change. Moreover, if funding is available it can consist of numerous periods of short time engagement in the field that can produce rich and varied understandings.

Thesis preparation and submission

Doctoral research requires a process of continual writing, from the conceptual framework and methodology that are usually drafted in advance of the field work, through diaries written up late at night in the field, to the crafting of the substantive research analysis chapters. It is now easy for distance-based students to submit work by e-mail, and for supervisors to interact with it tracked changes and comments in word processing packages. Moreover, it is even feasible for this to be done in real time through video-conferencing packages such as Adobe Connect and WebEx. My experience with the latter, though, is that it is still insufficiently reliable and easy to use, especially in low-bandwidth contexts, for it to be effective. However, having supervisions around a tracked changed document works well. The text needs to be submitted by the postgraduate well in advance of the meeting, and the

supervisor also needs to return the comments before the video supervision begins, but such practices make efficient use of the opportunities available.

Modern ICTs have also greatly facilitated the thesis submission process, with most printers and binders now being willing to accept .pdf files, and then forward the bound theses to the relevant university authority. Although there can be some time delays involved, distance-based part-time students do not seem to be particularly disadvantaged in this respect of postgraduate research.

The examination
Thesis requirements and examination processes vary greatly in different countries. However, it is usual that a viva is required, which means that the student has to travel to meet with the examiners. The travel and accommodation can represent a very considerable expense for the student, but time can usually be found to participate in such meetings, even if it is taken as leave. Many universities now provide viva practice as part of their package of postgraduate training, and part-time distance-based students are rarely able to attend such pre-scheduled courses. It is therefore useful for supervisors to provide such training through mock-vivas using video conferencing facilities some time in advance of the actual examination.

In most instances, the outcome of a postgraduate research examination is that some revisions are required, and although this can be distressing for any student, the actual process of redrafting and resubmitting the thesis is little different from the experience faced by full-time on-campus students, most of whom have at that stage in any case left the university where they undertook their research.

In conclusion: confronting the challenges
Our experiences have shown that carefully planned and rigorous supervisory practices using ICTs can go a long way to enable part-time distance-based students successfully to undertake research. The challenges that they face are much greater than those experienced by their peers working full-time and

on campus, but these cannot be reflected in the standards expected of their completed theses. Part-time distance-based students must therefore be particularly committed, even more dedicated to their research, and outstanding time managers if they are to succeed. Very rigorous selection procedures must thus be in place to choose just the right people to undertake research in this way. This can be really difficult, especially when an applicant is relatively unknown, yet has a good academic record, and strong references. I have always tried to interview such applicants face to face, but even then it is possible to make mistakes, and believe everything that a prospective student tells one about their ability to manage their lives. Part of the problem is undoubtedly that few really appreciate the required ardours and intellectual challenges involved in completing a high quality UK PhD.

Another aspect associated with the length of time it can take to complete a part-time PhD thesis, regulations for which usually permit around seven years, is that over such a period people's life situations can change much more significantly than is the case over merely three to four years for a full-time PhD. Several of my female PhD students have, for example, become pregnant and have chosen to interrupt their research, thus causing even greater subsequent challenges for them resulting from the speed with which research in the field has moved forward whilst they were 'interrupted'. The likelihood of serious illness or other misfortune also increases as the time taken to complete a thesis lengthens. It is thus fair to say that many of my part-time distance-based students have faced very serious personal difficulties during their research, often based around the complexity of juggling the need to earn an income with the rigours required of doing doctoral level research.

Using VoIP, video conferencing, digital tracking of manuscripts and other such techniques means that many of the potential challenges of part-time distance based research can be ameliorated. This certainly applies to the supervisory process, access to literature, discussion of written work and thesis submission. However, three very real challenges remain. First, and of most importance, is engagement with the intellectual culture associated with

high quality university research. It can be exceedingly difficult for research students who spend half of their lives in different worlds, be they business, civil society or government, to engage sufficiently deeply with the critical intellectual enquiry and analysis expected of doctoral research of the highest level. This is not just a matter of being able to see and listen to a recorded seminar, or be involved in peer-supervisory meetings, both of which are easily possible using new ICTs, but it runs far deeper into the fabric of what doing research is about. It is the chance meeting in a corridor, it is listening to an inspirational visiting lecturer in another department, it is engaging together with peers over coffee in the postgraduate suite, it is about participating in arguments and debates long into the evening. Moreover, institutions themselves miss out on the participation of their distance-based students in such discussions and seminars; very few departments actually use video conferencing effectively to permit their distance-based students to engage or ask questions or interact, for example, in seminars. This lack of engagement is of even more importance when research students come from a very different cultural background. What is required of a PhD in different parts of Europe varies hugely, let alone between Britain and parts of Africa or Asia. Matching up expectations and the reality of what a UK PhD is about is incredibly hard, even when prospective students think they know what they are letting themselves in for.

A second real area of difficulty is over the amount of empirical field research that can be completed. Being distance-based should, theoretically, often make it easier and cheaper to undertake the field research required for a thesis, especially where students are based in the location where the research is undertaken. However, part-time status can create real problems, particularly when the nature of the research ideally requires a substantial and continuous period of immersion in the field. In practice, the character of the empirical research has to be carefully crafted around the time available, and this usually requires finely honed time management skills that many PhD students simply have not yet acquired! Furthermore, in our experience, the need to generate income often seems to take priority over working on the thesis; a short term contract to generate income, thus comes before the need

to undertake another half dozen key interviews. Examiners are also not always willing to recognise this as a factor that should be taken into consideration when judging the value of a thesis. That having been said, as discussed above, the opportunity for empirical work to be done over a longer period of time, can be used to bring distinct advantages to the character of the research, that are not available for those needing to complete within three years. Such advantages need to be used creatively to compensate for the very real disadvantages involved.

Third, as alluded to in the previous paragraph, funding is the most critical problem. Indeed, it is often the main reason why students choose to be part-time in the first place. If they could afford it, they would almost all prefer to work full time on their theses. One solution is to try to employ part-time postgraduates on research contracts, but our experiences with this have not been entirely satisfactory. The relationship between a supervisor and a postgraduate research student is a highly personal and often fraught one that requires very careful management on both sides. With the addition of a long-term contractual employment relationship, where the supervisor is also the line manager, this relationship can become even more intense. Poor performance in delivery of the work contract can, for example, be seen by either or both sides as being reflected in the quality of the work done on the thesis, which could in reality be progressing entirely satisfactorily. Another, better, solution in my experience has been to employ research students on limited assignments where there is a very specific task that requires completion. There is on balance usually less chance that a short-term assignment will be problematic, although that is by no means always the case. Failure to deliver perfectly on the contract work can leave a lasting impression of dissatisfaction on either or both sides that can mar the supervisory relationship. Another challenge is that almost by definition most students in the early stages of their postgraduate careers, when they often have greatest need for income, are least able to do the kind of research work required because they have not yet acquired sufficient skills and expertise. However desirable it may therefore seem for supervisors also to be employers

of their research students, my experience is that this is something that more often than not fails to work successfully.

Ultimately, a clear distinction needs to be made between the challenges facing part-time students and those who are distance-based. Paradoxically, many so-called full-time students act in many ways as though they were part-time. They choose rarely to visit their universities, have only irregular supervisions, do not participate in student events on campus, and fail to contribute to the wider research cohorts of which they are part. Indeed, the ready availability of online resources means that full-time research students are much more footloose than they were 20 or so years ago when they had to visit libraries on campuses to read the latest journals. For full time students, absenting themselves from the intellectual milieu of their universities is by choice, and more often than not their experiences and skills acquisition are much diminished by their absence. The situation is very different for part-time students, who for whatever reason physically cannot attend the campus regularly. More often that not, these are distance-based students, trying to undertake their research degrees from abroad. It is these students who really miss out on the intellectually milieu that is involved in undertaking a PhD, and all too often they have real difficulty intellectually in bringing together their day-to-day working environment, be it in the private sector or civil society, with the scholarly requirements of undertaking a thesis.

In view of the financial difficulties faced by most distance-based students, many feel that they should receive a reduction on the fees charged when compared with full-time students who have the benefit of studying on campus. Most institutions, though, reject such arguments largely on the grounds that if they gave such fee reductions all research students would choose to go distance-based! Indeed, it does seem increasingly common already – at least in my own Department - for research students in the humanities and social sciences to absent themselves from their universities for much of the time, which is something that I lament considerably.

The difficulties facing part-time distance-based students suggest that we might reconsider the entire spectrum of research degrees available to such students. All too often, the MPhil degree is seen as a failed PhD, but this need not be the case. If the MPhil were to be more widely recognised as a positive outcome, and that it was the normal expectation for all part-time distance-based students, unless in exceptional circumstances they proved capable of undertaking the requirements of a PhD, then some of the challenges could be overcome. The shorter time period, perhaps 4-5 years instead of the 6-7 years of part-time study required for a PhD would mean that the financial costs would be less, the potential personal difficulties fewer, and the sacrifices less. Moreover, much less empirical research could be required for a MPhil, thus overcoming the difficulties of spending a long time in the field. Such research students would, though, gain the benefit of being part of a dynamic research group, albeit at a distance, with new ICTs enabling them to participate as actively as possible in the group's work. Examiners would need to be re-trained to see MPhils as the positive degrees that they are, and no longer simply treat them as failed PhDs, but the establishment of clear criteria could readily overcome this.

In seeking to overcome the challenges of being distance-based, this paper has emphasised once again the underlying difficulties of trying to undertake doctoral research on a part-time basis. Many, although not all, aspects of doing supervised research at a distance can largely be overcome, but allocating time to do so and generating the income to sustain someone for the duration of the research are very different matters. Most students would undertake research full-time if they had the means to do so, but this is not always the case. Thoughtful use of ICTs can go a long way to support distance-based part-time students, but I fear ultimately that their experience is almost always going to be less than that of their full-time university-based peers.

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