Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

The PhD student's journey

Exploring how interaction with the academic environment informs part-time doctoral student's agency and understanding of the PhD process.

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The part-time PhD student experience
Interactive process or solitary journey?

Background
Rationale for research project

- ↑ PhD enrolments (34%) internationally since 1990's (OECD, 2014)

- Over 7500 PhDs enrolled in Ireland (15% p/t)

- ↑ in number of institutions providing PhD education (Thune et al, 2012)

- High student: staff ratios in Higher Education. Currently 14:1 (Ireland) compared to OECD average of 21:1) (OECD 2016).

- Concern around PhD non-completion and time to completion e.g. *"ABD – All but Dissertation"* (Park 2007). Non-completion is costly and potentially damaging to student and institutional reputation, especially when research is externally funded (Bourke et al, 2004).

Research questions

How do part-time Arts Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) doctoral students' experience of interacting with the academic environment and accessing personal supports influence:

1. Doctoral students' understanding of the research requirements and standard of scholarship required to successfully complete the PhD?

2. Doctoral students' responses in terms of demonstrating agency, resourcefulness and help seeking behaviour to enhance PhD progression and experience?

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Benefits of this research project

- Supports the goals of the European University Association Council for Doctoral Education (EUA-CDE) *'Doctoral Education – taking Salzburg forward: implantation and new challenges'* (European Universities' Association, 2016) to :

1. *Include the voice of doctoral candidates* in feedback mechanisms and programme design.

2. *Support Higher Education Institutions in attracting high quality doctoral candidates.*

3. *Help Higher Education institutions to foster individual talent within the context of research cultures* characterised by independent thinking, rigour and resilience to advance knowledge through the generation of original research.

4. *Provide insights into supporting PhD students* who may be at a remove from college campus and culture (e.g. part-time, employed & international) and possible recommendations for individual learning contracts.

Why Part-time PhD students?

OWI-11882-D

I do this part-time

PhD Graduation day

How do I get here when I'm hardly ever there?

Information and support from the academic environment?
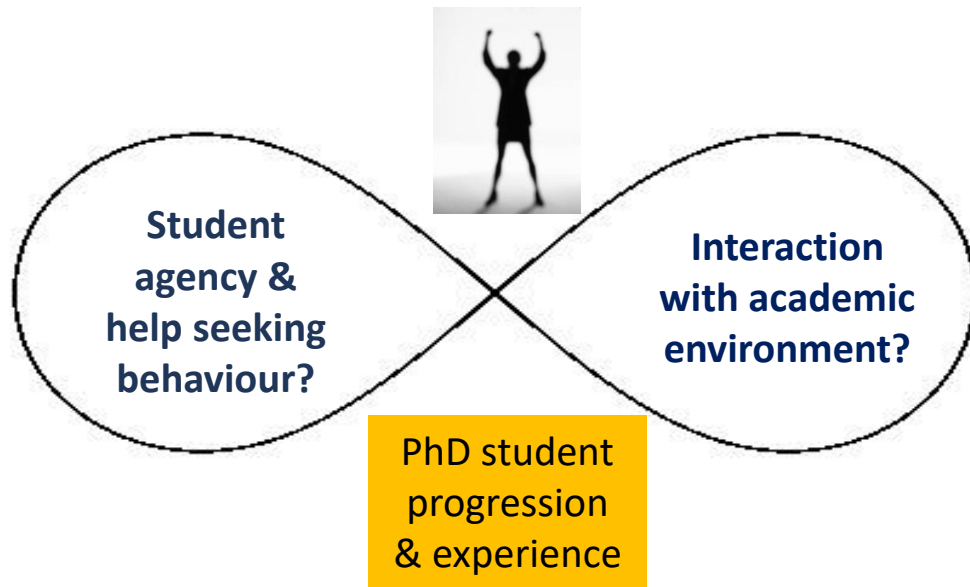
Personal support and friends?

Personal strengths and resourcefulness?

Conceptual model

Student agency & help seeking behaviour?

Interaction with academic environment?

PhD student progression & experience

Drawing on Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2005; Law, 1992) this model aims to :

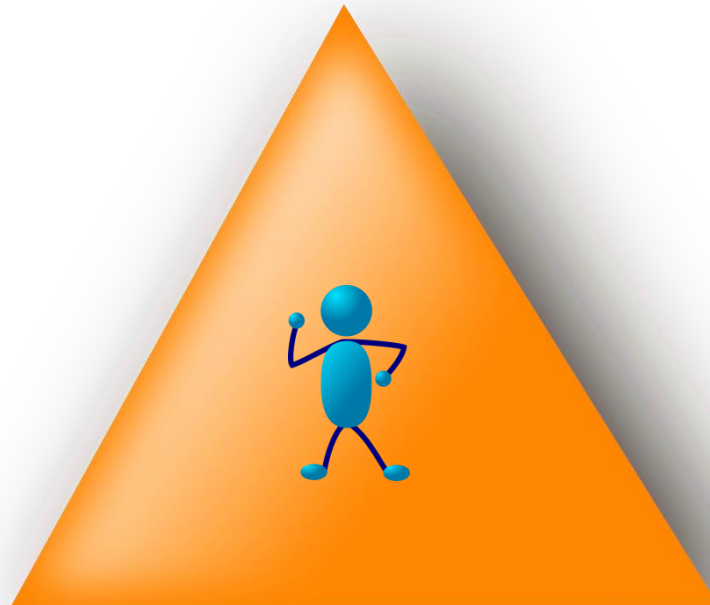- capture empirical evidence on who and what (human and non-human) actors influence PhD student progression
- Develop theoretical understanding of how the student responds to information from the academic environment (Archer, 2003), for example by demonstrating agency and accessing support to enhance PhD progression & experience.

Structure
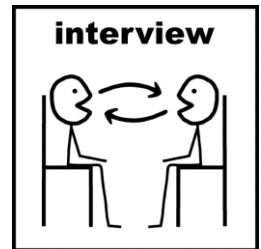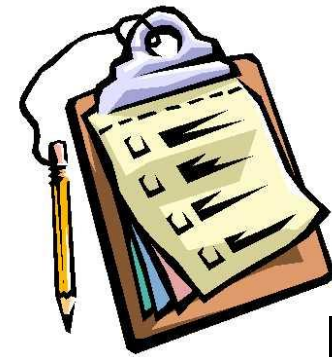
Agency

Culture

Theoretical approach and research framework

Activities and timescale
November 2017 – June 2022

Scoping Phase

Jan 18-19

- Questionnaire and interviews sample PhD (completers/non completers – Science and non-science students)
- Interviews with PhD stakeholders in TCD (e.g. academic and support staff and postgraduate student representatives).
- Goal: Refine research questions and identify themes to inform main study
- Ongoing activity - this researcher will keep a reflective journal throughout the PhD process to note experiences and insights.

Main study

Jan 19 - Dec 20

- Interviews with a sample of part-time AHSS PhD student using approach based on narrative analysis (e.g. Polkinghorne, 1998) to capture individual student's stories.
- Goal: To capture individual part-time PhD student's stories of experiences of interacting with the academic environment and how this influenced responses, for example in terms of help seeking behaviour.

Analysis and Write up

Jan 21 - June 22

- Write up of PhD
- Goal: to promote awareness of a sample of PhD student's experiences of interaction with the academic environment as a factor which influences (or not) independent learning and academic progression.
- Add to insights on ways to support an increasingly diverse PhD student body to help stakeholders in doctoral process to enhance competitiveness of doctoral education, quality of research output and quality of student experience.

Preliminary findings from Scoping Phase June 2018

- **10 + participants (questionnaire and interview)**

- **1 Academic staff member (Natural Sciences)**

- **2 PG student representatives**

- **4 x full time (AHSS) PhDs – 2 x m and 2 x f. Age range 35-45/45-55**

- **2 x part-time (AHSS) PhD 1 x m and 1 x f. Age range 25-35/35-45**

- **1 part-time (Health Science) PhD 1 x f. Age range 25-35**

Preliminary findings

Structure – poor co-ordination and communication, clarity of roles and responsibilities between different functions:

- **Process of transferring funding (awarded by external bodies) from academic departments to Academic Registry to pay students fees.**

- **Process of communicating PhD guidelines to students (e.g. annual progress reports, interim/final viva transfer process, accessing and completing mandatory ECT credit bearing modules and standard/scholarliness of research output.**

- *"I could have done nothing for the first two years and no one would know". "It's all a bit vague. Even though it's self-directed, the onus is on you, which is fine, but could do with a bit more clarity, structure and direction". (Quote from p/t student HS)*

Preliminary findings

Culture: - tends to be informal and bottom up (based on who you talk to) rather than top down an explicit and formalised

- **Greatest level of interaction is between student and supervisor.**

- **Supervisors tended to encourage self-directed learning and independence from students while supporting them in access to resources (e.g. training opportunities on campus)**

"Information is not timely – if it wasn't for my supervisor I'd know nothing – everything I got was from him – apart from my student card!" (Quote from p/t student AHSS).

Preliminary findings

Student agency/resourcefulness

- **Student needs to be very proactive and dynamic to source information and resources.**

- **Student position in relation to college environment (e.g. assignment of desk, positioning within a research communities and opportunities to interact with peers and academic staff and availability to participate in research seminars and social events) is key to quality of student experience and smooth progression.**

- *"I was aware that as a student on a structured PhD programme that I had to do a course. I sourced a course I was interested in. I found out who was running the course and contacted them. It was my own initiative that put me on that course". (quote f/t student PhD AHSS)*

Preliminary findings

"Seminars in the department are student-led, nothing is organised by staff, there is never a lecturer present – I think that's really bad." (quote f/t AHSS student).

"Isolation is a big factor [for students]. I don't know how college can solve this. The student has to be proactive, especially if you don't have a desk you mightn't meet anyone." (Quote f/t/ AHSS student)

"Student services, such as Counselling Service, Library, IT and Student Learning department were very helpful and proactive – e.g. sending out emails and notifying students about events."

Preliminary recommendations

- **Provide greater support in first year of PhD – mandatory one week course – introduction to PhD, research methods, milestones and supports.**

- **Use of technology to support (rather than replace) communication and interaction, for example use of a 'What's-App' group by supervisor to keep in touch with students. This was particularly appreciated and accessed by part-time students.**

- **Greater clarity for students on the PhD process and responsibilities (e.g. between academic and administrative functions) paying fees, submitting transcripts, completing and gaining accreditation for ECT modules and formal documentation).**

- **Greater financial support, identified as a key cause of mental health concerns for Postgraduates.**

- **Promotion of support services – as PGs may think they are only for UG and greater access to and flexibility of service provision for P/ts.**