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Mothers doing doctorates part-time – why do we make it harder than it needs to be?

If universities really want mature students with families to succeed they'll need to completely rethink the traditional image of the "doctoral student". Widening access isn't enough, say **Sue Cronshaw, Peter Stokes, and Alistair McCulloch**



Doing a PhD is hard. It's hard even when everything goes right with your research project and it's hard even when everything is set up to support you through three-years of full-time study. Put simply, it's hard because it involves an intensive period of what has been called the 'highest learning' and because it involves mastering the advanced knowledges and skills necessary to be welcomed into the relevant disciplinary community. It's hard because learning and managing a long term-project is hard.

But doing a PhD is even harder if study is undertaken on a part-time basis (completion rates for part-time PhD students are woefully low), and if there are social and personal barriers which have to be overcome in addition to the requirements of high-level research learning and research writing. Because public and institutional policy and institutional process are designed largely on the basis of the stereotypical "traditional" student (young, full-time, and without dependents), studying as a "non-traditional" student may not be easy.

Despite diversity and inclusion now being front and centre of many countries' public and business sector policy agendas, and particularly at the forefront of the agendas of most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), many barriers to study remain in place and especially in the doctoral space. This is despite the movement to widen access to higher education which began in the UK in the 1970s and is now approaching its second half century. Even though women have taken up a greater proportion of senior roles and positions in organisations and have taken the lead in undergraduate participation, in doctoral education many barriers continue to fall disproportionately on this group.

The result is that, in doctoral education, one group in particular faces barriers to success – mothers doing part-time doctorates – and this group has been largely overlooked and has slipped past the attention of policy makers in both government and in the HEIs where doctoral study takes place.

Recent research led by Dr. Sue Cronshaw has investigated the experiences of mothers studying for PhDs on a part-time basis to surface and explore the impact that doctoral study has on their lives, their relationships and their identities and, in particular the "unconscious" institutional policy and structural impediments and barriers that act upon them.

The fieldwork employed a qualitative feminist-informed methodology which allowed the lived experiences of the interviewees to be examined. The research revealed the voices and stories of systematically marginalised mothers doing doctorates and painted a concerning set of issues regarding perceptions of self as "students" and their feelings about institutions and the associated institutional processes.

The marginalized voices of 'mothers doing part-time doctorates' provides a new perspective on the "non-traditional" PhD student experience, allowing a deeper understanding of the challenges facing this community by identifying and analysing key themes of identity and peripherality within a framework of communities of practice. Despite the women coming from a range of backgrounds, occupations, life stages and stage of PhD study, this diversity was not apparent when listening to their experiences of studying for a part-time PhD.

A clear commonality linked their narratives, bringing them together and reinforcing the researchers' understanding that their perspectives were reflective of a significant cohort of women with children. The study provides an account of the experiences of thirty-five women encountering similar challenges and barriers to study and learning and providing reflections that may assist others considering embarking on a similar mode of study.

It must be acknowledged that the women identified many positive aspects of their study. Studying for a PhD provided them with a means of identity expression previously stifled through the adoption of the role of being a "mum". Through part-time doctoral study, this sense of re-awakening provided women with a renewed sense of positivity and confidence both intellectually and personally, demonstrating a resistance against the dominant ideology that dictates women's "natural" place is in full-time motherhood (Hughes 2002).

'It just gives you that something other than being mum, you know what I mean? Because it can be hard, you know, some days when you fall out of bed and you're running to school and doing twenty odd loads of washing a week, and I'm just trying to have something different from that.' (Joan)

Doing a PhD provided them with intellectual stimulus and allowed them a voice that the mother role had smothered. The academic development of the women helped them to see themselves as "worthy", strengthening their own identity as they developed a redefined sense of self.

There were however, challenges when they were faced with combining their roles of mother and student.

'I find it hard to still be "Mum", but then be a student, be these other things as well. Because that's what takes the priority, it always will.' (Heather)

These challenges of reconciling their various roles were made worse by the lack of institutional acknowledgement of their familial responsibilities. Despite embarking on a part-time PhD in an attempt to create new meaning to their current situation, their involvement in the PhD community of practice was peripheral at best, and this marginal position denied them opportunities for enhanced learning through knowledge sharing.

Much doctoral policy and practice implicitly draws on a Communities of Practice (CoP) framework suggesting that individuals move along a development trajectory from novice or "newcomer" and towards expert or "old timer" (Lave & Wenger 1991). This approach reflects a normative approach to PhD study – students begin the process with limited knowledge, then through interaction with other students, researchers and professionals and with the guidance of their supervisor they acquire new knowledge, developing a shared repertoire of skills and eventually becoming 'master practitioners' themselves as they achieve a PhD (Wenger 2008).

This normative PhD CoP process was not, however, what the women in the study experienced. A lack of in-group participation, tension between roles, expectations around motherhood, a fractured student experience and the management of their own guilt and lack of self-belief provided a very different reality of PhD study for these part-time students with a competing social role. Thus, the mothers were exposed to 'marginalities of experience', their competence never fully realised within the context of the CoPs with which they were nominally affiliated, due to them being 'repressed, feared or ignored' (Wenger 2008:216).

'I had an induction thing and their focus was very much, "You are supposed to be in your early thirties. You are all supposed to be single; you are all supposed to be full time students." Well, I'm old. I'm in my late thirties. I work full time. I'm a part-time student, they don't know what to do with you. The attitude of the university is to take a one size fits all approach.' (Therese)

This marginalisation of experience resulted in the women not being included in mutual engagement of learning and the resulting joint enterprise that comes from members working towards new knowledge with a common goal. This in turn, left them with little exposure to the shared repertoire necessary for learning (Tummons 2012). They felt excluded and not recognised within the institution.

'I will graduate, and no one from the university will know who I am.' (Grace)

Management within HEIs has a responsibility to address imbalances within PGR experiences. For the situation of this group of women to change, they must be supported to enable full, active, participation. This should aim to enhance their learning experiences in terms of their identity, sense of communal belonging, and the practice of PhD study.





The project's contribution to current thinking around part-time PhDs is that, in offering a critique of extant normative practice, its findings illustrate and exemplify how existing processes marginalise mothers doing part-time doctorates. In doing so, it points to the need for new approaches in practice. Understanding the needs of non-traditional cohorts considering and undertaking PhD study can inform recruitment practices of institutions who can tailor marketing communications, structures of programmes and training to different groups, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. We argue that a shift to the acknowledgement of diversity within the body of doctoral students is crucial if institutions are to be considered socially responsible.

HEIs have a powerful opportunity to learn from this work and develop practical responses to adapt and improve existing processes and infrastructure to support this and other groups of non-traditional students. The nub of the challenge appears to centre on identity building and connectivity. The use of online platforms alongside face-to-face events (research

seminars/ poster days) is a way to connect and involve remote students in "live" events. We have had plenty of experience with such an approach during the COVID pandemic. We should continue to experiment in this space.

Other options include helping with the development of connections between doctoral students whose situation threatens to keep them in peripheral situations. One such option is the buddy scheme whereby two students in similar situations are introduced, and online communication encouraged. Research shows that sharing experiences and providing mutual support between individuals in similar situations can have a powerful cathartic effect. Another option is to set up easily assessable online forums for research degree students to encourage chatting and idea sharing.

Above all, university procedures and protocols need to be adapted through the adoption of more flexible, bespoke approaches suitable for mature students with familial responsibilities. Providing access to higher education and promoting the values of equality and diversity are unquestionably fixed at the top of contemporary political and institutional agendas, but while HEIs retain their traditional view of the "doctoral student" and build policy and process around that view, there will continue to be a significant disjuncture between the experience of diverse groups of doctoral students.

Yes – doing a PhD is hard, but sometimes HEIs and public policy-makers make it harder than it need be, particularly for "non-traditional" students.



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