

The Midlands Hub Part-time Postgraduate Researcher Programme

Dr Ged Hall

Dr Carol Edwards

Talk outline

- ✔ Why the programme was conceived
- ✔ How we designed it
- ✔ What issues we thought part-timers have
- ✔ What the programme looked like
- ✔ What issues we had in implementing it
- ✔ The key findings from the research
- ✔ What next

Why we did it

- ✔ Hub wanted to develop material for researchers themselves
- ✔ Good practice workshop on part-timers concluded:
 - Region's existing practice was diverse and still didn't 'hit the mark'
 - An institution needs to do everything to do that!
 - Recommended setting up a project to review the cost effectiveness of different ways

The issues we thought PTs have

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

What did we do

- ✔ As PTs are under-represented in surveys we discounted that
- ✔ But how do you get their views?
- ✔ Being trainers, offering dedicated training seemed the solution!
- ✔ But they are under-represented in training sessions, so how did we solve that?

The design

- ✔ Develop a programme of 6 workshops
 - Most co-delivered by 2 institutions
- ✔ Geographically spread around the region
- ✔ Advertise all 6 to all PTs in the region
- ✔ Pack in elements that we thought would appeal to PTs specifically
- ✔ While we've got them do some research:
 - we should have good numbers
 - they can say what they need/want
 - enhances the evaluation

Day format

- ✔ 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 PT

Who was involved?

- ✔ Programme designed, written and managed by:
 - Tristram Hooley, ex Leicester
 - Heather Dalglish, Loughborough
 - Kate Mahoney, Warwick and Hub
 - Ged Hall, Nottingham
- ✔ Research design and analysis by Carol
- ✔ Workshop hosting and delivery by 11 HEIs
- ✔ Participants from 15 HEIs

The issues we had

- ✔ Have we got it right! Will they just know it all?
- ✔ Briefing people effectively to deliver some sessions
- ✔ Finding successful PTs
 - Even though they do exist
- ✔ Marketing
 - Getting website sorted
 - Ensuring institutions got the message out

The research element

- Evaluation of pilot project:
 - what do you think of what we thought you'd like?
- Primary research on what it's like being a part-time research student:
 - what do you want/need?

Four points of inquiry for each workshops

- ✔ pre-workshop on-line questionnaire, completed when signing up
- ✔ three points of inquiry on the day itself
 - before it began
 - after coming back from lunch
 - before leaving

Three main areas of findings

- ✔ What it feels like to be a part-time research student
- ✔ Problems to be addressed by their institutions
- ✔ Feedback specifically on the workshop days

It's a 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.’

Lonely

‘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.’

How do I achieve a balance?

‘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.’

Feeling excluded by their institution

‘It seems to be impossible to know who or what is available - a part time student is apparently not given the same level of remote access as a 'distance learner', despite most of us being in exactly the same situation.’

‘As a part-time mature student, I feel isolated from the activities of my university and have experienced difficulties "breaking into" the networks of my department.’

Feeling excluded by their institution

‘Training and provision is focussed on full time students with pt as an afterthought. I have been sent emails saying 'all students need to do this' followed by 'but not if you're part time' or having to clarify things and it being assumed that I am on campus ('just drop into the office') so now I don't bother to respond to these things.’

‘Unlike full-time students, part-time students frequently do not have sufficient time to attend events that are not strictly relevant to them but this can entail that part-time researchers feel excluded from university activities and unrepresented’

Harder than expected

‘Its lonely, demanding and requiring greater resilience than I fully imagined’

‘... it is much harder to find motivation when also working full time and alone.’

‘Far more stressful than I ever could have imagined.’

‘...the expectation prior to enrolling was that I would finish my PhD quicker but the reality turned out to be different: it has taken longer time to finish.’

Summary of what they say they feel like

- ✔ Absolutely wonderful
- ✔ Frustrated and confused
- ✔ Isolated and lonely
- ✔ Excluded

What are the practical implications?

- ✔ Time management
- ✔ Attending training
- ✔ Accessing full information, requirements, and support from their university
- ✔ Peer community and support
- ✔ Serendipity of corridor conversations

What did they think of the day?

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

What did they get out of the day?

General

‘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.’

What did they get out of the day?

Peer support

‘Feeling part of a community.’

‘Meeting other students. Swapping experiences.’

‘Reassurance that other part-time research students experience similar difficulties and anxieties.’

‘Hearing other experiences of part-time researchers.’

‘Insights from other students.’

‘Social networking.’

‘Networking – don’t often get a chance.’

Specific feedback on the content of the days: easy to address

‘I would have liked the 2 workshops to have been run sequentially so that I could have attended both of them.’

‘Very good, very enjoyable – just ice breaker session too long.’

‘Allow more time for student interaction with each other.’

‘... perhaps include videos of actual areas of common interests e.g.: supervisor experiences.’

Specific feedback on the content of the days: harder to address

- ‘Possible that different sessions may need to be marketed to different kinds of part-time doctoral students.’
- ‘Could qualitative and quantitative researchers be separated? Or science and arts researchers?’
- ‘Do a needs analysis of what participants would like first.’

What would they like included in a workshop day?

Time to communicate 'sob stories' Pastoral care
End Note Conferences
Ethics Methodology and conceptual framework
Preparation for the transfer document Supervision
Advice about the viva Time management
Keeping motivated Careers
Individual planning Negotiating skills Getting started
How to edit How to avoid isolation
Structure and essence of a PhD Write-up
Achieving a balance Funding

Representative comment on the workshop days

‘A good day’s learning experience.

Enjoyed it.

A lot of fun on a serious topic.’

Stages of review of feedback

1. Interim report of findings after 4 workshops
2. Advance planning for 2009
3. Discussion based on data from all 6 workshops
4. Review and revision of 2009 planning

Examples of changes that will be implemented

- ✔ 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 their names.
- ✔ Tightening up of section on ethos and process of research: remove reference to research perspective, and bill this as an opportunity for an hour to discuss with other p/t researchers

More changes

- ✔ Provide opportunities for ongoing peer support.
- ✔ Catching what people arrive wanting to find out about, and encouraging them to talk with others: in the ethos and process of research session; at coffee and lunch; and subsequently by email.
- ✔ Video clips of successful PTs

Examples of briefing notes to facilitators of the ‘ethos and practice’ session

- ❑ Relate *everything* back to the part-time perspective e.g.:
How do you determine research quality < within a part-time context>?
- ❑ Be flexible to follow productive discussions that emerge within a group
- ❑ Be proactive in establishing balance and re-establishing focus within the discussion
- ❑ Be a catalyst in promoting peer support through the sharing of experience and tips

What next

Any ideas on how we could:

- ✔ Do a needs analysis before each workshop
- ✔ Make programme more flexible for
 - All the different varieties of PT e.g. research assistants
 - PTs at different stages
 - Different disciplines

What next

- ✔ Will run again in 2008/9 within Midlands
- ✔ Writing up the findings:
 - Vitae publication (scheduled Jan 09)
 - Journal publication
- ✔ Rolling the programme out nationally
 - Possibly 10 workshops
 - Geographically dispersed across all Hubs
 - Open to any PT