

Networked in or networked out?

**Learners' experiences of completing a PhD
on a part-time basis**

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Declaration

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Summary

Doctoral education policy and practice in Europe primarily understands doctoral candidature in relation to learners' experiences of undertaking a PhD qualification on a full-time basis over three to four years. In contrast little is known about the part-time doctoral candidate's experience of navigating the PhD journey. I was interested in finding out how learners identified as often having limited access to the campus environment, usually due to other time commitments such as work and family responsibilities, navigated the doctoral process, usually over 5-6 years compared with the 3-4-year full-time PhD. In essence at the heart of this research was the goal of understanding how the part-time learner navigates and completes a PhD qualification, in terms of experiences of accessing doctoral programme information and support from the academic institution. Additionally, I sought to understand if part-time PhD candidates demonstrated agency and sought help from others (inside and outside the academic institution) to progress with and complete doctoral studies.

A questionnaire and semi-structured interview process were developed which were influenced by Theories of Agency (Archer, 2003) and Actor-Network-Theory (Latour, 2005). Despite adopting different interpretations of the relationship between structure, culture and agency, I felt these two conceptual approaches would contribute to an understanding of various dimensions of the part-time learner's experiences of navigating the PhD. Actor-Network-Theory provided a way to describe individual's accounts of accessing information and support from non-human (e.g., technology, documents and guidelines) as well as human actors. Archer's theory on personal agency, provided a way to explore if learners demonstrated personal agency, and sought help to advance with and complete the PhD. A preliminary exploratory phase of the research was conducted in a single academic institution in Ireland, firstly to develop the research instruments (questionnaire and interview process) and also to identify a sample of part-time PhD learners for the main study. The findings from the preliminary study, which included 18 participants (11 full-time and 7 part-time PhD candidates), illustrated the value of focusing on the experiences of individuals who had completed a PhD. Individuals at the late stage of the PhD (e.g., post viva and thesis submission) had greater insights into what had influenced progress at each stage of the journey to completion than candidates at the earlier stages of the PhD process.

Based on the findings from the preliminary study, I focused on the experiences of individuals who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis. Eighteen individuals who completed a PhD across (5) different universities in Ireland contributed to this study. The interview transcripts were analysed using qualitative methods, namely thematic analysis, to explore both common and unique aspects of individual's experiences of navigating the PhD to completion on a part-time basis. The findings illustrate the uniqueness of each learner's journey in the context of the following influences: access to academic resources and communities (within and beyond the campus setting); employment responsibilities; physical and temporal distance from the university environment; personal commitments and the role of help-seeking and personal resilience as facilitating or impeding progression and completion of a PhD on a part-time basis. This study contributes to existing research by adding the completed part-time PhD learner's voice to discourse within doctoral educational policy and practice. The findings illustrate the importance of exploring how face-to-face and online resources and networks can support the physically and socially distanced learner in progressing with and completing doctoral studies.

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Abstract

Doctoral education policy and practice in Europe tends to recognise candidature in terms of the full-time PhD researcher. Part-time doctoral candidates have been described as invisible in policy (Neumann and Rodwell, 2009) and campus life (Gardner and Gopaul, 2012) due to often managing studies in tandem with work and roles (Watts, 2008). This presented challenges in terms of developing a methodology for this study as doctoral education has primarily focused on the experiences of the full-time researcher and has emphasised the role of socialisation (Weidman and Stein, 2003) of the learner into the academic department and institution as influencing academic progression and quality of the doctoral experience. Researchers recommend further studies on the experiences of non-traditional doctoral candidates, for example part-time researchers (Zahl, 2015) beyond an assumption of the learner as full-time (Hopwood, Harris-Heummert McAlpine and Wagstaff, 2011) and situated in the academic institution (Pearson, Evans and Macauley, 2016). A questionnaire and a semi-structured interview protocol were developed within this research to explore various aspects of the part-time learner's experience of navigating the PhD. This included access to doctoral programme resources and support (face-to-face and online) and the role of personal agency and help-seeking behaviour as influencing doctoral progression and completion.

Eighteen full and part-time doctoral candidates from a single university in Ireland participated in a preliminary phase of the study to develop the research instruments. Additional interviews were conducted with eight other individuals including academic staff, postgraduate student advisors and four individuals who had undertaken an alternative form of doctoral education (part-time) to the traditional PhD. Responses suggested that completed/completing PhD candidates had a greater sense of what had influenced progression with doctoral studies than early or mid-stage candidates. Eighteen individuals who completed a part-time PhD in (5) different universities in Ireland participated in the main study. The findings highlighted the uniqueness of each learner's experience of navigating doctoral studies and illustrated the importance of developing online and face-to-face supports for learners at a distance from the academic institution/campus setting. This study addressed a gap in existing research namely by adding the completed part-time learners' voice to discourse within doctoral education. Recommendations from this study included the adoption of a person-centred and comprehensive approach to supporting doctoral candidates, particularly learners with limited access to the campus environment due to balancing studies with other roles.

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Chapter 1. Introduction to the research

1.1. Introduction

This chapter introduces the background to this research and rationale and objectives for the study. The aim of the research was to explore individual learner's experiences of navigating and completing a PhD on a part-time basis within the university sector in Ireland. An overview of the history and key developments within doctoral education are addressed to contextualise the part-time PhD learner within existing research, policy and practice. The research questions are introduced and finally the structure of the thesis is presented in this chapter. The contribution of this study to existing research is addressed, namely the addition of the part-time candidate's voice to discourse on doctoral satisfaction and completion. This mode of candidature has been described as absent in policy and practice despite growing part-time doctoral enrolments worldwide (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014; Neumann & Rodwell, 2009 ; Zahl, 2015). In general studies within doctoral education are based on an assumption of the researcher as full-time (Hopwood, Alexander, Harris-Heummert, McAlpine, & Wagstaff, 2011), and in comparison research on the part-time learner's experience is sparse. Researchers have highlighted the need for further studies on part-time learners' experiences of undertaking doctoral studies (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014; Zahl, 2015).

My position, both as a researcher and part-time PhD candidate is discussed in terms of the importance of reflexivity and reflection in highlighting any biases or assumptions (Pillow, 2003) I may have held about part-time doctoral candidates' experiences. I address my own interest in the part-time candidate's experience which developed through my role as a Student Learning Advisor working in a university with undergraduate and postgraduate students.

1.2. Background to the research

My interest in the topic of part-time PhD candidates came from working closely with (primarily full-time) doctoral candidates in my role as a Student Learning Advisor. At the heart of this research was a curiosity about how part-time learners navigated the PhD process. This was based on research findings which indicated that undertaking doctoral studies on a part-time basis can present challenges for learners in terms of accessing academic and research support in the academic institution during the working day. This is often due to a tendency to manage part-time doctoral studies in tandem with work and other personal and caring responsibilities (Watts, 2008).

My background as a Chartered Occupational Psychologist and experience working in the field of higher education in different academic institutions over the last 20 years has influenced my interest in access to education and training and personal development opportunities for different learners. I work as a Student Learning Advisor (currently on a career break to pursue the PhD) in Trinity College Dublin for over a decade since 2009. The Student Learning Development Service provides one-to-one, group-based and online academic writing and study skills support to an average of four thousand student contacts at undergraduate and postgraduate level each academic year. I noticed a trend over the last decade, namely greater diversity of the student body in terms of age and country of origin and the increase in the number of doctoral students who were availing of the Student Learning Development Services. In addition, there was a greater demand for diverse modes of learning support such as online resources and group-based workshops in various off campus locations. These supports were intended to meet the needs of those learners undertaking work placements as part of their studies, or who may have had limited access to the academic institution during the 9am-5pm working day. Although, a growing number of PhD candidates were availing of the Student Learning Development Services and as a team we were developing more workshops, modules, supports and resources for PhD candidates, the service users tended to be full-time doctoral

candidates. I became interested in learners' experiences of pursuing doctoral qualifications on a part-time basis.

I was interested in exploring part-time candidates' experiences of accessing doctoral programme-based supports and information in the context of potential challenges to accessing campus-based resources due to balancing studies with other commitments (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014; Watts, 2008; Zahl, 2015) such as employment and personal/caring roles.

1.3. Rationale for this research

Doctoral education policy and practice has evolved over the last thirty years on a global basis to provide learners with a greater variety and modes of study (Bao, Kehm, & Ma, 2018). The practitioner-based and Professional doctorate is an alternative to the traditional PhD and is primarily a part-time mode of study aimed at mid-career "time poor and experience rich" (Wildy, Peden, & Chan, 2015 pg 77) learners. Unlike the traditional PhD candidates on a Professional doctorate programme tend to be recruited as part of a cohort who undertake course work and pursue doctoral qualifications over a shared timeframe, often three to four years part-time (Bourner, Bowden, & Laing, 2001).

Socialisation of the traditional full-time PhD candidate within a research community in the academic institution has been identified as influencing progression and completion of doctoral qualifications (Jones, 2013; Weidman & Stein, 2003). In contrast, a commonly agreed understanding of the part-time doctoral learner's experience is an acknowledgement that part-time candidates can face barriers to accessing academic and peer communities (Zahl, 2015) as they often combine doctoral studies with other employment and personal commitments (Watts, 2008). Recognition of the need to support an increasingly diverse body of doctoral candidates has been identified due to increased levels of enrolments of non-traditional, such as mature and part-time learners (Gardner, 2008). According to a report on trends within doctoral education

(Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development, 2016b) a quarter of doctoral candidates are international students. Doctoral policy and practice within Europe (European University Association, 2016) highlights the importance of attracting and developing international doctoral researchers.

Enrolments of part-time doctoral candidates have increased worldwide (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009). Currently 19% of doctoral learners in Ireland are enrolled on a part-time basis (Higher Education Authority, 2018c). Part-time doctoral enrolments have increased by more than 70% over the last decade (O'Regan, 2018) from 920 part-time PhD enrolments in 2008 (Higher Education Authority, 2009a) to 1,625 part-time PhD candidates in 2018 (Higher Education Authority, 2018c). Based on an analysis of statistics on doctoral enrolments in Ireland (Higher Education Authority, 2018d) most part-time PhD enrolments, namely over 80%, are based within the university sector in Ireland primarily within an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) discipline .

1.4. Doctoral studies as different to other programmes within higher education

The doctoral process differs from other cycles of education as outlined by the Bologna Process for reforms within higher education in Europe (European Higher Education Area, 1999). In comparison with other undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, which are primarily structured and assessed around a curriculum, the main output from the PhD is the generation of research (González Geraldo, Trevitt, & Carter, 2011) which makes an original contribution to existing knowledge (European University Association, 2005). Researchers recognise the challenges that can face doctoral candidates and acknowledge that individuals who are good at completing coursework may not necessarily successfully make the transition to generating original research as independent scholars (Lovitts, 2008).

1.5. Rationale for focusing on learners who had completed a part-time PhD

Reported challenges which can be faced by part-time doctoral candidates in terms of limited opportunities to access social and academic supports in the academic institution compared to many of their full-time peers (Gardner, 2008; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012) presented an opportunity to explore individual learner's experiences of completing a PhD on a part-time basis. Despite the increase in doctoral enrolments on a part-time basis, little is known of the part-time mode of candidature.

Policy makers in Ireland have identified the goal of providing flexible educational programmes for diverse learners, including online, working and part-time students and also to increase the level of enrolments at doctoral level (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). Therefore, in addition to a personal interest in the topic of the part-time doctoral candidate the rationale for undertaking this research was also motivated by the changing demographic of doctoral candidates and recommendations for further studies on the experiences of non-traditional (Gardner, 2008) specifically part-time doctoral learners (Zahl, 2015). There are multiple definitions of what constitutes part-time status at doctoral level, which includes mode of enrolment, for example, registered on a part-time basis throughout the doctoral programme or movement from full-time to part-time status during the study process (Watts, 2008).

This study addressed the experiences of individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis in the university sector in Ireland. The decision to focus on the experiences of learners who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis for this study was informed by the responses from PhD candidates who participated in the preliminary phase of this study which included eleven full-time and seven part-time PhD candidates from a single academic institution in Ireland. Both full and part-time PhD respondents who were completing/or who had completed studies had a better sense retrospectively of what had influenced progression with studies at distinct stages of the doctoral process from induction to mid stage transfer, viva defence and thesis completion

than early or mid-stage PhD candidates. Researchers suggest that doctoral process can be understood as three distinct phases (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011) from early-stage induction and course work to mid-stage transfer (Pifer & Baker, 2016) and final transition to independent researcher (Lovitts, 2008). The transition from novice to experienced researcher can be challenging (Lovitts, 2008). Researchers (Devos et al., 2017) recommend further studies on the experiences of individuals who have successfully completed doctoral studies.

1.6. Objectives of the research

Existing research tends to focus on personal rather than academic aspects of learners' experiences of pursuing doctoral studies on a part-time basis. Examples include the challenges of combining studies with motherhood (Cronshaw, 2017), employment (Evans, 2002; Watts, 2008) and experiences of isolation from research and peer communities (Gibney, 2013; Watts, 2008). Yet little is understood about navigating the doctoral process, in particular accounts from individuals who successfully completed a PhD on a part-time basis. The objective of this research was to understand individual learner's experiences of interacting with the academic institution (face-to-face and online) to access doctoral programme information and support during the doctoral process to completion. The goal of the study was also to explore if individuals demonstrated agency and sought help inside and outside the university setting to progress with and complete a PhD on a part-time basis.

Personal agency and help-seeking behaviour have been identified as influencing learners' experiences of progressing with doctoral studies. Examples include harnessing support and guidance from personal contacts to overcome academic, system-based, administrative or procedural aspects of the doctoral programme within the academic institution (McAlpine, Paulson, Gonsalves, & Jazvac-Martek, 2012). Researchers recommend adopting a holistic view of the doctoral candidate's world which recognises the learner as engaged in multiple personal, social academic and employment activities and networks, both within and beyond the context of

the doctoral programme commitments within the academic institution (Hopwood, 2010b). Recognition of the part-time doctoral candidate as potentially occupied with a range of responsibilities and activities across diverse employment, family, personal and social settings, primarily outside of the doctoral environment within the academic institution (Watts, 2008) was central to the current research study.

1.7. Research questions

The research questions explored individual learner's experiences of interacting with the academic institution during candidature to access programme-based support and information. Additionally, the goal of this study was to explore if individuals demonstrated agency and sought support to progress with and complete the doctoral process. The research questions evolved from an evaluation of the literature within the field of doctoral education, including factors relating to doctoral candidature, academic progression and completion.

1. What were individual part-time PhD learner's experiences of accessing doctoral programme information and support (face-to-face and online) from the academic institution during the doctoral process in an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) field, to completion?
2. In what ways did individual part-time PhD learners report any factors (personal or institutional) which facilitated or impeded progress and completion of doctoral studies?
3. In what ways did individual part-time PhD learners give accounts of demonstrating agency and seeking help (inside and outside the academic institution) to progress with and complete doctoral studies?

1.8. Developing a conceptual and methodological framework for this study

The conceptual and methodological framework developed for this study sought to address the complexity of settings where doctoral learning takes place beyond an assumption of the learner as situated (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010; Pearson, Evans, & Macauley, 2016) within the academic

institution. The data generation instruments developed for this study explored the interaction between the individual and the academic environment (questionnaire). The role of personal agency and seeking help from diverse sources such as personal, social and academic contacts and networks inside and outside the academic institution was explored via a semi-structured interview process. A copy of the questionnaire and interview questions are included in the Appendices of this thesis. Central to this study was the goal of giving voice to the part-time doctoral candidate and providing each individual learner with the opportunity to share their experiences of completing a PhD.

1.9. Participant details

Eighteen individuals who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis from five different universities in Ireland participated in the main study within this research. Responses to the questionnaire illustrated the diversity of each learner's experiences of accessing doctoral programme supports and information, primarily on a face-to-face basis and via online and document-based resources from the academic institution during the PhD process. The qualitative and open-ended questions within the semi-structured interview process provided each participant with an opportunity to share their experiences of navigating the PhD process and illustrated the role of personal agency, resilience and help-seeking as influencing academic progression and completion. The findings emphasise the uniqueness of each participant's journey mediated within the context, or absence, of interaction with supportive others both inside and outside the academic institution. The following table provides a brief overview of the eighteen participants who contributed to the main research study. Pseudonyms were given to each respondent to protect participants' anonymity.

1.10. Table 1: Participant details

University	Number of participants	Pseudonyms
University A	7	Elaine/Fiona/Karen/Mike/Shane/Una/Vivienne
University B	4	Gary/Heather/James/Natalie
University C	4	Laura/Mary/Matthew/Rose
University D	2	Charlotte/Sarah
University E	1	Nina
TOTAL	18	

1.11. Terminology and definitions used within the current research

This section outlines the use of terminology and definitions which informed this research study.

1.11.1. Doctoral programme

The term doctoral programme, candidature, part-time candidate and doctoral process within this research refers to doctoral education, namely the PhD, as outlined within the Salzburg Guidelines (European University Association, 2005, 2010, 2016), usually defined as a three-year to four-year full-time programme.

1.11.2. Part-time doctoral candidate

In the current study the term part-time doctoral candidature refers to individuals who were enrolled part-time on a doctoral programme, specifically the PhD qualification (European University Association, 2005, 2010, 2016). The PhD model of doctoral education is recognised in policy and practice within higher education systems in Europe as referring to full-time enrolment on a doctoral programme over 3-4 years (Hasgall, Saenen, & Borrell-Damian, 2019). In contrast part-time doctoral candidature is often 5-6 years in duration (Watts, 2008). Other doctoral level qualifications such as the Professional or Educational doctorate usually have one mode of enrolment for all candidates who are recruited and undertake the study process together,

usually on a part-time basis (Wildy et al., 2015) and over 3-4 years (Bourner et al., 2001). The different modes of enrolment, of both full and part-time candidates, is a unique aspect of the traditional (PhD) doctoral process. However, part-time candidature has received little attention in doctoral education discourse, research, policy and practice, despite growing levels of part-time doctoral enrolments worldwide (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009)

1.11.3. Doctoral programme information

Doctoral programme information refers to guidelines on the doctoral education policies and procedures available to candidates in different formats including the student handbook and online resources originating both from individual departments and the academic institution. Examples include information on different mandatory and voluntary training options and expected quality of research output and mode of assessment at each stage of the doctoral process to final submission of the thesis and graduation (Golde & Dore, 2001). Researchers have identified the need to recognise the doctoral process as consisting of distinct stages (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011) in which the learner requires different types of support and information (Pifer & Baker, 2016) both to interpret the procedures within the doctoral process (Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004) and to move from novice to expert researcher (Lovitts, 2008).

1.11.4. Research and support networks

Researchers have identified the challenges part-time doctoral candidates in terms of limited opportunities to access academic (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012) and peer communities in the academic institution (Zahl, 2015). Researchers recommend greater equity of access to Student Services including academic support and pastoral care (Sursock, 2015) for example via online and face-to-face media for learners who are based in an off-campus setting (Naylor, Chakravarti, & Baik, 2018).

1.11.5. Personal agency

Resilience and help-seeking behaviour has been identified as influencing individuals' experiences of harnessing support and resources and overcome barriers to progression and completion of doctoral studies (McAlpine et al., 2012). The definition of personal agency which informed the current study was based on the concept of dynamic interaction between an individual and the environment (Archer, 2003). Pearson (2005) recommends reframing doctoral education to consider the influence of personal agency and interaction of the learner with multiple actors at institutional, national and international levels. She suggests this is a more realistic interpretation of the diverse factors that influence the doctoral candidate's journey beyond disciplinary context (Pearson, 2005).

1.12. Reflexivity and transparency

During this study I was an insider, in that I was a part-time PhD candidate and yet also located outside of the doctoral process as a staff member working with undergraduate and postgraduate students. My role as a staff member within the Student Learning Development Services in Trinity College Dublin provided me with the opportunity to collaborate closely with doctoral candidates and provide motivational, project-management and academic writing and skills development support. In my approach to this study, I needed to be aware of the boundaries of my roles both from the perspective of being a part-time doctoral candidate and a Student Learning Advisor. Therefore, my position within this study was that I was a novice researcher (Lovitts, 2008) who knew little about part-time doctoral candidates. I viewed my participants as the experts on their own experiences of undertaking doctoral studies. I shared the interview transcripts with the participants to help ascertain if I had accurately captured their experiences as also to provide participants with the opportunity to elaborate, clarify, edit or add further insights to their responses.

Findings from each stage of the research process were disseminated via conferences and peer-reviewed publications to different audiences including researchers, education practitioners and policy makers. The purpose of sharing the interim and final outputs from this research with various parties who were interested in and concerned with doctoral education was to make visible the research practices and modes of analysis which had contributed to the construction of knowledge for this study (Pillow, 2003). It was important to demonstrate awareness of how my own value judgements, experience, background and position within this research might influence how I approached the topic of part-time doctoral candidates' experiences of navigating the PhD journey. I sought to demonstrate self-awareness (Pillow, 2003) and ethical reflexivity by making explicit and visible the value judgements at each stage of the research (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2006). During this research I kept a learning log of my progress and experiences during the doctoral process, both as a part-time PhD candidate and as a researcher exploring the experiences of part-time PhD candidates to capture any learning, reflections and insights.

1.13. Contribution to existing research

The data generation instruments developed for this study provided a way to explore individual learner's experiences of pursuing a PhD beyond an assumption of the learner as located in the academic institution during candidature (Pearson et al., 2016). The role of personal agency (Archer, 2003) was explored in this study, via a semi-structured interview, to understand if individuals harnessed support and resources both inside and outside the academic institution (McAlpine et al., 2012) to advance with studies. This is in the context of potentially limited access to campus supports (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014) and communities, which has been reported as an aspect of the part-time doctoral learner's experience (Zahl, 2015). This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by adding the part-time doctoral learner's voice to discourse on individual learner's experience of navigating the PhD journey to completion.

1.14. Structure of the thesis

The structure of the thesis and brief description of the contents of each chapter is provided to guide the reader on navigating the research process and thesis.

1.14.1. Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of doctoral education, primarily based on an assumption of the full-time PhD candidate, prevalent in research, policy and practice, for example in higher education systems in Europe (European University Association, 2005; Hasgall et al., 2019), including Ireland. I discuss my academic and occupational background and I make a case, based on recommendations from researchers (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) for further studies on learners' experiences of navigating doctoral qualifications on a part-time basis.

1.14.2. Chapter 2: Background to the study

This chapter briefly describes the background to this study in the context of existing research, policies and practices within doctoral education which tend to address full-time learners' experiences.

The goal of this study in line with recommendations (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) was to conduct research on an under-researched body of learners (Bates & Goff, 2012; Neumann & Rodwell, 2009; Zahl, 2015) and to add to existing knowledge on the part-time learner's experiences of navigating a PhD to completion.

1.14.3. Chapter 3: Literature Review

This chapter presents themes identified as influencing doctoral candidates' experiences primarily based on assumptions of the full-time learner (Gardner, 2008), socialised (Weidman & Stein, 2003) and situated (Pearson et al., 2016) within the academic institution. The current study addressed a gap in existing research by investigating the factors which facilitated as well as

potentially challenged learners' experiences of undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis. The role of personal agency, which has been identified as influencing individual's experiences of undertaking doctoral qualifications (McAlpine et al., 2012), was explored in this study.

1.14.4. Chapter 4: Conceptual Chapter

This chapter discusses the theories and conceptual approaches that contributed to an understanding of various aspects of a learner's experiences. This included exploring ways to understand individual learner's experiences of demonstrating agency (Archer, 2003) and sourcing doctoral information and support (McAlpine et al., 2012) both inside and outside the academic institution via face-to-face, technology and document-based resources (Latour, 2005).

1.14.5. Chapter 5: Methodological Framework (Preliminary Study)

This chapter describes the initial phase of the study to develop the research tools (questionnaire and semi-structured interview). The findings from the preliminary study contributed to the identification of the sample group (individuals who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis) for the main study.

1.14.6. Chapter 6: Methodological Framework for the Main Study

Methodology and sampling for the main phase of the research is discussed including refinement of the research questions, method of analysis, research ethics and participant recruitment strategy. The main research study focused on the experiences of eighteen individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis in five different universities in Ireland. The chapter addresses the potential methodological issues. Post hoc rationalisation and potential retrospective evaluation of experiences was discussed in relation to the decision to focus on the experiences of learners who reflect on their experiences of completing a PhD, with the benefits of hindsight, versus a study based on the experiences of learners who were still in the process of undertaking doctoral pursuits. The chapter concludes with a presentation of background

information and demographic details (based on responses to the questionnaire) of the eighteen participants who completed a PhD on a part-time basis in the university sector in Ireland.

1.14.7. Chapter 7: Access to PhD programme information and supports from the university

This chapter discusses participants experiences of interacting with the academic institution during the doctoral process. The chapter presents the thematic analysis of the qualitative comments from the interviews which helped to illustrate the diversity of learners' experiences of accessing doctoral programme supports and information from the academic institution at different stages of the study process to completion. The chapter also presents a sample of four participants' narratives on navigating the PhD process to completion on a part-time basis. The stories from Elaine, Matthew, Sarah and Una (pseudonyms were provided for all participants) illustrates the variance in each person's account of demonstrating agency and seeking help from sources inside and outside the academic institution to progress with and complete the PhD qualification. Examples included seeking help within self-generated academic and peer-based networks (both face-to-face and online).

1.14.8. Chapter 8: Personal and employment factors which influenced doctoral progression

This chapter describes the thematic analysis of the qualitative comments from the interviews which demonstrated the diversity of learner's experiences and the uniqueness of each participant's account of progressing with and completing a PhD on a part-time basis. The position of the learner in relation to the employment environment, culture and work commitments was a key finding from this study. Personal factors, such as the role of family and friends, health and life events were identified by participants as impacting on the learner's experiences of pursuing the PhD. The findings illustrated the position of the learner within multiple environments and in the context of interaction with, or isolation from various personal,

employment and academic networks as influencing progression and completion of the doctoral process.

1.14.9. Chapter 9: Participants' reflections on completing a PhD on a part-time basis

This chapter presents insights and recommendations based on participants' experiences of navigating the PhD to completion on a part-time basis.

1.14.10. Chapter 10: Discussion

This chapter addresses the various factors that influenced individual participant's accounts of progressing with and completing the PhD on a part-time basis. The outcomes highlight the need to understand not just the position of the learner in relation to the academic institution during the doctoral process but also the individual's personal and employment situation, academic background as influencing doctoral progression and completion on a part-time basis.

1.14.11. Chapter 11: Conclusion

The chapter addresses the experiences of learners at a social and physical distance from campus but not enrolled on a distance learning programme, namely the completed part-time PhD learner. This study highlights the need to address inclusion and engagement at doctoral level beyond an emphasis on the characteristics of learners, for example, in terms of full-time, part-time, mature, and international student status to acknowledge the influence of the where learners are situated and what factors might influence progression with studies, for example employment and family/caring commitments (O'Regan, 2020b, 2021). Adopting a holistic understanding of doctoral learners' lives beyond the academic institution and campus-based environment, may help highlight the needs of individual candidates, in terms of factors which facilitate or impede access to programme-based supports and resources during the doctoral process to completion. Researchers recommend challenging assumptions around candidature, which are prevalent in discourse and research in doctoral education, for example assumptions of the learner as full-time, (Hopwood et al., 2011), socialised (Gardner, 2008) and situated in the

academic institution (Pearson et al., 2016). The recommendation to explore doctoral learners' experiences beyond normative assumptions of the full-time doctoral candidate situated within the campus-based environment, was reiterated throughout this thesis. The purpose of restating this recommendation throughout this research study was to emphasise the importance of understanding how the position of the learner (geographically, temporally and spatially) may potentially influence access to campus-based resources, supports and communities. While little is known about part-time doctoral learners, a commonly agreed understanding of this mode of candidature is in terms of the barriers learners can face to accessing campus-based research and personal networks in light of often conflicting occupational and personal commitments (Watts, 2008). This interpretation of the part-time doctoral candidate, namely in terms of absence from policy and practice (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) and from campus-life (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014) was emphasised throughout this thesis to emphasise the importance of adding the part-time learner's voice and experience to doctoral education discourse and reforms. A key aim of the current study was to understand individual learners' experiences of navigating the doctoral journey on a part-time basis.

1.14.12. Chapter 12: Personal Reflections and learning in a climate of COVID-19

This chapter offers a reflection on my own experiences as a part-time PhD candidate, yet also undertaking research on part-time doctoral learners' experiences. I also reflect on the experience of pursuing doctoral studies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I discuss the potential value of this study to learners at a distance from the academic campus, beyond the part-time PhD learners, who were originally envisaged as the beneficiaries of this study when I started this research in 2016.

1.15. Summary

This chapter established the rationale for exploring part-time learners' accounts of navigating the doctoral process in the context of limited research in this field. The primary aspect of the part-

time doctoral candidate's experiences, as agreed by researchers, is a tendency to have limited opportunities to access academic and supportive communities in the academic institution (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014). This has been primarily attributed to the fact that part-time doctoral learners often manage studies in the context of other work and personal commitments outside of the doctoral process (Watts, 2008). The next chapter in this thesis presents trends within doctoral education worldwide. Despite an absence from doctoral education policy and practice (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) a case is made for understanding part-time learner's experiences (Gardner, 2008) during different stages of progression (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Pifer & Baker, 2016) and completion of doctoral studies (Devos et al., 2017; Lovitts, 2008).

Chapter 2. Policy context and background to the study

2.1. Introduction to this chapter

Doctoral education has diversified over the last thirty years to include a greater variety of programmes and modes of study such as professional and practice-based qualifications as well as the traditional research-oriented doctorate (Park, 2005; Wildy et al., 2015). Trends in doctoral education include an increase in enrolments of doctoral candidates worldwide and diversity of learners including international (Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development, 2016b) and part-time students (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009). Doctoral education in policy and practice within higher education systems in Europe (European University Association, 2005), including Ireland, tends to recognise doctoral candidature in terms of the full-time PhD student who is pursuing doctoral qualifications over three to four years (Hasgall et al., 2019). According to Neumann and Rodwell (2009) part-time doctoral candidates have been described as absent from doctoral education policy and practice, despite an increase in enrolments worldwide. The purpose of this chapter is to contextualise the part-time doctoral candidate within the wider environment of doctoral trends and developments, particularly in relation to reforms within European Higher Education systems (European University Association, 2005, 2010, 2016) which has influenced policy and practice in Ireland (EUA Solutions, 2021). Typically doctoral candidature is understood in terms of the learner who is undertaking the doctoral qualification, namely a PhD, on a full-time basis, over the duration of three to four years (European University Association, 2016; Hasgall et al., 2019). Researchers recommend greater recognition of the needs of non-traditional, for example part-time doctoral candidates, (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012) when developing resources and supports for students (European University Institute, 2017; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014). As part of this chapter, I discuss definitions of the part-time PhD candidate and make a case for including part-time doctoral learners in discourse and reforms within doctoral education.

This chapter addresses the literature on the policy context for doctoral education and interpretations of doctoral candidature. A separate chapter (chapter 3) addresses literature and research pertinent to the experiences of part-time PhD learners and relevant to provision of resources and support to part-time PhD students. The Literature chapter (chapter 3) also addresses recent developments within doctoral education, which address the position of the doctoral research in relation to (or absence from) the physical and social environment of the academic institution. The approach to identifying the literature and key terms relevant to the part-time doctoral learner's experiences and rationale for structuring the section of the chapter for the Literature Review is addressed in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

The research on learners' experiences of navigating doctoral studies, detailed in Chapter 3, the Literature Review Chapter, was primarily sourced from peer-reviewed research articles accessed from databases and publications within the fields of Education, Psychology and Social Sciences. A review of the literature relating to both full and part-time doctoral students' experiences of pursuing doctoral studies was carried out using the following main databases; ERIC (Educational Resources Information Centre) on EBSCO host, JSTOR (multi-disciplinary and discipline specific journals) and PROQUEST (a database for unpublished doctoral theses - many of which are included in the ERIC database). The search was not narrowed by year of publication or time-frame with the intention of yielding the maximum results for research relating to part-time doctoral students. Over 200 journal peer-reviewed articles relating to doctoral students/doctoral studies were accessed from databases on the university library website.

No exclusion or inclusion criteria were applied to the literature search on studies which addressed part-time doctoral candidature for example by date, region or country where the research was conducted. The decision to conduct a comprehensive sweep of existing research addressing part-time doctoral learners' experiences at the outset of the study was to capture diverse perspectives from different countries and over different periods of time.

Additionally, I sought to ensure that this study acknowledged various dimensions of part-time doctoral candidature. Therefore, personal circumstances, employment responsibilities and learners' experiences of accessing doctoral programme resources and communities during the doctoral process are acknowledged in this study. A review of the literature, conducted at the outset and throughout this study, illustrated the limited body of research on learners' accounts of navigating the doctoral process on a part-time basis in comparison with studies on full-time doctoral candidature.

In addition to peer-reviewed articles, accessed via online university libraries and research repositories (such as ResearchGate) a further literature search was conducted to identify policy documents, statistical records and reports relevant to part-time learners' experiences of undertaking doctoral studies. Examples included guidelines and reports on international policy and practice within the field of doctoral education for example from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European University Association (EUA). Sources referred to in relation to developments in doctoral education policy, practice and discourse in Ireland included reports and statistical data on doctoral level enrolments and graduation rates from the Higher Education Authority and additional recommendations, for example from the Irish Universities Association (IUA) on training and development initiatives for doctoral students.

The results of the literature search support existing findings namely that the part-time student experience of doctoral studies tends to be under-researched compared to the full-time doctoral student experience. Researchers recommend further studies on the experiences of part-time doctoral candidates (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014 and Zahl, 2015). The current study addresses recommendations for further research on the experiences of individuals who pursued doctoral studies on a part-time basis.

The themes identified within existing research on part-time doctoral candidature are discussed in the Literature Review Chapter.

In accordance with recommendations from existing researchers (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014; Zahl, 2015) a case is made for undertaking further studies on learners' experiences of pursuing doctoral studies on a part-time basis and understanding part-time learners' stories and accounts of pursuing a PhD in their own terms and in their own words. In summary this chapter addresses environmental factors relevant to doctoral education policies and practices, which provides a background and context to understanding the literature and research relevant to doctoral candidature, support and resources and part-time candidature, which is addressed in detail in the Literature Review chapter.

2.2. Review of trends within doctoral education

According to Pearson (2005) the origins of the doctoral qualification can be traced back to Medieval Europe where knowledge was transferred between a novice and experienced scholar, in what is traditionally known as the 'master-apprenticeship' relationship, namely the recruitment and training of the doctoral candidate within the supervisory relationship (Baschung, 2016). According to (Kehm, 2006) the master-apprenticeship model is prevalent in higher education systems in European countries, despite the emergence of Graduate Schools and new forms of doctoral programmes and structures. In the nineteenth and twentieth century doctoral education underwent a series of reforms in Europe and the USA which resulted in a shift in emphasis from teaching and learning to more research-based activities (Pearson, 2005). These development in doctoral education need to be set within a broader set of structural and institutional developments which included the establishment of research institutions and the provision of various (e.g. national and international) funding initiatives to support research endeavours and greater recognition of research as a core activity within universities (Pearson, 2005). The process of doctoral education has diversified over the last thirty years and

researchers have identified multiple programme structures, modes of assessment and types of qualification (Park, 2005). This includes the traditional PhD, usually pursued by individuals seeking a career in academia to more practitioner-oriented programmes aimed at individuals concerned with transferring research into the professional or practice-based environment (Bao et al., 2018). Examples of programmes, which tend to emphasise the transfer of research into a practice-based rather than academic settings, include the Professional doctorate (Bourner et al., 2001), Clinical doctorate (Orme, 2002) and 'New Route PhD' (Bao et al., 2018; Park, 2005) which tends to place greater emphasis on structured training modules compared with the traditional PhD (Park, 2005).

Intertwined with these shifts has been the growth in demand for doctoral education worldwide, which has been largely driven by labour market demands for highly skilled workers who can generate new knowledge and innovative practices within academia and other sectors (Bao et al., 2018). According to Loxley and Kearns (2018) the doctoral degree has increasingly become the entry level qualification for many roles within academic, professional and industrial settings. Based on a study of employment destinations of (11,000) PhD graduates in Ireland researchers, O'Brien (2015) found an increase in PhD graduates working in industry rather than academia over the decade from 2000-2010. Statistics for 2016/2017 (Higher Education Authority, 2018c) reported the main sectors for employment of doctoral holders in Ireland were within higher education (41%) and non-market services (65%) including public sector roles. The findings support evidence of the growth in demand for doctoral holders in employment sectors within and beyond academia (Loxley & Kearns, 2018; Wildy et al., 2015).

Park (2005) recommends greater emphasis on research skills and training within PhD programmes, beyond the traditional academic apprenticeship, to enhance transfer of research skills and graduate competencies into work-based and professional settings. Thune et al. (2012) recommend that institutions recognise the needs of different learners when developing

research-based and generic skills training to consider the different employment environments the doctoral holder may be working in, including, academic, clinical, advisory and management roles. These findings have implications for the value that institutions place on training and development of employability skills as part of doctoral programmes.

2.3. New forms of doctoral education programmes

The Professional doctorate has emerged as an alternative to the conventional PhD to meet the needs of the knowledge economy beyond the traditional academic environment. According to Servage (2009) there has been an increase in enrolments in Professional doctorates, particularly in Australia, the USA and the UK. Newer modes of doctoral qualifications tend to place greater emphasis on training and coursework and different modes of assessment within the programme (Orme, 2002) in comparison with the traditional PhD, where the main output is usually the thesis (European University Institute, 2017) which is often up to 100,000 words.

Alternatively, some institutions have a maximum page number requirement, for example 250 pages (European University Institute, 2017). The Professional doctorate tends to be designed based on an assumption that the learner is working while undertaking the doctoral programme and managing the study process in conjunction with other employment responsibilities (Wildy et al., 2015), which may make this mode of doctoral programme appealing to part-time learners. According to Wildy et al. (2015), a Professional doctorate that is designed with the needs of the learners in mind, for example scheduling of contact time, course-work, assignments and assessments, tends to be attractive to “time poor and experience-rich” (Wildy et al., 2015 p77) individuals. A feature of the Professional doctorate is often the recruitment of candidates as a cohort for the duration of the programme (Bourner et al., 2001). Professional doctorates are similar to the doctoral model in the USA, with the emphasis on taught modules and, usually, a reduced dissertation in contrast to the traditional PhD, which is primarily assessed and examined based on the dissertation (Wildy et al., 2015). Professional doctorate programmes are not

prevalent in Europe, compared to enrolment levels in Australia, the USA (Servage, 2009), Iceland and China (Wildy et al., 2015) with the exception of the following countries Belgium (Flemish community), Denmark and Ireland (European Commission, EACEA, & Eurydice, 2015). In general doctoral education policy and practice in European higher education systems is understood as referring to the PhD qualification, usually undertaken on a full-time basis over the duration of three-to four years from start to completion (Hasgall et al., 2019) which may explain lower levels of enrolment on Professional doctorates in Europe in comparison with other countries. Unlike the PhD, which tends to be aimed at individuals who aspire to a career as a researcher, for example within an academic institution, or possibly within another sector, the Professional doctorate is often designed to meet the needs of learners who are often already established within their careers or professions (Wildy et al., 2015). The purpose of the Professional doctorate is to transfer the learning and research outputs into the workplace, professional or practice-based setting (Wildy et al., 2015) versus the PhD which focuses on developing theory and research within an academic context.

2.4. Differences in governance and doctoral education structures

Researchers have identified challenges to comparing doctoral education systems across institutions and countries, primarily due to variance in systems of governance, policy drivers and programmes structures (Kehm, 2006). For example, doctoral education in the USA (Kehm, 2006) and Canada (Andres et al., 2015) tends to be decentralised and responsibility for implementing national initiatives is shared between various governing bodies (Andres et al., 2015; Kehm, 2006). Doctoral education in the USA tends to emphasise training and coursework often within the setting of a Graduate School or programme (Andres et al., 2015). In China priorities within doctoral education reforms include an emphasis on quality control, regulations and assessment (Bao et al., 2018). Doctoral education policy in Europe and practice are based on shared guidelines (European University Association, 2005, 2010, 2016) which emphasise quality and comparability of programme structures and systems across different higher education systems

(González Geraldo et al., 2011). According to Kivistö, Pekkola, and Siekkinen (2017) doctoral education policy and practice in European higher education systems promotes autonomy and self-governance at a local level to allow individual academic institutions to identify strategic goals and to capitalise on unique research strengths and priorities. Although policies, practices, governance systems and structures may vary within and across different higher education systems, a common trend across is the growth in enrolments in doctoral level programmes worldwide (Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development, 2016b). Additionally, there is an increase in international (Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development, 2016b) and part-time doctoral candidates (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009). Potentially academic institutions may experience challenges in providing academic support and resources to a growing and increasingly diverse population of doctoral level learners.

2.5. Participation rates in doctoral education worldwide

Participation in doctoral programmes has increased internationally over the last two decades. According to a report from the Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development (2019) there were 276,000 doctoral holders in OECD countries in 2017, which reflects an 8% increase in doctoral graduates between 2013-2017. Doctoral education in Europe shows diverse patterns of enrolment (Hasgall et al., 2019) with high levels of participation in Germany (n=111,409) to modest numbers of doctoral candidates in countries with lower population rates such as Luxembourg (n=309) and Malta (113). According to recent statistics international candidates account for a quarter of doctoral enrolments in OECD countries (Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development, 2016b). The increasing levels of students on doctoral programmes, including international (European University Association, 2016) and part-time candidates (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014; Zahl, 2015), can present challenges for academic institutions in terms of providing resources and services to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse body of learners (European University Institute, 2017).

2.6. Diversity of learners within doctoral education programmes

Researchers are increasingly acknowledging a shift in enrolments from traditional doctoral candidates (Gardner, 2008) who have been defined as male, white, full-time, and young, for example under 30 years of age (Hopwood et al., 2011) to a different type of learner. This includes ethnically diverse (Gardner, 2008; Jones, 2013), female (Maher et al., 2004), part-time (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) and mature doctoral candidates (Wildy et al., 2015). According to the a report from the Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development (2019) the median age for entry to doctoral level programmes is 29 years of age and 60% of doctoral candidates are aged between 26 and 37 across OECD countries. Women represented 47% of doctoral graduates in 2017 (Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development, 2019), predominantly in non-Science versus Science-based fields. Based on an analysis of doctoral graduation rates in Europe from 2004 Meri (2007) found a variance in representation of males and females within different fields of study. Women tended to be under-represented within Science and Engineering (at undergraduate and postgraduate as well as doctoral level) and had high levels of participation at doctoral level within Education (Maher et al., 2004) and Health Studies.

The European Council for Doctoral Education (CDE) recommend that higher education institutions develop policies that recognise the increased diversity of doctoral candidates in terms of age, country of origin and experience (European University Association, 2016). It is important that institutions provide support and resources to meet the needs of individual students, which includes facilitating opportunities for learners to participate and engage meaningfully in institutional and doctoral research cultures (European University Association, 2016). Based on an evaluation of doctoral education policy and practice in Australia, Pearson (2005) recommends greater acknowledgement of the diversity of doctoral candidates and complexity of contexts where doctoral education is situated, including industry or research-based settings as well as within the traditional campus based environment. Pearson (2005)

recommends further studies which consider how human agency (at the individual level) in the context of interaction with different stakeholders at various levels of (e.g., policy-level, governmental and institutional) can influence learners' experiences of navigating the doctoral journey. Little is known about part-time learners' accounts of accessing support, resources and communities during the doctoral process, which is typically framed in terms of challenges to availing of supports and participating research communities (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Zahl, 2015). The next section discusses part-time candidature within the wider context of reforms in policy, practice and discourse within doctoral education.

2.7. Part-time learners within doctoral education

Increased diversity of doctoral candidates in terms of country of origin, age and experience has promoted greater emphasis on ensuring academic institutions have transparent admission policies to recognise different aspects of research talent (European University Association, 2016). However, in the main, doctoral education is understood in the context of supporting the full-time doctoral researcher into the faculty or department within the academic institution (Weidman & Stein, 2003). Full-time candidature tends to be recognised as the accepted mode of doctoral enrolment (European University Institute, 2017) and is widely recognised as the standard model of candidature within doctoral education systems in most European countries (Hasgall et al., 2019). Part-time doctoral enrolments have increased worldwide, however, this mode of candidature has been described as invisible in policy, practice (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) and campus life (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014). Part-time candidates account for 19% of all enrolments at doctoral level in Ireland (Higher Education Authority, 2018c).

National Policy Frameworks have been criticised for failing to acknowledge the diversity of doctoral candidates (Hopwood et al., 2011). Examples include basing curricula and funding mechanisms on the assumption of the researcher as full-time, geographically mobile, with

limited previous employment experience or personal and family commitments (Hopwood et al., 2011). Researchers suggest that the goal of providing part-time doctoral learners with opportunities to enhance research and critical thinking through participation in research communities may be challenging for academic institutions (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014; Zahl, 2015). Part-time doctoral candidates tend to have limited opportunities to avail of academic support and community within the academic institution due to often combining employment and personal responsibilities with doctoral studies (Watts, 2008). Researchers have acknowledged that, due to scarcity of resources and personnel, some academic institutions may experience challenges to providing equity of access to doctoral training and support for both full and part-time candidates (European University Institute, 2017).

2.8. Value of part-time doctoral candidates to academic institutions

Part-time doctoral candidates have been described as often more mature in years and employment experience (Wildy et al., 2015) than, for example, full-time students who have progressed to doctoral studies straight from undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications (Evans, 2002). Researchers recommend greater acknowledgement of the value that part-time doctoral candidates can potentially bring to a research community in terms of a richness of perspective gained from life and work experience (Evans, 2002). Additionally, part-time doctoral candidates can be less resource intensive than their full-time peers, due to a tendency to spend less time on campus than their full-time peers. Also part-time candidates can be a valuable source of income for academic institutions due to a tendency to self-fund doctoral pursuits (Evans, 2002). Researchers have criticised doctoral policy (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) and research funding mechanisms as largely aimed at full-time candidates. Bates and Goff (2012) suggest further research on the value of part-time students' research to the knowledge economy, due to the increase in students enrolling in doctoral programmes on a part-time-basis. Despite the limited body of research on part-time learners' experiences of navigating doctoral studies, certain themes have been identified which merit further examination. These include

further exploration of part-time learners' experiences of accessing programme-based and personal support and resources during the doctoral process, and greater recognition of the potential benefits that part-time doctoral researchers can bring to employment and practice-based environments and to academic institutions and research communities. Non-completion and high drop-out rates on doctoral programmes have been identified as a concern by policy-makers and educators worldwide (Kehm, 2006). The next section addresses the cost of attrition, at doctoral level, both to academic institutions and individuals (Park, 2007) and highlights the need for academic institutions to provide targeted support to learners at different stages of the research process (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011) to completion (Lovitts, 2008).

2.9. Completion and retention rates within doctoral education

Non-completion of doctoral studies has been identified as a concern within different education systems worldwide (Kehm, 2006). According to Park (2007) potential consequences of non-completion or late completion of doctoral studies include waste of finances, time and resources, which may include damage to personal or institutional reputation for example when external funding has been secured to carry out the research. Based on an analysis of non-completion of doctoral studies in the USA (Litalien, 2015) reported that 40% - 50% of candidates never finish their programme and that the decision to drop out can occur at different stages across the doctoral process. Researchers (Elgar, 2003; Elgar & Klein, 2004) recommend the establishment of a national database in the USA to record time to completion and completion statistics. According to Kehm (2006) drop-out rates are less widely known in Europe than in the USA. A lack of systematic approach to data collection or shared definitions of terms such as drop-out, completion and time to completion was identified as a problem by higher education institutions in Europe, Australia and the USA (Vossensteyn et al., 2015).

The issue of completion times has been addressed within guidelines for best practice in doctoral programmes within European higher education systems (European University Association,

2005). Examples include clearly defined timeframes for both full-time (typically three to four years) and part-time (typically five to six years) doctoral programmes. However, difficulties in calculating completion statistics for part-time doctoral candidates is compounded by a lack of clear definition of part-time status within and across different higher education systems. Part-time enrolment status can be defined based on different criteria in different academic institutions (Irish Survey of Student Engagement, 2018) such as full-time equivalency, number of modules completed (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). Additionally, part-time candidature can include candidates who move between full and part-time enrolment status at various stages of the doctoral process (Watts, 2008).

2.10. Addressing retention and completion within doctoral programmes

Differences within the structure and culture of disciplines (Golde, 2005), socialisation of the doctoral candidates into the wider context of the academic institution and the regulatory framework of the doctoral process (McAlpine et al., 2012) have been found to influence doctoral progression and attrition. In a study exploring non-completion within doctoral programmes (Golde, 2000) found that students' awareness about the explicit requirements of the doctoral programme and the impact of the doctoral culture within the department influenced learners' decisions around persisting with, or leaving, doctoral programmes.

While acknowledging that policies and practices may potentially vary in terms of impact or interpretation in different departments within the university, Golde (2005) recommends that institutions should review doctoral programmes to revise any outmoded or obsolete customs and, potentially, to mitigate against a culture of institutional neglect (Castelló, Pardo, Sala-Bubaré, & Suñe-Soler, 2017; McAlpine et al., 2012). In general, academic institutions are encouraged to manage doctoral programmes at the local, namely institutional level, in order to harness unique institutional strengths and align research activities with strategic goals (Kivistö et al., 2017). However, different practices and interpretations of enrolment status (Watts, 2008)

within doctoral programme structures and systems in different countries makes it difficult to make comparisons between institutions, in terms of progression and completion rates (Kehm, 2006).

Despite various interpretations of (e.g. full and part-time) enrolment status (Irish Survey of Student Engagement, 2018) and different methods of calculating completion rates across education systems (Kehm, 2006) researchers tend to agree on the importance of socialisation of the doctoral candidate within the discipline and institution as influencing academic progression and quality of the learner's experience (Jones, 2013; Weidman & Stein, 2003). Based on a study of 742 doctoral candidates across 5 universities in Spain (Castelló et al., 2017) the most frequent reason cited by participants for contemplating dropping out of studies included problems with socialisation in the institution and challenges resulting from balancing studies with employment. Gardner (2008) recommends moving beyond models of socialisation to explore and understand non-traditional, including, part-time learners' experiences of pursuing doctoral studies. The next section addresses developments over the last two decades within European higher education systems (European Higher Education Area, 1999), including reforms within doctoral level programmes (European University Association, 2005, 2010, 2016). This section provides a context for understanding the developments within doctoral education in Ireland which is influenced by European guidelines (EUA Solutions, 2021; Irish Universities' Association, 2015; Irish Universities Association, 2015). Doctoral candidature in Ireland tends to refer to a student undertaking a PhD on a full-time basis rather than alternative modes of doctoral enrolment and programmes, for example part-time candidature or Professional and practice-based doctorates.

2.11. Reforms within doctoral education policy and practice in Europe

Education policy in Europe is underpinned by the shared guidelines of a large network of more than 250 academic institutions across different countries (Hasgall et al., 2019). Reforms within higher education in Europe have largely been driven by the Bologna Process (European Higher

Education Area, 1999) which involves intergovernmental collaboration between 48 countries in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Priorities within higher education policies and practices in Europe, as outlined within the Bologna Process (European Higher Education Area, 1999) include, a focus on quality assurance and comparability of programmes and qualifications across countries to promote mobility of staff, students and graduates (European Commission, 2020) between different institutions and education systems. Key outcomes from the Bologna Process (European Higher Education Area, 1999) include increased transparency and accountability within educational programmes and an adoption of the three-cycle qualification system (Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral qualifications) across countries (González Geraldo et al., 2011). As part of the Bologna Process, doctoral education was incorporated into the Educational Framework for Qualifications in 2005 and into the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning in 2008 (Elmgrem, Forsberg, Lindberg-Sand, & Sonesson, 2016). The goal of reforms was to enhance quality, comparability and standards to advance European doctoral education and research as outlined in the 'Salzburg Principles' (European University Association, 2005, 2010, 2016). Supporting doctoral candidates to generate new knowledge and contribute to academic, economic and social reform has been identified as a core strategy within higher education policy in Europe (European University Association, 2016). According to researchers 95% of higher education institutes in Europe have implemented the three cycle (Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate level) degree structure (Sursock & Smidt, 2010).

2.12. Reforms within doctoral programmes and structures in Europe

Progress in the implementation of the Salzburg Principles within academic institutions in Europe and identification of further actions and priorities for doctoral education was outlined in two reports published over the last decade. The first report 'Salzburg II Recommendations' (European University Association, 2010) addressed reforms within doctoral education, primarily in the context of institutional structures, for example enhanced transparency, accountability and research outputs, which were addressed through the provision of more structured training in

doctoral programmes and research environments. A report produced by the European University Association (2016) 'Doctoral Education: Taking Salzburg Forward' outlined the progress made by Europe's universities in terms of establishing diverse doctoral organisational structures and supports to ensure open and inclusive research environments while acknowledging the challenges faced within doctoral education due to external influences such as increased globalisation and technology. Researchers have recognised the potential benefits that digital technologies can offer in terms of enhancing access to education for different learners (Fumasoli, 2019) which includes learners with limited access to the academic institution during studies including students on distance-based programmes (Andrew, 2012). Online doctoral discussion groups, blogs and email communication have been identified as valuable for enhancing a sense of belonging and access to programme-based resources for individuals who pursued doctoral programmes on a part-time basis (O'Regan, 2021).

However, researchers have identified the challenges of supporting a growing and diverse body of doctoral level candidates at an institutional level in terms of providing equity of access to resources and services for part-time as full-time students (European University Institute, 2017).

Developments within doctoral education include a greater emphasis on structure and comparability of programmes, for example through the inclusion of a curricular element to doctoral courses (Baschung, 2016). Comparability of doctoral programmes has been addressed via greater emphasis on coursework and formal assessment. Credit bearing modules are recognised on a European level and can facilitate movement of learners between one higher education system in Europe and another (González Geraldo et al., 2011). An updated review of reforms within doctoral education in Europe (Hasgall et al., 2019) was carried out five years after the ARDE (Accountable Research for Doctoral Education) project (Byrne, Jorgenson, & Loukkola, 2013) was completed. The updated review (Hasgall et al., 2019) was based on responses from 292 institutions with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The recent report (Hasgall et

al., 2019) identified trends such as increased emphasis on quality control, 88% of respondents had external and internal quality control systems for doctoral education compared to 74% of respondents in 2013 (Byrne et al., 2013). According to Byrne et al. (2013) there was an increase in the number of doctoral schools and greater emphasis on structure within doctoral education programmes and 69% of respondents reported mandatory course work on all doctoral programmes within schools and programmes. Hasgall et al. (2019) recommend that academic institutions assess how quality and evaluation mechanisms can be used to add value and improve doctoral education.

As well as reforms within programmes new forms of doctoral structures and arrangements have evolved. Graduate Schools can help to foster individual researchers and meet the needs of a group of learners within a shared environment (Elmgrem et al., 2016). According to Elmgrem et al. (2016) the success of Graduate Schools tends to be influenced by the extent to which doctoral organisations are integrated into the university's research mission and goals.

Variance within and across institutions in terms of structure, size of modules and modes of assessment makes it difficult to compare different doctoral programmes and practices (Hasgall et al., 2019; Kehm, 2010). Elmgrem et al. (2016) recommend further studies into quality assurance practices within doctoral education, which tend to be under researched compared to studies exploring quality assurance at undergraduate level. Varwell (2018) recommends that institutions seek feedback from a diverse body of learners, such as online and postgraduate learners, as well as traditional undergraduates, when seeking to enhance teaching, learning and assessment procedures.

2.13. Structure and stages of the doctoral process

Doctoral education differs from other undergraduate and postgraduate programmes within higher education systems in European countries, which tend to include a structured programme of modules and assessment embedded within a curriculum (González Geraldo et al., 2011). The

goal of doctoral education is for the candidate to undertake and generate research which makes an original contribution to knowledge (European University Association, 2005, 2010, 2016). The main form of assessment within the PhD is usually based on the production of a written thesis and the effective defence of the research and thesis by the candidate in an oral viva examination (European University Institute, 2017). The doctoral process can be understood as a trajectory of learning in which the candidate goes through the transition from dependent student (for example undertaking and completing coursework at the early stages of the process) to a fully-fledged independent researcher (Lovitts, 2008). Typical stages of the doctoral process include early-stage induction and coursework, mid-stage assessment and progression and final stage (viva) examination and submission of the thesis (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011). The fact that the doctoral candidate is required to advance beyond a prescribed curriculum and is assessed based on the successful defence of the thesis and evidence of an original contribution to existing knowledge can be challenging for many learners (Kearns, Gardiner, & Marshall, 2008). According to Lovitts (2008) individuals who are good at completing coursework may not necessarily be skilled at undertaking research as an independent scholar. Therefore, successfully undertaking doctoral research and completing the doctoral qualification differs from other modes of undergraduate and postgraduate education, which often tend to be assessed within the context of a prescribed curriculum (González Geraldo et al., 2011). Researchers suggest that doctoral candidates face various challenges which require distinct types of information and support at different stages of the doctoral process from induction to completion (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Lovitts, 2008; Pifer & Baker, 2016).

2.14. Doctoral programme information and support

Researchers (Devos et al., 2017) suggest that a clearly defined research project not impeded by frustrations or setbacks has been found to influence progression and completion of doctoral studies. According to a study evaluating doctoral education and careers in the USA (Golde & Dore, 2001) found, based on (4,114) survey responses that students reported a lack of

understanding of what doctoral studies entailed, how it worked or how to navigate the process. Researchers (Gardner, 2010) found that doctoral candidates have cited a lack of clarity in relation to programmatic structure, guidelines and deadlines. Disciplinary and departmental context can influence doctoral candidates' experiences (Golde, 2005). Environments where students were given clear expectations on roles and responsibilities within the doctoral process, coupled with opportunities for social and academic interaction with others were identified as a positive influence on the quality of the learner's experience (Gardner, 2010). Lower completing departments had less favourable reports of providing a supportive environment than high completing doctoral environments (Gardner, 2010). According to Gardner (2010) non-traditional learners, such as international doctoral candidates reported the need to demonstrate greater self-reliance and agency in terms of dealing with language and cultural difficulties in low completing departments whereas greater cultural support was identified as a feature of high completing departments.

Interaction with peers and a clear understanding of the faculty's expectations of the student was found to increase persistence with doctoral studies for non-traditional learners (Fitzpatrick, 2013). The findings highlight the significant role the learner plays in taking responsibility for their learning experience, for example seeking out information on course requirements and understanding what the doctoral programme entails. However, researchers recommend greater emphasis on duty of care at the institutional level in terms of addressing relational as well as regulatory aspects of the doctoral process rather than placing the onus for progression and completion on the individual learner (McAlpine et al., 2012).

2.15. Doctoral programme cultures and disciplines

Some doctoral programme settings may be more conducive to fostering communication and interaction between doctoral candidates than others (Christensen & Lund, 2014; Golde, 2005). Researchers recommend further analysis of the role of the discipline and academic department

as potentially influencing attrition of doctoral candidates (Gardner, 2010). Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) disciplines tend to have a high proportion of part-time learners in comparison with other disciplines for example within the Sciences (Bourke, Holbrook, Lovatt, & Dally, 2004). Therefore, academic departments and disciplines which have been identified as tending to attract high levels of part-time doctoral candidates, such as Education (Maher et al., 2004) may need to make concerted efforts to address social and academic engagement for part-time learners, who have been identified as potentially requiring different resources to their full-time peers (European University Institute, 2017).

2.16. Supporting part-time doctoral candidates

The previous sections within this chapter addressed developments and priorities within doctoral programmes which have been articulated in policy and practice (European University Association, 2016) including the importance of providing opportunities for the doctoral candidate to access research support and socialise within academic and peer networks (Gardner, 2008). Part-time learners who were not in a cohort based doctoral programme identified a lack of availability of campus resources after normal business hours (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012).

Students on Professional doctorates tend to be recruited within a cohort, often on a part-time basis, which can provide participants with opportunities to develop peer networks (Bourner et al., 2001). In contrast, part-time PhD candidature is not associated with opportunities to participate in peer-networks. Recommendations to improve support for students include recognising the role that Student Services can play in providing academic and pastoral support to alleviate stress for postgraduates and students with families (Sursock, 2015).

To address the social and academic needs of non-traditional learners Gardner and Gopaul (2012) suggest that institutions expand pastoral and academic support services to facilitate learners with limited access to the campus environment during business hours. Researchers recommend reframing doctoral education beyond a focus on the candidate as situated within a discipline or

departmental setting to acknowledge the role of student agency and position of the learner in the context of multiple influences, actors and networks at different policy, institutional and department levels (Pearson, 2005). Digital technologies may potentially facilitate access to a wide range of learners across different physical, temporal and geographical locations (Fumasoli, 2019). Potentially digital technologies and resources could enhance access to doctoral programme information and communities for learners at a physical distance from the academic institution, for example part-time doctoral candidates (O'Regan, 2020a). Educational policies should recognise the potential of virtual learning to support education for individuals who experience challenges in terms of accessing the campus environment (Gavan & Anderson, 2012). Gavan and Anderson (2012) proposed exploring how web-based environments can be used to enhance social interaction for remote learners, underpinned by clear institutional guidelines, while ensuring that the virtual learning environment is supported using appropriate technologies and web-based tools.

In general Education has been traditionally understood as a human-centred discipline (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010). Communication and social interaction between academic staff and doctoral students, often within the disciplinary or department setting, has been identified as key to learners' experiences of navigating the doctoral process (Weidman & Stein, 2003).

The role of the supervisor has been recognised as a significant influence on the individual's experiences of undertaking doctoral studies (Jones, 2013; Lee, 2008; Pyhältö, Vekkaila, & Keskinen, 2015). In general existing research has addressed the supervisor/student relationship based on an understanding of the doctoral candidate as full-time (Lee, 2008; Pyhältö et al., 2015). In contrast to full-time candidature little is known about part-time learners' experiences of navigating the doctoral process.

2.17. Doctoral supervision

Reforms within doctoral education include an increased emphasis on formal training, monitoring and accountability within the supervision process (Halse, 2011). According to Loxley and Kearns (2018) the conditions of supervision are not always clear, and regulations vary from country to country and within institutions. Kivistö et al. (2017) have highlighted the tendency for academic institutions to increase the level of doctoral enrolments and to encourage academic staff and departments to reduce time to completion and increase the number of doctoral degrees awarded, to enhance the reputation and research profile of the higher education institution. Potentially, it could be argued, that the increased levels of enrolments at doctoral level, coupled with an emphasis on timely completion could put pressure in terms of workload on individual supervisors. Based on an evaluation of supervision practices over the last 20 years in Australia, Netherlands, Sweden and the UK Bastalich (2017) recommends greater emphasis on the context and content of learning and suggests a move away from the traditional interpretation of the supervisor as bearing responsibility for research outputs.

McAlpine (2014) recommends that doctoral supervision is recognised as a collective responsibility at an institutional level and not just understood as falling within the remit of individual members of academic staff. Lee (2008) identified aspects of supervision styles as influencing the learner's doctoral journey. Examples include the adoption of a more pastoral and supportive versus a project management style or acting in the role of mentor to empower the learner versus adopting a more hands-off *laissez faire* approach to supervision. Lee (2008) acknowledged the potential power dynamic which can exist within the supervisor/supervisee relationship, namely where the supervisor has the power to facilitate or impede the learner's access to research communities and personal development opportunities. According to Guerin, Kerr, and Green (2015) supervisors' approaches to supporting learners are strongly influenced and informed by their own experiences of being supervised as doctoral candidates and

recognition of these personal influences should be taken onto account when designing training programmes for supervisors.

Blaj-Ward (2011) suggests that generic training skills are embedded within doctoral programmes to offer training and development opportunities for learners, in addition to the support provided within the context of the supervisor/student relationship. Formal skills training may be particularly valuable for learners who work on a solitary basis on individual research projects, which is more typical in Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) disciplines than within the sciences. Based on an evaluation of quality within doctoral education in different European countries within the ARDE (Accountable Research for Doctoral Education) project Byrne et al. (2013) recommend that institutions combine the benefits of the apprenticeship model of supervision with the advantages of greater structure and support within a research environment in the institution, to facilitate candidates to progress with and complete doctoral studies.

2.18. Supervision of non-traditional doctoral candidates

Supervisors have identified challenges in developing ongoing communication and interaction with part-time doctoral candidates, who often spend less time in the academic institution than their full-time peers (Watts, 2008). Factors which have been found to enhance supervision of distance learners include the use of technology to develop dynamic communication and interaction and to provide timely feedback for the learner (Andrew, 2012). Effective use of digital technologies to support supervision of distance learners may mitigate against students' experiences of social isolation and limited interaction and engagement within the academic institution (Andrew, 2012).

In a review of student satisfaction with supervision on doctoral programmes within a distance setting Erichsen, Bolliger, and Halupa (2014) found that learners who experienced a blended (e.g., face-to-face and online) experience of supervision reported higher levels of satisfaction than learners who had a wholly online experience of supervision during the study process.

Potentially online communication mechanisms and resources could be explored as way to provide supervision and to support learners with limited access to the academic institution, such as part-time doctoral candidates.

2.19. Student engagement and quality assurance

Recommendations from the European University Association (2016) include fostering inclusive research environments and ensuring that individual supervisors and doctoral candidates are engaged in dialogue and consulted on issues concerned with reforming doctoral programmes. However, disparity across doctoral structures, supports and offerings within universities has been acknowledged (European University Association, 2016). Management in academic institutions are encouraged to promote inclusive research communities by providing research, training and development activities across the university rather than concentrating activities and resources around specific schools or groups of doctoral students (European University Association, 2016).

Researchers (Elmgrem et al., 2016) have commented that doctoral education has not been subject to the same levels of external scrutiny, in terms of quality assessment, as degrees at other levels of the academic cycle. The recommendations for taking doctoral education forward (European University Association, 2016) suggest that the voice of the doctoral candidate is included in dialogue on good practice within doctoral education. The aspiration of ensuring that doctoral candidates are included in dialogue on best practice and reforms in doctoral education (European University Association, 2016) may not reflect a diversity of learners' experiences if only one voice, for example the full-time learner's perspective, is recognised. Varwell (2018) recommends that the scope of student engagement in quality assurance processes is elaborated beyond the undergraduate population to include online and postgraduate students. To date, part-time candidates tend to have had limited influence on policy, practice and reforms within doctoral education (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009). The next section will examine how part-time

enrolment status is understood within doctoral education policy and practice in Europe. Part-time doctoral candidature appears to be interpreted as an accommodation to learners who may require greater flexibility in terms of time to completion, beyond the traditional three-to-four-year full-time qualification.

2.20. The part-time doctoral researcher within policy and practice in Europe

Early communication outlined within the Salzburg Principles for doctoral education, (European University Association, 2005) acknowledged diversity of candidates in terms of age, employment status and personal circumstances. This included recognition of the fact that there are candidates who may require greater flexibility in terms of duration of doctoral studies, for example on a part-time basis and over a longer period of enrolment than the recommended three to four year (full-time) doctoral programme. It was recognised that some candidates may require greater flexibility in terms of mode of enrolment and duration of doctoral studies, for example in the case of individuals already established within a career prior to undertaking doctoral studies, or alternatively where individuals decide to undertake studies either at a later stage in life, or whilst engaged with other work or personal commitments (European University Association, 2005).

Since the establishment of the Salzburg Principles, outlining ten guidelines for best practice within doctoral education (European University Association, 2005) recognition of the needs of the part-time learner, in terms of flexibility of duration of candidature, has not been reflected in more recent communications and developments within doctoral education. Between 2005 (European University Association, 2005) and 2016 (European University Association, 2016) duration of doctoral candidature has consistently been recognised as full-time over the duration of three to four years from start to completion, which is acknowledged as the accepted mode of candidature in European higher education systems (Hasgall et al., 2019). Therefore, part-time enrolment status tends to be a dispensation to individual researchers whose circumstances do

not facilitate the pursuit of a PhD on a full-time basis, rather than recognised as a distinctive mode of candidature. Researchers recommend further research into part-time learners' experiences of undertaking doctoral studies (Zahl, 2015) to shed light on the factors which influence satisfaction, persistence and completion (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014; Neumann & Rodwell, 2009; Rodwell & Neumann, 2008).

Defining part-time student status, in general, at undergraduate as well as postgraduate level has been identified as challenging, due to multiple interpretations and terms which can be used interchangeably or have different meanings depending on the context (Irish Universities Association, 2020a). The consensus arrived at by the working group for part-time and flexible students in Ireland, in terms of conceptualising part-time student status was that part-time enrolments tended to refer to "An '*othering*' approach to non-full-time-provision"(Irish Universities Association, 2020a p1). The working group for reforming supports and resources for part-time and flexible students in Ireland recommended that student status should be understood in terms of "a student is a student is a student" (Irish Universities Association, 2020a p1). The next section outlines trends and priorities in higher education systems, policies and practices in Ireland with a focus on developments within doctoral education in Ireland over the last decade.

2.21. Drivers for change within doctoral education worldwide including Ireland

The increase in demand and provision of doctoral programmes worldwide since the 1990s is largely driven by a recognition of the contribution of Research and Development capabilities and highly skilled workers to prosperity, competitiveness and economic growth (Nerad, 2010). This includes countries with established traditions of doctoral education, such as Germany. More recently, since the 1990s, Asian countries are developing and offering programmes to doctoral level learners (Nerad, 2010). In recent years there has been a tendency to place a greater emphasis on employability as well as research skills, for example communication, networking,

problem-solving and team-working skills (Irish Universities Association, 2015) to meet the growing demand for researchers in different sectors (Loxley & Kearns, 2018) including industry, business, government and not-for-profit enterprises.

There is a greater emphasis on professional development and communication within doctoral education (Bao et al., 2018; Park, 2005). Additionally, there is an increased focus on structured training in programmes, to help learners to develop research skills and prepare doctoral graduates for employment in various sectors (Nerad, 2010). Despite differences in doctoral education systems and practices in East and West, common aspects associated with a research doctorate include the recognition that a research doctorate should make a contribution to knowledge through original research and that the doctoral process should recognise the importance of transferable (for example communication and academic writing skills) as well as research-based skills training within programme structures (Nerad, 2010). The next section outlines key trends, policies and priorities within higher education systems in Ireland which includes a growth in levels of participation and diversity of candidature, for example an increase in enrolments of part-time doctoral students.

2.22. Background and context of higher education in Ireland

According to Walsh (2014) higher education in Ireland has undergone significant growth in enrolments over the last fifty years from a sector dominated by a small number of traditional academic institutions including technical schools and teacher training colleges to a complex system of over 40 institutions. The influence of international and European policy and trends, coupled with structural reforms and increased diversity and growth in student enrolments has had a significant impact on higher education systems and policies in Ireland (Walsh, 2014).

Priorities at a policy level include the goal of maintaining the quality and competitiveness of the higher education sector in Ireland (Higher Education Authority, 2017a) in the context of reduced public funding and high student to staff ratios (Department of Education and Skills, 2011).

According to Walsh and Loxley (2015) proposed reforms in higher education in Ireland have been dominated by financial and economic concerns and have been strongly influenced by European policy objectives. 'The National Strategy for Higher Education 2030' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) known informally as: 'The Hunt Report', named after Colin Hunt the Chairperson of the Strategy 2030 Group, outlined a series of recommendations to develop the higher education system in Ireland.

Priorities identified in the 'Hunt Report' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) highlighted the importance of enhancing access to higher education for an increasingly diverse body of learners. This includes individuals who enter higher education post second level education (on completion of the Leaving Certificate examination) and also individuals who enter college at later stages in life, for example mature students (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). The goal of increasing participation in higher education both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels is to develop highly skilled individuals and researchers who can contribute to knowledge development, innovation and competitiveness in an increasingly global environment and labour market (Department of Education and Skills, 2011).

2.23. Growth in enrolment rates and participation in higher education in Ireland

Equity of access to higher education for a diverse body of learners, particularly from targeted socio-economic and under-represented groups has been identified as a priority by policy makers and practitioners in Ireland (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). This includes improving access for part-time students (Higher Education Authority, 2009b) and enhancing opportunities for learners who are in employment (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). Technology has been identified as "crucial to what, how and where students learn" (Higher Education Authority, 2017a p5) and recommendations include improving online and blended learning models to reach a wider and more diverse body of learners (Higher Education Authority, 2018a).

2.24. Equity of access to higher education in Ireland

A snapshot of participation rates in higher education programmes in Ireland (Higher Education Authority, 2018b) recorded a level of 225,000 student enrolments across the higher education sector, of which 15,000 are international students and over 10,000 postgraduates are enrolled on a research programme, the majority at doctoral level. Growth of student numbers has been reported as uneven across the sector with 82% of enrolments at undergraduate and 18% at postgraduate level (Higher Education Authority, 2017a). A recent publication on institutional and sector level performance within higher education systems in Ireland (Higher Education Authority, 2020) reported that 27% of new entrants within the higher education sector were from targeted socio-economic groups. Recommendations for enhancing access to education and provision of supports and resources for part-time and flexible students include moving beyond distinctions of learners in terms of full and part-time enrolment status (Irish Universities Association, 2020a). “The current distinctions between full and part-time students are old world constructs which are outside the reality of national and European policies and outside the needs of Higher Education Institutes and the students themselves.”(Irish Universities Association, 2020a p11).

In addition to the growth in enrolments and diversity of student populations, the higher education sector in Ireland has undergone a significant transformation over the last decade, for example through an increase in mergers and partnerships between academic institutions, within and across regions (Harkin & Hazelkorn, 2015) The developments and changes within the higher education system in Ireland have highlighted the need for academic institutions to grow and adapt to accommodate the needs of a larger body of diverse learners across a wide range of institutions in different regions of the country (Higher Education Authority, 2012).

2.25. Restructuring the higher education landscape in Ireland

Measures to enhance regional collaboration between institutions and maximise use of shared resources to reduce duplication of activities have resulted in a restructuring of the higher education landscape via mergers and formal partnerships within and across different regions (Harkin & Hazelkorn, 2015; Higher Education Authority, 2012). The purported policy goal of reforms is to increase capacity, critical mass and scale of institutions and to facilitate access and progression for a wide range of students, predominantly at undergraduate (Level 6-8) programmes as outlined within the National Framework of Qualifications (Higher Education Authority, 2017a). According to the Higher Education Authority Report for 2019 (Higher Education Authority, 2019) progress has been made on the establishment of Ireland's Technological University sector, namely the consolidation of individual Institutions of Technology (IoT) into Technological Universities within different regions in Ireland.

As part of the enhancement of quality and standard of teaching and learning within the newly formed Technological Universities and regional higher education clusters at least 45% of academic staff are expected to hold a Level 10 (doctoral) or equivalent qualification (Higher Education Authority, 2012). According to a recent report on institutional and sector level performance within higher education systems in Ireland (Higher Education Authority, 2020) 76% of all permanent academic staff in the university hold a doctoral qualification compared to 33% of permanent academic staff in the Institute of Technology sector. Potentially the recommendations that a high proportion of academic staff within the higher education sector should have a doctoral or equivalent level qualification may increase enrolments in part-time doctoral programmes by staff who are already employed within the higher education sector and who wish to enhance their skills and academic qualifications.

2.26. The influence of European policy on doctoral education reforms in Ireland

Policy objectives for doctoral education in Ireland include the goal of doubling numbers of doctoral candidates to contribute to Research and Development activities to enhance knowledge creation, competitiveness and to meet the needs of the economy (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). Additional recommendations include investment in Research and Development and increasing the number of doctoral students in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) as well as Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) disciplines (Department of Education and Skills, 2011).

Recently there has been greater recognition of the value of cross-disciplinary research for example in the promotion of 'STEAM' – Integrating Arts within STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) disciplines (Higher Education Authority, 2017a) to foster research skills and personal development for learners. The objective of fostering research skills at doctoral level in Ireland is supported by an enhanced commitment to quality assurance at doctoral level. According to researchers (Byrne et al., 2013; EUA Solutions, 2021) Ireland has made considerable progress in reforming doctoral education in accordance with European guidelines. However, the influence of European policy on doctoral education and training within Ireland, in general based on an assumption of a three to four year full-time PhD programme (Hasgall et al., 2019), may not reflect differences between Ireland and other European countries. Although not common as a mode of doctoral education in many European countries, Ireland has seen a growth in enrolments on Professional doctorate programmes (European Commission et al., 2015). This suggests the need to explore trends and patterns of enrolments in doctoral education in Ireland in greater detail to understand the drivers of change in this country on its own terms, rather than in the context of European-wide policy directives and reforms. The next section will discuss some of the key developments in doctoral education in Ireland and will explore changes in participation and enrolment levels. This includes an increase (76%) in part-time doctoral

learners over the last decade (O'Regan, 2018) which has received little attention in policy and practice within doctoral education in Ireland.

2.27. National Framework for Doctoral Education in Ireland

A framework for good practice in doctoral *education* 'The National Framework for Doctoral Education' (Irish Universities Association, 2015) was launched in 2015 and was endorsed by all the higher education institutions in Ireland. The guidelines within 'The National Framework for Doctoral Education' were consistent with European guidelines for doctoral education and training as defined within the Salzburg Principles, namely Salzburg I (European University Association, 2005) and Salzburg II documentation (European University Association, 2010). Recommendations outlined within the 'National Framework for Doctoral Education' include the provision of personal and professional development opportunities for researchers, within the context of a structured doctoral programme (Irish Universities Association, 2015). A clearly articulated commitment to enhancing employability and research skills of doctoral graduates has been outlined in the 'PhD Graduate Skills Statement' (Irish Universities' Association, 2015). These skills reflect the personal, social and self-management aspects of the PhD as well as the underlying research skills required to successfully complete doctoral studies.

A recent report evaluating the implementation of the 'National Framework for Doctoral Education' in higher education institutions in Ireland (EUA Solutions, 2021), based on feedback from academic staff, management and postgraduate research students in academic institutions in Ireland, revealed a trend towards the establishment of structured doctoral training. In line with findings on practices within higher education systems in Europe (Hasgall et al., 2019), the range of taught modules included within doctoral programmes varied from institution to institution and within academic departments (EUA Solutions, 2021). Academic institutions identified a commitment to enhancing personal, academic and career development support for postgraduate students, which, according to the report (EUA Solutions, 2021), was acknowledged

and appreciated by students. In some institutions, due to lack of resources, the burden of supporting postgraduate students was managed by individual academic staff, namely supervisors (EUA Solutions, 2021). This finding concurs with existing research, McAlpine (2014) recommends that universities identify doctoral activities as a strategic priority at an institutional level, rather than falling within the remit of individual staff members. Researchers recommended that Student Services can play a role in alleviating stress and providing academic and personal support to postgraduate learners and students who are combining studies with additional employment or personal responsibilities (Sursock, 2015).

2.28. Participation in doctoral education in Ireland

In Ireland PhD provision and quality has been identified as a strategic priority to enhance employability and skills profile of graduates (Irish Universities Association, 2015). PhD enrolments have increased internationally and in Ireland over the last decade (Organisation for Economic and Co-operative Development, 2016a). According to recent statistics there were 6,888 full-time and 1625 part-time doctoral candidates in Ireland for the year 2017/2018, of which, over 44% of all full-time and 84% of all part-time doctoral candidates were aged 30 years or over (Higher Education Authority, 2018b). There is a reasonable overall gender balance with 48% males and 52% females participating in full-time doctoral education in Ireland. Participation in part-time doctoral programmes records higher levels for female (54%) than male (46%) candidates (Higher Education Authority, 2018b). According to a report 'Postgraduate Fact Sheet' (for the year 2016/2017) the majority (86%) of doctoral candidates are studying within the university sector in Ireland with a further 14% undertaking doctoral studies within another higher education institution or college. There were 1,718 graduates at doctoral level from the university sector in 2017 (Higher Education Authority, 2018c).

2.29. Part-time doctoral enrolments in Ireland

A trend which has received little attention is the significant growth in part-time doctoral enrolments in Ireland over the last decade (O'Regan, 2018). Almost a fifth of doctoral candidates (19%) are enrolled in studies on a part-time basis (Higher Education Authority, 2018c). Statistics for 2008/2009 (Higher Education Authority, 2009a) reported a figure of 920 part-time doctoral enrolments in Ireland. Recent reports (Higher Education Authority, 2018b) recorded a figure of 1,625 part-time doctoral candidates in Ireland. This shows an unprecedented 76% increase in part-time doctoral enrolments in the higher education sector in Ireland from 2008-2018 (O'Regan, 2018). In contrast full-time enrolments have increased by 16% from 5,945 (Higher Education Authority, 2009a) to 6,888 (Higher Education Authority, 2018b) over the same time frame. The growth in part-time enrolments over the past decade suggests further analysis of doctoral education provision in Ireland in the context of the part-time learner's experience.

2.30. Student engagement (postgraduate level) in Ireland

Following the success of the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE), aimed at undergraduates within the higher education sector in Ireland (Higher Education Authority, 2017b), the first ISSE survey for postgraduate researchers was launched in 2019, following a pilot survey (Irish Survey of Student Engagement, 2018) the previous year. The goal of the survey for postgraduate researchers in Ireland (Irish Survey of Student Engagement, 2019) was to support developments to enhance quality in postgraduate research and training as outlined within the 'National Framework for Doctoral Education' (Irish Universities Association, 2015). All higher education institutions in Ireland participated in the Irish Survey of Student Engagement for postgraduates and there was a response rate of 29.9% (n=2,721) master's and doctoral level candidates in Ireland. The key findings from the survey (Irish Survey of Student Engagement, 2019) significant for the current research are in relation to differences between full and part-time postgraduate

researchers' responses and experiences of participating in university life, including participants' experiences of accessing research and social (peer-based) communities.

2.31. Student satisfaction (full and part-time postgraduates) in Ireland

Findings from the survey (Irish Survey of Student Engagement, 2019) which evaluated student engagement for postgraduates in Ireland did not report differences between full and part-time respondents in relation to research skills, progress, assessment and overall experience.

However, there was a significant difference between full and part-time candidates in relation to engagement with the academic institution. Full-time postgraduate research candidates reported greater levels of engagement with contacts and supports in the academic institution than part-time respondents. This included regular contact with the supervisor appropriate to needs, opportunities to discuss research with peers and opportunities to avail of research and academic development opportunities. The findings from the Irish Survey of Student Engagement for postgraduate researchers concur with existing UK survey results such as the Postgraduate Researcher Experience Survey (PRES) which reported that part-time postgraduate candidates experienced lower levels of satisfaction than their full-time peers in terms of accessing research communities within the higher education institution (Higher Education Academy, 2017). The growing awareness of part-time postgraduate researchers as potentially requiring different supports to full-time learners builds on recommendations for further studies on part-time doctoral candidature (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014; Zahl, 2015). The aim of the current study was to explore part-time candidates' experiences of navigating the doctoral process to completion, to add this 'invisible' (Bates & Goff, 2012; Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) learner's voice to discourse and practice within doctoral education.

2.32. Challenges in defining the part-time doctoral candidate

The term part-time doctoral learner is challenging to define due to the reported lack of recognition of this mode of candidature within doctoral education policy and practice (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009).

Some doctoral programmes, such as the Professional doctorate are usually aimed at learners who often manage studies while in employment (Wildy et al., 2015). The Professional doctorate tends to be delivered by the academic institution, generally on a part-time basis, and often over three to four years (Bourner et al., 2001). However, in the main, doctoral educational policy and practice in Europe, including Ireland, is understood in terms of the PhD learner undertaking doctoral qualification on a full-time basis over three to four years (European University Association, 2005, 2010, 2016). In contrast there is no single shared definition of part-time doctoral candidature across different education institutions and systems which can be calculated in different ways, for example in relation to full-time equivalency (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) or number of courses completed. Part-time doctoral candidature can include learners who move from full-to part-time status as well as individuals who are enrolled on a part-time basis for the duration of doctoral studies, often up to 6 years (Watts, 2008). Participants who contributed to a qualitative, interview-based study exploring thirty-five learners' experiences of juggling motherhood with part-time doctoral studies (Cronshaw, 2017) reported various lengths of candidature including and up to seven or eight years.

In the case of the PhD qualification part-time enrolment status is often granted at the discretion of the academic institution, to individuals who require a more flexibility or a longer time frame to complete doctoral research, for example due to personal disruption, family caring roles or employment responsibilities (European University Association, 2005). Therefore, part-time PhD status is more of an accommodation agreed locally between individual candidates and the academic institution than a formal process articulated in doctoral education policies and practice

within national and international higher education systems. There is a tendency to view part-time doctoral candidates in terms of deficit for example limited opportunities to engage with academic staff and peer networks (Zahl, 2015) or in terms of challenges to availing of research supports on campus on a regular basis during studies. This deficit-based understanding of part-time candidature common in discourse within doctoral education (Gardner, 2008; Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) may provide a narrow understanding of learners' experiences of navigating the PhD journey on a part-time basis.

What has received little attention are the potentially positive aspects of undertaking doctoral studies on a part-time basis, or, additionally, the role that the learner plays in navigating their own study journey. This study aimed to explore learner's accounts of navigating doctoral studies on a part-time basis and to add the part-time learner's experience to discourse in doctoral education.

2.33. Summary

This chapter outlined developments within doctoral education, primarily in relation to reforms within European policy and practice as outlined within the 'Salzburg Principles' (European University Association, 2005, 2010, 2016) which informs and influences doctoral education in Ireland. Completion rates have been identified as a concern worldwide and researchers have reported attrition rates of up to 40-50% at doctoral level (Litalien, 2015). Socialisation of the learner into the academic department and institution has been identified as influencing academic progression and quality of the doctoral candidate's experience (Weidman & Stein, 2003). However, researchers have criticised assumptions of the doctoral candidate as full-time and socialised within the campus setting as not reflecting the experiences of non-traditional students (Gardner, 2008), including part-time doctoral candidates (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). Almost a fifth (19%) of doctoral learners in Ireland are enrolled on a part-time basis, primarily within an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) discipline within the university sector

(Higher Education Authority, 2018b). The lack of agreed definition of part-time status (Watts, 2008) and reported absence of the part-time candidate in existing doctoral policy and practice (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) requires a fresh look at this type of learner. The next chapter presents the literature relevant to exploring learners' experiences of navigating a PhD to completion, in particular research and literature which addresses part-time doctoral candidature.

Chapter 3. Literature Review

3.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to contextualise the part-time doctoral learners' experience within empirical studies and discourse. The current study sought to address a gap in existing research by exploring learners' experiences of pursuing a PhD on a part-time basis. Researchers recommend greater awareness of the position of the doctoral candidate in the context of multiple networks and responsibilities, for example family (Cronshaw, 2017) and employment (Watts, 2008) both within and beyond the doctoral context (Hopwood et al., 2011) and academic institution (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010; Pearson et al., 2016). Part-time candidates have been identified as experiencing challenges to accessing campus-based supports and resources (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014) due to often studying whilst occupied with other employment-based, personal and family commitments (Watts, 2008). Researchers recommend further studies on learners' experiences of completing a PhD (Devos et al., 2017) including the identification of factors, both institutional and personal which may potentially facilitate or challenge progression (McAlpine et al., 2012) and completion (Maher et al., 2004) of doctoral studies.

3.2. Review of existing research on factors influencing the doctoral journey

The rationale for this study was to add the voice of the 'invisible' (Bates & Goff, 2012; Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) part-time learner to discourse within doctoral education. Existing research tends to focus on personal, rather than academic and programme-based, aspects of learner's experiences of pursuing doctoral studies on a part-time basis. Researchers have reported on the challenges of balancing motherhood (Cronshaw, 2017), employment (Evans, 2002; Watts, 2008) and experiences of isolation from research and peer communities (Gibney, 2013; Watts, 2008). Little is understood about navigating the doctoral process, in particular accounts from individuals who have successfully completed a PhD on a part-time basis. Personal agency and

help-seeking behaviour have been identified as influencing learners' experiences of progressing with doctoral studies. Examples of personal agency and seeking help include harnessing support and guidance from personal contacts to overcome academic, system-based, administrative or procedural aspects of the doctoral programme within the academic institution (McAlpine et al., 2012). Hopwood (2010b) recommends adopting a holistic view of the doctoral candidate's world which recognises the learner as engaged in multiple personal, social academic and employment activities and networks, both within and beyond the context of the doctoral programme commitments within the academic institution. Recognition of the part-time doctoral candidate as potentially occupied with a range of responsibilities and activities across diverse employment, family, personal and social settings, primarily outside of the doctoral environment within the academic institution (Watts, 2008) was central to the current research study.

In general, research on student engagement and access to communities has focused on doctoral learners in terms of enrolment status (O'Regan, 2020a, 2021) for example full-time (Weidman & Stein, 2003), international (Coterall, 2011) or part-time (Zahl, 2015). However, the position of the learner in terms of where they are physically or temporally situated, in relation to the academic institution setting and resources has received little attention in research on doctoral candidates' experiences (O'Regan, 2020a, 2021). Researchers suggest further studies beyond an assumption of the learner as located in the academic institution (Pearson et al., 2016) and greater acknowledgement of the role of informal learning in non-traditional environments as influencing the student's experiences of navigating academic studies (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010; Gourlay, 2015). Interaction between the learner and non-human as well as human actors, for example books, texts (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010) and databases (Gourlay, 2015) has been identified as influencing progression with academic pursuits. This study aimed to explore different dimensions (personal and institutional) of learners' experiences of navigating the PhD

on a part-time basis and potentially to shed light on the world of the part-time learner in the context of different influences, both within and beyond the context of the academic institution.

3.3. Progression and completion of doctoral studies

Completion of doctoral studies has been highlighted as a concern (Park, 2007) with high attrition rates, for example of up to 50% (Litalien, 2015) reported. Lack of a systematic approach, both within and across institutions in different countries, has presented challenges to calculating doctoral completion rates (Kehm, 2006).

Calculating completion rates for part-time doctoral candidates is potentially exacerbated by variance in definitions of part-time status across different systems and institutions (Watts, 2008). Part-time doctoral candidature can be defined, for example, by mode of enrolment, including movement from full-time to part-time status during the programme or by full-time equivalency or by number of modules completed (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Watts, 2008). The decision to concentrate on the experiences of learners' who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis in the university sector in Ireland, versus early or mid-stage doctoral learners resulted from the findings of a preliminary phase of this study. The findings from the preliminary study indicated that individuals who were at the late stages or had completed the PhD had a greater sense retrospectively of what had facilitated or challenged progression at each stage of the process in comparison with students at the early or mid-stages of the doctoral journey. A review of the implications of undertaking a study based on the experiences of learners who have completed doctoral qualifications is addressed in subsequent chapters in this thesis.

3.4. Existing research on part-time doctoral candidates' experiences

There is a sparse body of research which focuses solely on part-time doctoral candidates' experiences. The following studies identified the challenges of studying part-time at doctoral level in the context of other personal commitments and challenges to accessing academic and peer networks and resources on campus (Cronshaw, 2017; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul &

Gardner, 2014; Zahl, 2015). Individual experiences of undertaking research qualifications on a part-time basis tend to be addressed within larger more comprehensive studies usually based on full-time learners' experiences. Examples of these are the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) for postgraduate researchers (Irish Survey of Student Engagement, 2019) and the PRES (UK) Postgraduate Researchers' Experience Survey (Higher Education Academy, 2017). The ISSE Postgraduate (Irish Survey of Student Engagement, 2019) and the UK PRES (Higher Education Academy, 2017) surveys included responses from both full and part-time master's and doctoral level postgraduate researchers' experiences of; engaging with personnel, peers and resources in the academic institution; quality of the learning experience and student satisfaction. Gibney (2013) recommends that academic institutions should address the needs of part-time candidates to overcome high levels of isolation and alienation reported by part-time learners who responded to the PRES (UK) survey.

Research on part-time doctoral learners' experiences illustrate the challenges of this mode of candidature in the context of socialisation of the learner into the academic institution (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014) and academic and peer communities (Zahl, 2015). The role of personal, for example family and caring (Cronshaw, 2017) and employment responsibilities (Watts, 2008) while studying have been identified as impacting on part-time learners' experiences of engaging with campus-based supports and communities during the working day (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). Researchers recommend that academic institutions address the needs of part-time doctoral candidates to enhance social engagement and academic experiences (Gopaul & Gardner, 2014). In general, researchers tended to adopt a qualitative approach to exploring part-time learners' experiences. These studies were often based on interviews, for example on the challenges of balancing motherhood with a part-time PhD (Cronshaw, 2017) or accounts of accessing academic resources (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012) and peer-based communities within the academic institution (Zahl, 2015). Qualitative studies on part-time doctoral candidates' experiences ranged from thirty-five (Cronshaw, 2017) to ten

(Gardner & Gopaul, 2012) or twelve (Zahl, 2015) participants. Two researchers (Bates & Goff, 2012) undertook an autoethnographic study on their experiences of pursuing part-time doctoral studies, which highlighted the potential benefits a part-time learner can bring to an academic institution in terms of potential maturity in years and employment and life experience. Bates and Goff (2012) recommend a clearer definition of part-time doctoral candidature beyond negative categorisation around invisibility and lack of presence within the academic institution. Part-time doctoral candidates have been reported to be often less resource intensive than full-time learners due to a tendency to spend less time on campus, and often contribute financially to the university due to a tendency to fund doctoral studies their studies and to pay their own fees (Evans, 2002).

3.5. Challenges of undertaking research on part-time PhD learners' experiences

The challenges of exploring part-time doctoral candidates' experiences were compounded not just by the lack of a shared definition on part-time status across institutions and education systems (Irish Survey of Student Engagement, 2018; Watts, 2008) but also by the inclusion of part-time learners' experiences within larger postgraduate studies, based on full-time learners' experiences. The goal of the current research was to add the part-time learner's voice to discourse within doctoral education, not as a subset of a larger group of, primarily full-time, doctoral candidates but on their own terms and based on individual's accounts of navigating the doctoral process to completion. Researchers recommend greater attention to the influence of different roles performed within the learners' lives outside of the pursuit of doctoral education for example, parent (Cronshaw, 2017) worker, friend and partner (Hopwood et al., 2011; McAlpine et al., 2012) to understand how "Scholarly identity is enacted in the gaps of everyday life" (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010 p44).

An understanding of the various dimensions of the doctoral candidate's life including social, personal and professional responsibilities beyond the academic role (Hopwood, 2010b;

Hopwood et al., 2011; Hopwood & Paulson, 2012) reflects the reality of many part-time doctoral candidate's worlds (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014; Watts, 2008). This suggests the need to look at the part-time candidate's experiences of accessing doctoral programme support and information beyond an assumption that the individual is based within the academic institution during studies. This study explored if individuals who undertook part-time doctoral studies accessed online as well as face-to-face doctoral programme support potentially to overcome challenges to accessing campus-based resources and communities, which has been reported in existing studies addressing the experiences of non-traditional, namely part-time doctoral candidates (Gardner, 2008; Zahl, 2015).

3.6. Accessing doctoral programme information and support from the university

Research within the field of doctoral education has emphasised the role of socialisation of the doctoral candidate into the research environment and academic institution as influencing academic progression and quality of the learner's experience (Gardner, 2008; Jones, 2013; Weidman & Stein, 2003). Student involvement in departmental and institutional activities has been found to contribute to persistence and retention (Bair, 1999). The process of becoming a researcher is described as a taking place within social interactions, on an everyday basis, within the formal setting of the academic institution and other settings (Mantai, 2017). Navigating the doctoral process has been identified as based on the extent to which the learner understands the structure and process of doctoral education, including different activities and outputs associated with undertaking doctoral research (Maher et al., 2004), for example publishing in academic journals, receiving research funding and attending conferences.

Agency and help-seeking behaviour (Maher et al., 2004) often from personal contacts outside of the doctoral environment, has been identified as influencing learners' experiences of progressing with and completing doctoral studies (Maher et al., 2004; McAlpine et al., 2012).

According to McAlpine (2014) there is a tendency to place the responsibility for progression and

completion of doctoral studies on the individual learner rather than the academic institution. McAlpine et al. (2012) recommend greater emphasis on duty of care at the institutional level in terms of addressing relational as well as regulatory aspects of programme design and practice. Researchers recommend further evaluation of doctoral cultures and research environments, beyond an assumption of full-time doctoral learners, to understand non-traditional, including part-time doctoral candidates experiences of socialisation (Gardner, 2008) and participation in peer and academic networks (Zahl, 2015).

3.7. Doctoral programme cultures and disciplines

Researchers have reported diverse types of doctoral communities within different disciplines. However, according to Lovitts (2008) the relationship between individual doctoral candidates and the academic institution and field of study in terms of progression or non-completion of qualifications appears more complicated than can be explained by differences within discipline of study. Based on responses from faculty on the factors which differentiated doctoral candidates who advanced from early-stage doctoral candidates to independent researchers, versus those who do not successfully make the transition, Lovitts (2008) found that respondents cited personal learners' characteristics as well as departmental culture as influencing progressing and completion of studies. Non-completers were found to have fewer social and personal resources than individuals who completed doctoral studies. Students who made the transition to independent researchers were reported by faculty as demonstrating agency in terms of making decisions on their own and working independently without too much direction for others (Lovitts, 2008). According to Vekkaila, Pyhältö, and Lonka (2013) students who saw themselves as proactive, with a level of autonomy over the direction of their research projects reported greater levels of control over the doctoral process. Researchers recommend reframing doctoral education beyond a focus of the learner within the discipline-based or departmental context to explore the role of person agency and position of the learner in the context of multiple policy level influences and networks within and beyond the institutional environment

(Pearson et al., 2016). Researchers have identified different dimensions of the doctoral process which can influence progression and completion of studies. Examples include personal agency and actions of the learner (Maher et al., 2004), research culture within the discipline or department (Gardner, 2008; Weidman & Stein, 2003) and the role of academic staff and institutional policies and procedures (McAlpine, 2014; McAlpine et al., 2012).

A consistent theme within literature in the field of doctoral education is the influence of the supervisory relationship on learners' experiences of undertaking doctoral studies (e.g. Jones, 2013; Pyhältö et al., 2015).

3.8. Doctoral supervision and part-time learners

The supervisor/supervisee relationship has been identified as a key influence on academic progression and student satisfaction, primarily in relation to the full-time doctoral candidate's experience (Jones, 2013; Pyhältö et al., 2015). Shared understanding between the supervisor and the doctoral candidate on the activities and responsibilities of the supervisory role has been cited as impacting on doctoral student satisfaction (Pyhältö et al., 2015). Style of supervision has been acknowledged as impacting on the doctoral candidate's experience, for example a more project-management-based approach has been associated with enhancing the quality of the learner's experience versus a more informal and hands-off style of supervision (Lee, 2008). However, little is known about the role of supervision as an influence on part-time doctoral candidate's experience. Watts (2008) reported the challenges that supervisors can face in terms of developing and sustaining interaction and communication with part-time candidates, due to limited presence of this type of learner within the academic environment over the doctoral process. This finding suggests the need for further studies which explore the influence of the supervisory relationship on learner's experiences of undertaking and progressing with doctoral studies on a part-time basis.

Potentially digital technologies may contribute to the supervision of doctoral candidates at a distance from the university (Erichsen et al., 2014) and may alleviate student isolation and lack of engagement with the academic institution (Andrew, 2012). Participation in an academic or peer-based community has been identified as influencing part-time learners' experiences of undertaking doctoral studies (Zahl, 2015). Researchers recommend further studies which address learners' experiences of accessing peer and academic support during the pursuit of doctoral qualifications on a part-time basis (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014; Zahl, 2015).

3.9. Communities of Practice

Researchers have reported the positive role that peer-based research communities can have on student satisfaction and quality of the learner's experience (Christensen & Lund, 2014).

Lahenius (2012) suggests that doctoral candidates may sometimes need support and encouragement from the academic department and institution to help students to establish research communities. Participation in a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998) even at a peripheral level (Lave & Wenger, 1991) has been found to influence sense of belonging and development of researcher identity for both full-time (Coffman, Putman, Adkisson, Kriner, & Monaghan, 2016; Lahenius, 2012; Pilbeam & Denyer, 2009) and part-time doctoral candidates (Teeuwsen, Ratković, & Tilley, 2012; Zahl, 2015).

Legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) emphasises the role of learning beyond the world of the individual learner to focus on learning as a social activity in the context of interaction with other members of a group. Theories of Communities of Practice acknowledge factors such as power, levels of membership and access to resources as influencing identity development, acquisition of skills and sense of belonging for members of the group (Wenger, 1998, 2010). The concept of legitimate peripheral participation allows for an

exploration of learning through various levels of participation and engagement for different members of the Community of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

“Peripheral participation is about being [located] in the social world. Changing locations and perspectives are part of the actors’ learning trajectories, developing identities and forms of membership.” (Lave & Wenger, 1991 p36).

A Community of Practice is defined by a shared language and way of doing things which is practiced by members of the group (Wenger, 1998). A key feature of a Community of Practice (Wenger, 2010) is the extent to which it influences identity development and sense of belonging among members in the context of a shared language, values, procedures and practices.

The concept of a Community of Practice has been used in education to identify opportunities for professional development within groups and organisations and to develop new insights into peer learning, including an exploration of the role of communication technologies, such as social media as facilitating learning and interaction between individuals (Wenger, 2010).

3.9.1. Communities of Practice and part-time learners

In a reflection and critique of the concept of Communities of Practice, both as a theoretical framework and in practice (Wenger, 2010) notes that the emphasis on participation and identity development inherent in models of Communities of Practice suggests a similarity and cohesiveness among group members (Wenger, 1998), which may not reflect the diversity of perspectives and characteristics of individuals within the group. Researchers have identified the heterogeneity of part-time doctoral candidates which can include variance in classification by full-time equivalency, or movement between full and part-time enrolment status (Watts, 2008). Participation in a Community of Practice has been identified as a positive influence on sense of belonging and identity for part-time doctoral learners (Bates & Goff, 2012; Teeuwssen et al., 2012; Zahl, 2015). The challenges of accessing academic and peer-communities within the academic institution for part-time doctoral candidates has been identified by researchers

(Gardner, 2008; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014). This suggests the need to explore individual part-time learner's experiences of navigating the doctoral process, based on recommendations from existing researchers to move beyond assumptions of the traditional full-time candidate (Gardner, 2008; Hopwood et al., 2011) socialised and situated in the academic department and institution (Weidman & Stein, 2003). Potentially digital technologies may help to enhance sense of belonging and access to resources for individuals, including part-time doctoral candidates, who are situated at a physical distance from the campus environment during academic studies (O'Regan, 2020a, 2021).

3.10. Digital technology and learners at a distance from the institutional setting

Wenger (2010) recommends elaborating an understanding and definition of Communities of Practice networks beyond a focus on individuals in groups with shared practices and norms to include wider less group-based learning contexts

“Which have the magic of unpredictability, for example a Twitter message sends a question into the connectivity of a network, and it boomerangs back with a totally unexpected response and brand-new person to follow.” (Wenger, 2010 p10).

Systems of virtual education might mitigate against isolation for part-time or distance-based learners. Gavan and Anderson (2012) recommend exploring how web-based environments can be used to enhance social interaction for remote learners, underpinned by clear institutional guidelines, a supportive framework and use of appropriate technologies and web-based tools. According to researchers (Gavan & Anderson, 2012) educational policies should recognise the potential of virtual learning environments to support social engagement of learners who experience challenges accessing the physical campus setting in the academic institution. Digital technologies can provide opportunities to reach a wide range of learners across different physical and geographical locations (Fumasoli, 2019). Researchers have questioned whether the potential of technology has been realised as a means of supporting teaching and learning

practices within higher education (Fumasoli, 2019). Fenwick and Edwards (2014) suggest that learners are engaged with many actor networks both human and non-human (Latour, 2005), for example networks mediated via technology. However, Fenwick and Edwards (2014) question whether the inclusion of mobile technologies into higher education practices may be compatible with existing, predominantly human-centred, actor networks established within traditional teaching and learning practices and embedded within the curricula. Potentially learners with limited opportunities to access doctoral programme support and information on a face-to-face basis may access resources via online or document-based sources, for example student guidelines, training opportunities and modes of assessment at distinct stages of the PhD process. An exploration of part-time doctoral candidate's experiences of accessing doctoral programme resources and support via different media, face-to-face and online may potentially contribute to an understanding of individual's experiences of navigating a PhD beyond an assumption of the learner as located in the traditional campus setting during candidature (Pearson et al., 2016) with opportunities to participate in academic, research and peer-based communities. Wenger (2010) proposed exploring how Communities of Practice and information networks can complement each other to enhance learning capabilities of groups and individuals. For example, by harnessing the potential of Communities of Practice to create opportunities for identity development and sense of belonging, and in addition, exploring the potential of networks to provide opportunities for dynamic interaction, communication and access to information beyond the group context. Wenger (2010) suggested addressing two levels of accountability which need to be recognised when developing social systems of learning. Firstly, vertical accountability, which is concerned with hierarchy, policies and management of resources, and horizontal accountability which helps socialisation, harmony and collaboration in joint activities by group members.

Wenger (2010) highlighted the challenges of creating visibility with vertical and horizontal learner systems, particularly for traditional organisations. According to Wenger (2010) the process of enhancing transparency and visibility of organisational systems, values and processes offers a way to question and evaluate accepted norms and presents opportunities for new perspectives and practices to be considered. Designing learning systems that incorporate the strengths of Communities of Practice, for example enhanced cohesion and sense of belonging, supported by dynamic networks may facilitate interaction and communication for different individuals (Wenger, 2010). Recommendations include designing learning systems to address factors which can impact on engagement such as lack of time, which can force individuals to make choices about how, or whether, to participate in different networks and practices (Wenger, 2010). This is particularly pertinent in the design of education systems which support engagement of peripheral learners, for example part-time doctoral candidates who may be time poor, with limited opportunities to avail of resources and supports on campus in the context of working and managing family responsibilities while studying (Gopaul & Gardner, 2014; Watts, 2008).

3.11. Student engagement and learning networks beyond the institutional context

Definitions of student success have been critiqued as focusing on a narrow range of constructs such as academic achievement and satisfaction which does not tend to explore other non-environmental and contextual factors which can impact on the student's experience (York, Gibson, & Rankin, 2015). Researchers recommend inclusion of non-traditional learners, in addition to undergraduates, for example online and postgraduate students in discussions relating to student engagement and quality of the learner's experience (Varwell, 2018). Student Services have been identified as a potential source of support for learners, particularly at postgraduate level, who often have other employment and personal commitments in addition to academic pursuits (Sursock, 2015). Studies which explore non-traditional, for example international (Coterall, 2011) and part-time (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Zahl, 2015) candidates

accounts of navigating the doctoral process can help shed light, not just on the individual's experiences but also on aspects of the institutional doctoral culture from the learner's point of view (Coterall, 2011). The current research study sought to explore if part-time doctoral candidates accessed research and supportive communities, not just within the academic institution but potentially from other personal, social or professional networks to advance doctoral studies. Researchers emphasise the importance of considering doctoral candidates' learning networks (Pearson et al., 2016) and social and academic activities (Hopwood, 2010a, 2010b) and development of scholarly identity (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010) in the context of distributed as well as traditional (e.g. institutional) learning environments. According to Gourlay (2015) student engagement has tended to be conceptualised in terms of participation and interaction in the context of public and observable learning activities, within the academic institution and programme-based context. However, Gourlay (2015) notes that learners interact with material artefacts such as journals, articles, books and databases as well as with people. Learning can take place in non-traditional settings beyond the academic institution and library such as the office, home or on public transport (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010). Gourlay (2015) suggests that student engagement and personal agency are understood beyond the context of interaction with individuals and academic activities within institutions to understand the role of distributed modes of learning, such as engagement with digital technologies as well as traditional texts. An exploration of the various networks and spaces occupied by the doctoral student during candidature can contribute to an understanding of the ways learners seek out and interact with various sources of information (human and non-human). Understanding how learners engage with different resources, both online and on a face-to-face basis (O'Regan, 2020b) may shed light on the role of individual agency and autonomy in shaping the candidate's scholarly identity and experience of navigating the doctoral journey (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010). Recommendations include undertaking more fine-grained qualitative studies to understand individual student agency and engagement with non-quantifiable or observable

activities such as reading, writing and reflecting, to develop a broader understanding of student engagement beyond, what Gourlay (2015) described, in the title of her article, as “the tyranny of participation” (Gourlay, 2015).

3.12. Personal agency and help-seeking behaviour

Based on survey responses from (160) women who completed doctoral studies early (within 4.25 years) or late (within 6.75 years) researchers Maher et al. (2004) found that early completers were more likely to report positive relations with faculty and greater confidence in navigating the doctoral system than later completers. Motivation to complete studies early, for example pending a job offer and demonstrating personal agency in terms of asking for help from faculty and peers and learning how to navigate the doctoral system and procedures within the academic institution were identified as factors which influenced early completion of doctoral qualifications (Maher et al., 2004). The findings illustrate the importance of personal agency in terms of the learner taking action to seek academic help to progress with doctoral studies.

Kahn (2009) recommends greater focus on personal agency as influencing student engagement and the capacity of the student to respond proactively, often in the face of uncertainty.

Reported personal characteristics such as extraversion and introversion were found to influence doctoral candidates’ experiences of accessing faculty and peer support (O'Regan, 2020b).

Learners who perceived doctoral culture in terms of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ and who described themselves as ‘outsiders’ tended to be less proactive in seeking help than more outgoing peers (O'Regan, 2020a). Participants who described themselves as ‘outsiders’ included part-time, international and non-traditional doctoral candidates, for example learners who had returned to education after a long interval. However, participants who reported positive experiences of seeking help from faculty and peers also included full-time, part-time and international candidates. The findings suggest that personal factors such as self-confidence can contribute to personal agency and help-seeking behaviour from faculty and peer support networks.

Case (2015) identified that student agency can be impeded (or enabled) by personal factors such as social and educational background and by institutional factors such as the physical space, structure of the curriculum and culture of the discipline and learning environments. In a study exploring doctoral candidates' experience of progressing with and completing doctoral qualifications (McAlpine et al., 2012) the participants' narratives illustrated the influence of personal characteristics such as demonstrating resilience, agency and persistence to address problems, often drawing on personal networks as an alternative to sourcing support from the academic institution.

Researchers suggest that academic institutions develop a greater awareness of the complexity of learners' lives (Hopwood et al., 2011; McAlpine et al., 2012). This includes greater awareness of the impact of personal and academic challenges (which may exist prior to or result from the doctoral process) on learners' experiences of navigating the doctoral journey (McAlpine et al., 2012). Recommendations for academic institutions include greater consistency, visibility and transparency of policies and practice which can help learners to navigate the intellectual, personal and procedural aspects of the doctoral process (McAlpine et al., 2012). Researchers advocate for further research addressing the paucity of existing literature within higher education on the role of individual agency, beyond a collective or group-based context, for example to understand how individual learners seek out and use feedback to advance research and academic writing skills and to develop confidence as a researcher (Inouye & McAlpine, 2019).

3.13. Recent developments within doctoral education research

In March 2020, educators moved from predominantly face-to-face to online teaching and learning platforms on a worldwide basis, including Ireland (Irish Universities Association, 2020b), to limit social interaction and combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. In essence, the experience of learning at a distance from the physical campus setting has become commonplace

to many learners at all stages of the curriculum over the last two years and is no longer identified as a feature of particular learners' experiences, such as the part-time PhD candidate (O'Regan, 2020a). Over the last year there has been growing interest from educators on supporting learners at a distance from the campus setting (Irish Universities Association, 2020b). Aarnikoivu (2020) recommends greater attention to the spatiotemporal dimensions of doctoral education which recognises the individual learner as located within different activities and physical spaces across time during the research process, both in contact with others and on a solitary basis. Communication and digital technologies have been identified as providing a way to connect learners who are situated in different physical settings (Fumasoli, 2019).

Researchers have highlighted the influence that digital technologies and social media sites have had on knowledge acquisition and transfer (Mewburn, Guerin, & Aitchison, 2021). According to Mewburn et al. (2021) the digital world has shed light on the types of networks that can be accessed by learners, for example blogs, forums and social media sites, which offer alternative ways to source information and resources, to the traditional learning spaces, artefacts and books within the physical setting of the academic institution (Mewburn et al., 2021).

Researchers advocate for new theories to understand and support learners which recognise the role of technology and social media as well as interaction with people and resources as influencing individuals' experiences of accessing information, supportive communities, resources and learning networks (Mewburn et al., 2021). This suggests the need for further research which explores how learners navigate academic qualifications in terms of opportunities to access face-to-face and online resources and in the context of understanding the location of the learner as situated in, or distanced from, the physical environment of the academic institution during studies (O'Regan, 2020b, 2021).

3.14. Conclusion

This chapter contextualised the part-time doctoral candidate within existing discourse and research within doctoral education. Doctoral education policy and practice in European education systems including Ireland (Irish Universities' Association, 2015) is typically based on an understanding of doctoral candidature in terms of a student who is undertaking a PhD on a full-time basis (Hasgall et al., 2019). In comparison, research on learners' experiences of progressing with and completing doctoral studies on a part-time basis is sparse. Gardner (2008) suggests that studies exploring non-traditional, for example part-time doctoral learners' experiences should move beyond normative assumptions of the doctoral researcher as full-time (Hopwood et al., 2011) and socialised (Weidman & Stein, 2003) within the departmental and institutional setting during candidature. This chapter has highlighted the role of personal agency, resilience and seeking support from others such as friends and personal contacts (McAlpine et al., 2012) as helping candidates to overcome (personal and institutional) barriers to advance with and complete doctoral studies. Online communities and digital technologies have been discussed as potentially facilitating sense of belonging and access to doctoral programme support for learners with limited access to the academic institution, such as the part-time PhD learner. The next chapter discusses the conceptual and theoretical framework considered within this study to provide insights into learners' experiences of navigating the doctoral journey on a part-time basis.

Chapter 4. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

4.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the conceptual framework developed for this research which provided a context in which to explore part-time learners' experiences of navigating doctoral studies to completion. In general doctoral education research has focused on the experiences of full-time doctoral researchers (Hopwood et al., 2011) primarily based on an assumption of the doctoral candidate as situated (Pearson et al., 2016) and socialised (Weidman & Stein, 2003) within the doctoral-programme environment within the academic institution. Researchers have recommended further studies on the experiences of non-traditional doctoral candidates (Gardner, 2008; Hopwood et al., 2011), for example part-time candidates, who have been identified as experiencing challenges to accessing doctoral programme support (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014) and research communities (Zahl, 2015).

The complexity of various personal and institutional factors which can shape the learner's journey requires a fresh look at candidates' experiences of navigating the doctoral process from different vantage points. Examples include the position of the learner within different settings such as work, personal and family roles, beyond the context of the doctoral environment in the academic institution (Hopwood et al., 2011). The inclusion of different dimensions of a learner's experience, such as personal agency and access to doctoral support and resources from different media (e.g. face-to-face and online) within this study offered a way to explore part-time doctoral learners' experiences beyond an assumption that the learner was physically located in the academic institution during studies. A key aim of this research was to understand learners' experiences of navigating doctoral studies on a part-time basis, potentially in the context of having limited access to campus-based resources and communities during the working day (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014). Assumptions of the doctoral learner as based within the academic institution and departmental environment during candidature has

been critiqued as not reflecting the reality or experience of some doctoral students (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010; Gardner, 2008; Pearson et al., 2016) such as part-time candidates (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). Therefore, new perspectives and novel approaches were required to explore learners' accounts of navigating the doctoral journey on a part-time basis.

4.2. Exploring different dimensions of the part-time doctoral candidate's experiences

Two conceptual approaches are discussed in the chapter which may add to an understanding of learners' experiences of navigating doctoral qualifications on a part-time basis. Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2005) can shed light on the role of non-human (such as technological, material and document-based) as well as human actors in the process of knowledge generation. Theories of Agency may provide insights into a learner's experience of navigating the doctoral process. Resilience (Kearns et al., 2008) and help-seeking behavior (Maher et al., 2004; McAlpine et al., 2012) have been identified as contributing to progression and completion of doctoral qualifications. Progression with doctoral studies can be affected, both positively and negatively by multiple institutional and personal factors. Examples include factors such as motivation (Litalien, 2015); goal-setting (Wisker et al., 2010); supervisory relationship (Lee, 2008; Pyhältö et al., 2015); institutional systems and procedures (McAlpine et al., 2012); academic communities (Lahenius, 2012) and support at different stages of the doctoral process (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Pifer & Baker, 2016). Researchers have recommended further studies on the relationship between structure and agency (Rafiee, Mirzaee, Mirzaee, & Hashemzadeh, 2014). McAlpine et al. (2012).

Researchers suggest moving beyond a narrative which focuses on the student as responsible for progression with the research process and recommendations include greater recognition of the role of institutional structures, cultures and systems as influencing advancement and completion of doctoral studies (McAlpine et al., 2012). This chapter presents different aspects of personal

agency, including a concept of agency (Archer, 2003) which acknowledges the dynamic interaction between the individual and the environment as influencing advancement with a personal goal, which in the case of this study was the successful completion of doctoral studies by part-time candidates. Archer (2003) recommends moving beyond a focus on either the psychological (individual) or social (environmental) dimensions of agency to understand how the dynamic interaction between a person and their world can facilitate or impede progress and the realisation of an occupational, educational or personal goal.

In light of reported challenges associated with part-time doctoral status, including limited opportunities to access campus supports and community (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014; Zahl, 2015) the role of personal agency and help-seeking behavior, within and beyond the academic institution, may potentially contribute to learners' experiences of navigating doctoral qualifications on a part-time basis. Existing studies on part-time doctoral candidates' experiences have tended to focus on barriers to progression, for example due to personal family responsibilities (Cronshaw, 2017) and limited access to research communities within the academic institution (Zahl, 2015), rather than focusing on factors which may have had a positive impact on learners' experiences of navigating and completing doctoral qualifications on a part-time basis. Therefore, concepts of personal agency and help-seeking behavior, for example from human and non-human (technological) resources, inside and outside the academic institution were included in this study for discursive and exploratory purposes. No assumptions were made about how learners navigated the doctoral process on a part-time basis, or if individuals demonstrated agency and sought help, either on a face-to-face or online basis. A key aim of this research was to provide individuals with an opportunity to share their experiences and stories of navigating the PhD journey and to add the part-time learner's voice to discourse within doctoral education.

Researchers have recommended further studies on the role of digital technology as a means of reaching multiple learners across different locations (Fumasoli, 2019). Online supports, in addition to face-to-face interaction with staff and peers within the academic community and campus setting may provide a way to enhance access to programme supports and resources and, potentially, enhance a sense of belonging for individuals located at a distance (for example spatially and temporally) from the physical campus setting (O'Regan, 2020a). Therefore, the inclusion of Actor Network Theory in this study may, potentially, offer a way to explore learners' interaction with the academic institution, as a means of accessing academic and social support, via technology and online learning resources, beyond an assumption of socialisation of doctoral candidates on a face-to-face-basis in the academic institution. The assumption of the learner as situated within the academic institution has been questioned (Pearson et al., 2016) as possibly not reflecting the reality of many doctoral candidates experiences. Part-time candidates tend to have limited access to resources and collegial support on campus during the day (Gardner, 2008) due to often managing studies with other occupational and personal commitments (Watts, 2008). The exploration of personal agency (Archer, 2003) as potentially influencing learners' experiences of navigating the PhD to completion on a part-time basis may offer a way to explore if individual learners harnessed support and drew on their own resources, for example resilience and help-seeking behaviour, to progress with and complete doctoral studies on a part-time basis. The inclusion of concepts of Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2005) and Theories of Agency (Archer, 2003) in this thesis were exploratory and tentative, due to the limited body of existing research on the role of part-time learners' experiences of interacting with online and technological resources as well as face-to-face supports during the doctoral journey. There is little known about the influence of personal agency on learners' accounts of navigating doctoral studies on a part-time basis. An evaluation of the contribution of the conceptual framework developed in this study to explore learners' accounts of accessing doctoral- programme

resources (online and face-to-face) and experiences of demonstrating agency during the part-time PhD journey are addressed in the Discussion Chapter later in this thesis.

In summary the different dimensions of the part-time researcher's experiences and reported lack of opportunity to participate in university life on a regular basis over the doctoral process (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014; Watts, 2008; Zahl, 2015) suggests the need to develop innovative approaches to exploring the experiences of a diverse and heterogenous body of learners (Watts, 2008) undertaking an unconventional mode of doctoral study.

4.3. Actor Network Theory

Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2005; Law, 1992) recognises the role that non-human, for example technology, as well as human actors can play in generating knowledge. According to Michael (2017) the influence of technology on contemporary society has been largely overlooked by social theorists, such as Giddens and Bourdieu. This is due to a tendency to focus on human-centered interaction in modern society (Latour, 2005). The value of Actor Network Theory as a conceptual framework is that it provides a way for the researcher to look at roles, responsibilities and actions from multiple viewpoints (Parker, 2017) of different actors in heterogenous settings, beyond the "taken for grantedness of the present" (Ren & Petersen, 2014 p11). The acknowledgement of multiple actors at different levels of influence (e.g. political and institutional) provides a way to understand how educational policies and curricular practices are accessed and experienced by individual stakeholders and learners (Nespor, 2013). The recognition that non-human (e.g. document-based, material and technological) resources as well as human-actors can contribute to knowledge generation and practices in contemporary society has been identified as a valuable yet disputed feature of Actor Network Theory (Doolin & Lowe, 2002). Actor Network Theory has been used as a conceptual and methodological framework in different disciplines including management and organisational studies, science and technology (Michael, 2017) and in the field of communication and media research over the last twenty five

years (Waldherr, Geise, & Katzenbach, 2019). Actor Network Theory has provided researchers with a way to

“Zoom in and out, unpack and repack social phenomena and to reflect on their own positions” (Waldherr et al., 2019 p3967).

According to Waldherr et al. (2019) Actor Network Theory is primarily used as a descriptive tool by researchers who prefer qualitative and descriptive, versus quantitative approaches to undertaking research.

Actor Network Theory can provide researchers with a way to identify and describe specific interactions and events and “follow the actors” (Latour, 2005 p154) in order to capture momentary encounters between entities (such as people, material and technological agents) who participate in knowledge generation. According to Nespor (2013) Actor Network Theory can help to reveal accepted norms and practices within educational settings and can identify actors who contribute to discourse in the field of education, as well as individuals, for example students and parents, who may not be consulted in discussions concerned with educational practices and curricular reforms. The value of Actor Network Theory as a methodology is that it can add a dimension to an individual’s narrative by asking about the role of non-human (e.g. technology, documents and material) actors, as well as humans, in shaping the process of knowledge acquisition and generation (Czarniawska, 2014). The focus on learners’ experiences of accessing both online and face-to-face resources within this study, offers an opportunity to understand if learners with limited access to the academic environment seek support from online communities to advance studies and enhance connectivity and sense of belonging (O'Regan, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

4.4. Definition of an actor within Actor Network Theory

In order to be defined as an actor, either human or non-human agents need to make a difference and participate in a course of action (Latour, 2005 p77).

“An actor is a unique event which cannot be reduced to any other event or else they can be described as placeholders who do not make an individual contribution or participate in knowledge generation” (Latour, 2005 p154).

The inclusion of non-humans, such as technology and material resources in actor networks provides a way to understand agency beyond assumptions of human actions and/ or social interaction between individuals (Latour, 2005). Therefore, the goal of Actor Network Theory is to recognise the contribution that non-human, as well as human actors, can make to knowledge generation and advances in modern society (Latour, 2005). Actor Network Theory can help to identify the different ways that human and non-human actors (Latour, 2005) contribute to a process or network. Therefore, a study which did not acknowledge the potential role of non-human resources (such as websites, email and virtual learning environments) as providing ways for individuals to access academic information, resources and communities would seem to provide an incomplete account of living and learning in the modern world.

4.5. Actor Network Theory and higher education systems

According to Fenwick and Edwards (2014) education systems have codified ways of valuing certain types of knowledge over others, which are made visible through policies, systems and practices. The importance of socialisation (Weidman & Stein, 2003) and role of academic and personal networks (Lahenius, 2012; McAlpine et al., 2012; Zahl, 2015) have been identified as influences on academic progression and development of the doctoral researcher’s identity (Baker & Pifer, 2011). However, researchers recommend greater emphasis on the non-observable activities that influence the learner’s journey such as engagement with non-human artefacts, texts, computers, documents and databases, often on a solitary basis and outside of the setting of the academic institution (Gourlay, 2015). This includes engagement in academic activities in non-traditional sites of learning such as the office, home or daily commute (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010). Actor Network Theory offers an objective way to track how knowledge

unfolds and is transmitted (via human and non-human) actors at different levels of a social system, such as in the classroom, community and institutional setting and at an educational policy level (Fenwick & Edwards, 2014; Nesper, 2002, 2013). An exploration of the types of doctoral programme and support (e.g. research modules, interim and final viva assessments) in different formats (such as online and document-based doctoral procedures and guidelines) available to learners over doctoral candidature may shed light on different individual candidate's needs for information and resources at different stages of the doctoral process. This can include exploring whether timing and mode of delivery (face-to-face and online) of research training, modules and seminars meet the requirements of different learners, for example part-time doctoral candidates who tend to pursue studies over six years (Watts, 2008) compared to the three to four year (full-time) doctoral process (European University Association, 2016; Hasgall et al., 2019).

4.6. Actor Network Theory and digital technology

In an analysis of doctoral education progress and areas for development within European higher education systems two trends, namely increased internationalisation of the student body and the growing use of digital technology in society were identified as both presenting opportunities and challenges to reforming higher education (European University Association, 2016).

According to Fumasoli (2019) digital technology can provide a way to reach a large number of learners across different environmental, temporal and spatial settings. However, Fumasoli (2019) has questioned whether the potential of technology has been realised as a means of supporting teaching and learning practices within higher education. Recommendations for institutions include greater consistency, visibility and transparency of policies and practices which may help students to navigate the intellectual, personal and procedural aspects of the doctoral process (Fenwick, 2012; McAlpine et al., 2012). Potentially the provision of online, as well as face-to-face resources could enhance access to academic resources and supportive

communities for learners with limited access to the physical campus based environment, such as part-time doctoral candidates (O'Regan, 2021)

4.7. Critiques of Actor Network Theory

A major critique of Actor Network Theory is the lack of recognition of the role of human agency (Doolin & Lowe, 2002; Michael, 2017) as influencing knowledge generation and social practices.

The purpose of Actor Network Theory is to separate the different entities within a network to identify agency and interaction between various human and non-human actors (Latour, 2005).

According to Waldherr et al. (2019) Actor Network Theory has been criticised as a conceptual and methodological framework for failing to recognise pre-existing factors which can contribute to knowledge generation, such as social, structural or cultural influences, or individual factors, including as age, gender and human agency.

Michael (2017) acknowledges that Actor Network Theory can make interaction between different human and non-human actors visible, however, it does not address the role of human agency in shaping knowledge acquisition. A research study which focused only on the dimension of the learner's experience of accessing doctoral programme resources, primarily from the academic institution, during candidature, without exploring individual's personal stories and role in navigating the doctoral journey would potentially provide an incomplete account of learners' experiences of pursuing and completing PhD on a part-time basis. The recognition of personal agency and help-seeking behaviour as possibly influencing the individual's experience of undertaking doctoral studies offers a potential way to move beyond a deficit-based interpretation of part-time doctoral candidature, prevalent in discourse within higher education (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009). The current research offered an original approach to exploring and giving voice to a growing body of learners (part-time doctoral learners) who defy existing frames of reference and conventional mode and duration of doctoral studies, which tends to be based on an assumption of the candidate as full-time within doctoral education discourse and practice

(Gardner, 2008; Hopwood et al., 2011). Therefore, central to this study was the goal of exploring if part-time learners accessed both face-to-face and online supports and communities during doctoral studies and if individuals demonstrated agency, potentially in the absence of regular contact with peers and academic communities on campus (Zahl, 2015) to advance with, and complete, doctoral studies.

4.8. Personal agency as an influence on progression with doctoral studies

Student agency, motivation and personal resourcefulness were identified as key to persistence and completion of doctoral studies (Maher et al., 2004; Mowbray & Halse, 2010). Researchers (Lahenius & Martinsuo, 2011; Mowbray & Halse, 2010) recommend that the student takes control of developing their own learning networks. McAlpine (2014) suggests that the student only seeks support from the supervisor for legitimate concerns. The role of peers and personal networks, including family and friends have been cited as factors which can influence the quality of experience and completion of doctoral studies for candidates. According to Vekkaila and Pyhältö (2016) students have different learning process, and a proactive, versus passive approach to managing the doctoral process can help learners to make the transition from novice to independent researcher (Lovitts, 2008). However, social as well as individual factors have been cited as influencing doctoral progression, for example seeking help from academic and personal contacts (Maher et al., 2004; McAlpine et al., 2012) and participating in a research community (Lahenius, 2012; Zahl, 2015)

4.9. Personal agency and social interaction within the doctoral process

Social interaction has been acknowledged as central to transformational learning and communication and interaction with others has been identified as influencing experiential learning and personal development (Calleja, 2014). The journey from novice to independent scholar has been described in terms of a transformation (Lovitts, 2008). The doctoral process can be challenging and often requires the learner to demonstrate resilience, personal agency

and perseverance to succeed (Kearns et al., 2008). Coffman et al. (2016) discussed the transformative potential of participating in a community of doctoral researchers. Pilbeam, Lloyd-Jones, and Denyer (2013) examined location in relation to others as key to learning and forming networks and face-to-face communication was found to be the most valuable way to discuss and resolve research issues.

An exploration of part-time doctoral learner's experience of progressing with and completing doctoral studies, in the context of social interaction and access to research networks, may present challenges. This is largely due to reported absence of part-time doctoral learners from campus life which can limit opportunities to participate in academic or supportive networks on campus (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014). However, a research study which concentrated solely on the individual learner without exploring how the individual interacts with the social environment, for example to harness support or overcome barriers to advancing with studies, may potentially provide an incomplete account of part-time learners' experiences of navigating doctoral studies.

4.10. Micro and macro social constructions – learners' stories of completing a PhD

Burr (2003) states that knowledge and identity are co-constructed through communication and interaction between individuals in everyday social life. Burr (2003) makes a distinction between micro and macro social constructions, namely micro social constructions are experienced at the individual level and describe how a person develops an identity in relation to others through interaction, experiences and conversations. Macro social constructions describe system level norms which define what is recognised and accepted (or not as the case may be) at a societal level. She discusses the importance of narrative analysis as a method to understand how people demonstrate agency and justify their own actions and decisions. An exploration of learners' experiences of undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis through their own accounts and stories of navigating and completing the doctoral process may present an opportunity to move beyond a

deficit-based understanding of the part-time doctoral learner's experience, prevalent in doctoral education research and discourse (e.g. Neumann & Rodwell, 2009). Potentially, an understanding of what may have facilitated as well as inhibited progression and completion of doctoral studies, based on individuals' stories of pursuing a PhD on a part-time basis, may contribute to future discourse and research on this 'invisible' (Bates & Goff, 2012; Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) mode of doctoral candidature.

4.11. Personal and social dimensions of agency

The emphasis on full-time doctoral candidature within doctoral education policy (European University Association, 2016) and normative assumptions of the learner as socialised (Gardner, 2008; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014) and situated (Pearson et al., 2016) within the academic institution presented challenges for exploring part-time doctoral candidates' experiences.

Part-time candidates have been reported as spending very little time on campus, compared to many full-time peers (e.g. Watts, 2008; Zahl, 2015). Therefore, it was important within this study to explore how different dimensions of the learner's life, both within and beyond the doctoral process and academic institution, might have influenced individual's experiences of navigating the PhD on a part-time basis. The limited body of existing studies on this mode of doctoral candidature highlighted a gap in existing research, namely not just in terms of understanding who (if anyone?) part-time candidates engaged with to progress with doctoral studies, but also in terms of understanding where this interaction may have taken place, given the limited presence on campus of part-time learners during the doctoral journey (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Watts, 2008).

4.12. Psychological and social dimensions of personal agency

Theories of Agency developed by Margaret Archer (Archer, 2003) may present a way to understand the various dimensions (Hopwood, 2010b; Hopwood et al., 2011) of the part-time candidate's world, both within the context of the doctoral process and academic environment

and from the position of the individual's own personal concerns, time and employment commitments outside of the university setting. Due to limited existing research on part-time doctoral candidates experiences Archer's (Archer, 2003) perspectives on Personal Agency were included in this research for exploratory purposes rather than as a proposal for understanding how, or if, individuals demonstrated agency to advance with and complete a PhD on a part-time basis.

4.12.1. Structure, agency and internal conversations

In her book '*Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation*' (Archer, 2003) the sociologist Margaret Archer notes that much effort has been devoted to conceptualising how structure and culture impact on an individual's projects and personal aspirations. Her research sought to understand how individuals interpret cultural and structural influences in the environment and also how individuals respond to the social world, for example by demonstrating agency and deciding a course of action.

She critiques research for relying on "generalisations about what most of the people do most of the time" (Archer, 2003 p133) rather than seeking empirical evidence to understand individual agency and responses to social situations. Archer states that:

"Methodology lacks effective explanation of causation when the subjective powers of agents excluded from research design" (Archer, 2003 p133).

Archer's assumptions are that individuals are dynamic agents who can respond reflexively to constraints and enablers, such as structural and cultural factors, in the social environment to advance with personal projects and shape their own lives. Archer's perspectives on the role of the learner in shaping their world

“Gives weight to the private life and personal power of the social subject who can respond with subjective reflexivity to their environment rather than just operating within the constraints and enabling aspects of society” (Archer, 2003 p147).

How an individual interprets and reflects on social influences via internal conversations and reflexivity can influence the way that person views their objective social reality and extent to which they feel that they can advance with their own ambitions and personal projects. Archer proposed that

“The individual’s internal conversation is a mechanism which can be explored empirically to understand the relationship between structure and agency” (Archer, 2003 p53).

She stated that individuals can use internal dialogue to reflect on their status in relation to the achievement of personal projects and assess whether these endeavours are feasible or not, in the context of external constraints and enablers in the environment. Archer (2003) examined how individuals make sense of their social environment and circumstances, such as place and family of birth, to harness enablers or transcend barriers, for example social, personal or educational constraints, in order to realise projects of personal interest.

Archer’s theory provides a way to look at human experience and transformation in the context of both subjective (individual) and objective (social) factors, potentially overcoming shortcomings in theories of learning and transformation, which have been criticised as either overly focused on either individual characteristics or the environmental context (Mälkki, 2010).

4.13. Summary

This chapter has reiterated the challenges of understanding part-time learners’ experiences of navigating the doctoral process in the context of reported limited opportunities to access social and academic support from the academic institution during candidature. The emphasis on social interaction, for example via research communities and assumption of the learner as full-time

and typically situated in the academic institution has been critiqued as not reflecting the experiences of non-traditional, namely part-time doctoral candidates (Gardner, 2008). Researchers recommend further studies on part-time candidates' experiences of undertaking doctoral studies (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009; Zahl, 2015). The dilemma at the centre of the current research was not just to understand how the part-time learner navigates the doctoral process to completion, potentially due to personal agency and their own efforts, but also to understand if the learner harnessed support and resources (e.g., online and on a face-to-face basis), for example inside and outside the academic institution, to advance doctoral studies. Evidence highlights the potential barriers the part-time learner can face in terms of accessing social and academic networks within the academic environment due to often attending to occupational and personal responsibilities while undertaking doctoral qualifications (Watts, 2008).

Two conceptual approaches were discussed within this chapter, which may offer a potential way to address dimensions of the learners' experience which may influence progression of doctoral studies for a learner with limited access to academic networks or presence on campus. Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2005) can contribute to an exploration of the dynamic interaction between individuals and non-human resources, such as technology, documents and material artefacts as influencing knowledge generation. The value of Actor Network Theory is that it moves beyond an assumption of an educational process as primarily focused on human-centred interaction to explore how non-human actors (including technology) can contribute to learning and academic development (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010; Fenwick & Edwards, 2011).

Undertaking doctoral studies, potentially in the absence of ongoing interaction with academic staff and peers, on a face-to-face basis, has been identified as an aspect of the part-time candidate's experience. Therefore, potentially learners may avail of technological mediated resources to enhance academic progression and completion of the doctoral journey on a part-time basis.

Personal agency (Maher et al., 2004; McAlpine et al., 2012) has been identified as influencing individual's experiences of navigating the doctoral process, both in the context of personal resilience and own actions, as well as seeking out support from others inside and outside the academic institution. Researchers have critiqued a tendency to place responsibility for progressing and completing doctoral studies on the individual student, and recommendations include greater acknowledgement of the role that institutional policies, practices (McAlpine et al., 2012) and cultures (Gardner, 2008) can play in learners' experiences of navigating the doctoral process.

In summary, a theory of personal agency (Archer, 2003) which acknowledged the influence of dynamic interaction between the individual and the social environment, as well as the role of personal agency, reflection and action as influencing advancement with a personal goal was presented in this chapter. The acknowledgement of the interaction between the learner and the social environment and role of personal agency, action and reflection potentially offered a way to explore various dimensions of the learner's experience, namely psychological and environmental (Archer, 2003) influences on advancement with doctoral studies on a part-time basis. The two conceptual approaches addressed within this chapter were for discursive rather than predictive purposes, as there was no evidence in existing studies to suggest that part-time researchers accessed online resources to overcome potential limitations to accessing to face-to-face supports within the academic institution. Also, little is known about the role of personal agency and help-seeking behaviour as an influence on learners' experiences of progressing with and completing a PhD on a part-time basis.

The next chapter addresses the methodology and research approach developed within this study to explore learners' experiences of undertaking PhD on a part-time basis, primarily based on individuals own stories and accounts of progressing with and completing the doctoral journey. The initial methodology chapter outlines the preliminary stage of this research which was

undertaken to identify a sample of part-time doctoral learners (for example by discipline or stage of the doctoral journey) to focus on for the main phase of this study. The main methodology chapter in this study discusses the recruitment and selection of individuals to contribute to the main study, namely individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis in the university sector in Ireland. The findings from the preliminary study illustrated the richness of experience and reflections from participants who were at the late stages or had completed a PhD, versus individuals at early stages of the doctoral journey. The challenges inherent in recruiting such a specific sample of participants, who have finished the doctoral process is addressed in this thesis.

Chapter 5. Methodology Chapter: Preliminary research

5.1. Introduction

This chapter describes the methodology developed to explore the experiences of doctoral candidates beyond an assumption of the learner as situated (Pearson et al., 2016) and socialised (Weidman & Stein, 2003) within the academic institution during doctoral studies. The approach to undertaking this research was exploratory, due to the limited existing body of research on the experiences of individuals who undertake a PhD on a part-time basis. The structure of the chapter is as follows; description of the design and development of the research instruments; identification and recruitment of participants for the preliminary phase of the study, data generation and analysis. The outcomes from the preliminary research phase are discussed in terms of how this phase of the study contributed to the identification of participants for the main study. The recruitment strategy, identification of participants, data generation and analysis for the main study are addressed in a separate methodology chapter. The findings from main study are discussed in subsequent chapters in this thesis.

5.2. Methodological and conceptual framework developed for the current study

Given the body of research that tends to recognise the part-time learner as largely absent from university life during doctoral candidature (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Watts, 2008) the current research aimed to explore other dimensions of the part-time doctoral candidate's experiences. The broad objective, at the preliminary stage of this study was to understand learners' experiences of navigating doctoral studies on a part-time basis. Due to the limited body of existing research it was unclear if there was a stage of the doctoral process (e.g. early, middle or late) or a discipline of study, which might yield more valuable insights into learners' experiences of navigating doctoral studies on a part-time basis. The purpose of the preliminary study was to help identify a sample of participants who could shed light on the topic of part-time doctoral

candidature and, additionally, to develop the research instruments (questionnaire and semi-structured interview protocol) for the main study.

As a proposed approach to exploring learners' experiences of navigating doctoral studies on a part-time basis Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2005) and theories of Personal Agency (Archer, 2003) were included within this study as conceptual discursive tools to help provide purchase on the subsequent analysis. No assumptions were made in this study as to whether, or if, individuals who pursue doctoral studies on a part-time basis demonstrate agency or access support either on a face-to-face basis or via online or technology-based resources, due to limited existing research on the topic of part-time doctoral candidature. The utility of Actor Network Theory and theories of Personal Agency as conceptual tools for exploring part-time learners' experiences of pursuing doctoral studies are addressed in the Discussion Chapter later in this thesis.

5.3. Development of data generation tools for this study

The research tools, namely descriptive questionnaire (to generate contextual and background information on participants) and interview process, were developed and refined over two stages of the research process. The aim of the preliminary research phase was to explore if full and part-time PhD candidates (from a single university in Ireland) reported different experiences in terms of opportunities to access information, resources and research communities within the campus setting. Researchers have identified the challenges that part-time doctoral candidates can face in terms of participating in research activities and collegial networks in the academic institution (Gardner, 2008; Watts, 2008; Zahl, 2015). The inclusion of both full and part-time doctoral learners in the preliminary phase of the study was to ensure that no assumptions were made on the differences between full and part-time doctoral candidates, prior to undertaking the main research study. This was a cautious measure due to the limited existing body of research on part-time learners' experiences of navigating the doctoral process. An additional

interim research activity was undertaken to explore (via semi-structured interview) the experiences of part-time learners undertaking an alternative form of doctoral programme to the traditional PhD, such as the Professional (for example Educational) doctorate.

The cohort nature of the Professional (for example Educational Doctorate) where candidates pursue studies over a single timeframe, usually three to four years has been cited as an advantage to this mode of doctoral study (Bourner et al., 2001). The Professional doctorate tends to be designed for part-time learners, usually over the duration of three years, and provides a contrast with the experience of learners undertaking a PhD qualification on a part-time basis often over five to six years from start to completion. The contributions from doctoral candidates who contributed to the preliminary research study helped with the identification of a sampling and recruitment strategy for participants for the main study. The main research study focused on the experiences of individuals who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis within an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) discipline within different universities in Ireland. The rationale for focusing on the experiences of learners who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis within an Arts and Social Science field (AHSS) is addressed within this thesis.

5.4. Research design - Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to generate background and contextual data on each participant. This included the following details: motivation for undertaking doctoral studies; choice of doctoral programme; incidence of family and employment responsibilities (if applicable) and age range on starting the doctoral process. The questionnaire included items which explored if participants had experiences of accessing doctoral programme via online resources as well as on a face-to-face basis during candidature, for example via documents, web-based information or doctoral programme guidelines. Researchers recommend understanding how different entities contribute to knowledge generation, for example technology, document-based and material resources (Latour, 2005) beyond an interpretation of interaction and

knowledge exchange as solely based on human centered endeavours (Michael, 2017). The questionnaire (see Appendices) was primarily designed based on a closed questions format with open question comments boxes. The inclusion of the comments boxes in the questionnaire provided participants with an opportunity to convey their experiences in their own terms and words (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2018).

Although the current research was qualitative in design, as the focus is on exploring individual's accounts of pursuing a PhD on a part-time basis, the inclusion of structured questions and predefined categories in the questionnaire offered a standardised approach to collecting the data. The closed question format of the questionnaire, coupled with the open question format of the Comments boxes, both in the questionnaire and semi-structured interview protocol contributed to understanding different aspects of each participant's experiences. This included an exploration of learners' accounts of interacting with the environment (e.g. the academic institution) and additionally individual (personal) experiences of, for example, reflecting on progress, taking action or seeking help to advance with the doctoral process.

5.5. Table 2: Questionnaire themes within the context of existing research

The following table outlines the different sections within the questionnaire and illustrates how existing research and empirical studies informed the development of the questions.

Section in Questionnaire	Theme	Existing research/survey data
Sections: Demographics	Gender/full-time or part-time enrolment status/age range on starting doctoral process.	Age range of doctoral candidates: part-time tend to be more mature in years than traditional full-time doctoral students (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012).
	Work/family caring roles/children/while studying.	Motherhood (Cronshaw, 2017). Multiple roles in addition to studies, including work and family (Watts, 2008).
	Distance from place of residence to academic institution.	Postgraduate's place of residence tends to be further from academic institution than undergraduates (Harmon & Erskine, 2016).
	Employment status/funding source (self/other/mixed) in PhD.	Part-time doctoral candidates tend to be self-funded and employed during studies compared to many full-timers (Evans, 2002).
Section 2: About your PhD	Discipline of study/Year of commencing/stage of PhD process (early/middle/late).	Different challenges presented for learners at different stages of the PhD journey (Ampaw & Jaegar, 2011; Lovitts, 2008, Pifer & Baker, 2016).
Section 3: Interaction with the academic institution during PhD	Frequency of time spent on campus. Reasons for visiting campus e.g. access training/meet supervisor/peers.	Part-time PhDs reported as having limited access to campus-based academic and social networks and resources (Zahl, 20015).
Section 4: Access to resources & support from academic institution	Access to academic information and personal support during candidature.	Engagement between the academic institution and the candidate (Weidman & Stein, 2003) influences experiences and progression of studies.
	Sources of doctoral programme information and support (face-to-face).	Communities of Practice can facilitate learning and sense of belonging (Wenger, 1998).
	Sources of doctoral programme information and support (e.g. online and document-based).	Knowledge acquisition and transfer can occur between non-human (e.g. technology and artefacts) as well as human actors (Latour, 2005).

In summary the role of the questionnaire within the current study was to explore part-time doctoral candidates' experiences of interacting with the academic institution and accessing doctoral programme support and information via face-to-face and online sources at different stages of the PhD. The design of the questionnaire was underpinned by existing themes within doctoral education literature and research which have been identified as influencing doctoral learners' experiences of navigating the study process. Examples included themes and question items which explored different aspects of the learner's experience such as life-stage, age and incidence of work and caring roles. The purpose of the semi-structured interview was to provide participants with the opportunity to give an account of their experiences of pursuing doctoral studies on a part-time basis.

5.6. Research design -semi structured interview process

The semi-structured interview process was designed to support the predominantly closed question format of the questionnaire. According to Kvale (2006) interviews have become a popular alternative to Positivist quantitative approaches to generating data since the 1980s. The interview process can be used to "give voice" to people who don't normally participate in public debate (Kvale, 2006 p480). The interview can provide individuals with the opportunity to present their life stories in their own words, rather than responding to predesignated categories or other structured formats for generating information (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001).

5.7. Location of the interview

The location where the interview takes place is important and analysis of the interview should acknowledge the context where the interview took place as well as evaluating the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Rapley, 2001). Interviewers need to establish the goals of the interview process (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001) and identify the power dynamics and potential asymmetries of power within the interaction between the interviewer and the participant (Kvale, 2006). Interviews can move between a continuum where the goal of the

interviewer is to understand the interviewee's perspective and experiences to a situation where the interviewer and interviewee contribute equally to the co-construction of knowledge (Bernier-Rodoreda et al., 2018). While researchers have noted that although interviews can often be time consuming as a mode of data collection, the data generated from interviews can be often be more personal than information gathered from questionnaires (Jamshed, 2014), for example by allowing the researcher to respond to individual differences and explore issues in more depth with participants (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013).

5.8. Ethical considerations and reflexivity within the interview process

In order for the interviewer to gain an understanding of the interviewee's perspective the interviewer is expected to bracket their own attitudes and knowledge from the interview process. Gewirtz and Cribb (2006) recommend that researchers need to be aware of how their own value judgements can influence the type of data sought, or not sought, for example evidence that challenges the researcher's own assumptions and beliefs. Therefore, researchers need to demonstrate ethical reflexivity by paying attention to their own potential subjectivity and biases regarding their research (Pillow, 2003) and be explicit about values, judgements and assumptions that are embedded in each stage of the research process (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2006).

To demonstrate self-awareness and make visible the decisions and actions I took at each stage of the research process (Pillow, 2003) I kept a reflective journal throughout the duration of the research process, documenting my decisions, actions and potential dilemmas throughout the research process. An extract from the reflective journal is included in the chapter which addresses the methodology for the main research study in this thesis. The documentation of my progress, decisions and actions was particularly important within this study in the context that, like my target population, I was pursuing a PhD on a part-time basis. I have also worked in a Student Advisory role over the last decade in the university where I am undertaking doctoral

studies, providing learning and development support to a diverse body of undergraduate and postgraduate students, including doctoral candidates.

Throughout my work as a Student Learning Advisor, I have seen doctoral students both triumph and struggle. Therefore, I felt I needed to be aware of my own background and potential biases, which have both ignited my interest in this topic but may potentially have influenced my perceptions and belief system on PhD candidates' experiences. The process of writing and keeping a reflective journal throughout the research process helped me to reflect on my practice, perceptions and experiences as I progressed through this journey, both as a researcher and as a part-time PhD candidate.

5.9. Data generation via the semi-structured interview process

Potential asymmetry in the power dynamic (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2018; Kvale, 2006) was addressed in terms of how I (the researcher) positioned myself within the research process. I viewed my role in the interview process as that of attentive listener, seeking to gain an understanding of participants' experiences (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2018) of navigating the doctoral journey. The goal of the research was to "give voice" (Kvale, 2006 p481) to part-time doctoral candidates who have been described as invisible in doctoral education policy and practice (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009). The semi-structured interview process was influenced by Margaret Archer's work 'Structure, Agency and the Internal Conversation' (Archer, 2003) which explored via interviews how individuals interacted with the structures and culture of their social worlds, either by demonstrating agency, or not, in order to realise an ambition or personal goal. The central argument in Archer's work (Archer, 2003) was that individuals can demonstrate personal agency to interact with the social environment as a means of shaping their personal potential and realising a goal, which in the case of this research was the navigation of the PhD process on a part-time basis. The key questions that Archer (2003) asked individuals influenced the questions developed for the semi-structured interview process in this research. Examples

included exploring if participants identified any enablers or barriers, for example personal or environmental, to progressing with doctoral studies and if any enablers and barriers were encountered, did participants demonstrate agency such as take action, seek help or harness support and resources, to advance with studies?

5.10. Preliminary research phase

The goal of the preliminary research phase was to explore the experiences of a diverse sample of participants who were at different stages of the PhD journey within a single university in Ireland, including both full and part-time PhD candidates. The rationale for including full-time learners in the preliminary process was to explore if full and part-time candidates reported differences in opportunities to participate in academic and supportive networks within the academic institution, as has been reported in research within doctoral education (Gardner, 2008; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Zahl, 2015). At this stage of the process, it was not clear if there was an advantage to exploring PhD candidates experiences at a particular stage of the research journey (e.g., early, middle or late) or to explore individual's experiences across different stages of the doctoral process such as early-stage induction to mid-stage transfer or from mid-stage transfer to final viva assessment and submission of the thesis.

5.11. Pilot phase of the preliminary study

To pilot the questionnaire and interview data generation tools I conducted a pilot study, on a face-to-face basis with one participant, and additionally via remote communication methods (email and telephone) with two participants. The reason for exploring if it was feasible to conduct the study via remote access was to harness the possibility of recruiting from a wider sample of individuals, who may not have been available to meet on a face-to-face basis.

According to researchers most qualitative data is generated via verbal interaction between the interviewer and participant (or groups) on a face-to-face basis or by email and social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013) or by telephone interview

(Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2012). While telephone interviews tend to be shorter in duration than face-to-face interaction, the technique of conducting telephone interviews can require a high level of interpersonal skills on the part of the interviewer in terms of creating a rapport and connection with the respondents (Irvine et al., 2012).

Wisker et al. (2010) conducted face-to-face and telephone interviews, combined with email contact in a UK based study exploring twenty-two full-time, part-time and international doctoral candidates' learning journeys.

5.12. Procedure for conducting the pilot study within the preliminary research phase

I met with an individual on a face-to-face basis, at a location and time suggested by the participant, based on communication via email. I did not know the participant personally, but I had met them at a social event for research students held at the university where we were both undertaking doctoral studies. The participant agreed to take part in the preliminary study and give feedback on the data generation tools (questionnaire and interview) and provide any recommendation and observations on the research process in general. The participant was studying within an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) field but within a different discipline to me and was at a later stage of the doctoral process than I was and was preparing for the viva assessment and submission of the research thesis. At the beginning of the meeting, I gave the participant information on the research study and asked them to read and sign the Consent Form which I then co-signed (see Appendices for Participant Information and Consent Form for the Preliminary Research Study). I asked the participant to complete the questionnaire, which was in paper format and took approximately 20 minutes to finish. I then asked the participant if they would like me to audio record the interview and send the transcript to them afterwards, or if they would prefer if I did not audio record the interview process but took brief notes during the interview process and sent them the transcript by email afterwards. The

participant did not state a preference, in terms of having the interview recorded or not.

Therefore, due to the lack of expressed consent I chose to take notes rather than record the interview process, and to send the transcript of the interview by email to the participant afterwards.

5.13. Ethical and practical considerations emerging from the pilot study

On hindsight I was satisfied that I had not recorded the interview process as the participant revealed very personal information about a health issue, which had impacted on their experience of the doctoral journey. While pertinent to the individual's story I felt it might have been unethical to keep a record of this personal information when the interview was completed. I advised the participant that when I was writing up the transcript I would exclude any personal information disclosed to me during the data generation/interview process that might identify the individual or contravene the Researcher Ethics Procedure I had signed and agreed with my supervisor and the Ethics Committee in the department where I was undertaking the PhD. Based on the experience of conducting the pilot study I made the decision that I would give participants who took part in the preliminary stage of the research the opportunity to decide if they would like to have the interview recorded or not. The participant who contributed to the pilot study on a face-to-face basis did not have any recommendations to make in terms of amending the data-generation tools.

The aim of the pilot study was to establish if the questionnaire could be administered to participants online and followed up with a telephone interview did not prove fruitful. Two individuals agreed to take part in the pilot process and evaluate if the data could be generated successfully in the absence of face-to-face interaction between the researcher and the participant. Both participants were in different academic disciplines to me, one was an early stage (part-time) candidate, and the other was a (full-time) late stage/completing PhD researcher. Both agreed to complete the questionnaire (which I sent via email). The feedback I

received independently from both participants was that the lack of opportunity for face-to-face interaction acted as a disincentive to complete the questionnaire via email, or to conduct the interview by phone, especially due to other competing and more pressing research and personal commitments that were a priority for participants. Therefore, I decided that face-to-face interaction on a one-to-one basis, rather than via online interviews, would potentially offer a more person-centred approach to encouraging meaningful interaction and engaging with participants.

5.14. Sampling strategy for the preliminary research phase

For the preliminary research study, I used snowballing sampling techniques, namely identifying participants and asking them to refer me to others within their social and academic networks. The advantages of snowballing recruitment methods is that they can provide a way to access participants who are hard to recruit via other methods (Atkinson & Flint, 2001) based on a preselected criteria (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013) with specific characteristics or experiences relevant to the study, who may provide difficult to locate via other sampling strategies (Ishak, Bakar, & Yazid, 2014). According to Atkinson and Flint (2001) referral between participants, which is a feature of snowballing sampling, may lead to potential bias in that participants may share similar characteristics which may not be representative of a broader sample of individuals, who have not been recruited but meet the criteria for the study (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Therefore, to address any potential bias in terms of the sampling strategies, I sought to recruit participants from a diverse range of sources. This included networking with contacts and fellow delegates at conferences and training events and participating in social events with other doctoral candidates within the institution to promote my research and to ask colleagues and peers to share information on the study with their own networks in college.

According to researchers (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013) there is no formal criteria for establishing sample size in a qualitative research study, which normally includes eight to fifteen participants,

but can vary significantly inside and outside this range. Qualitative studies explored within a review of the literature for this study ranged from one or two participants, for example in the context of part-time doctoral candidates' experiences of participating in a research-based community (Teeuwsen et al., 2012). Larger qualitative studies included interviews with thirty five participants on the challenges of balancing motherhood/caring for children with part-time doctoral studies (Cronshaw, 2017). Therefore, no minimum or maximum sample size was defined to explore part-time doctoral candidates' experiences, but the goal of the study was to draw on a diverse a range of individual perspectives of navigating the doctoral journey on a part-time basis.

5.15. Procedures for conduction the preliminary research phase

Participants were recruited using snowballing sampling strategies (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). I promoted the research study at conferences, training and social events within the academic institution and invited fellow delegates or colleagues to contact me or pass on the details within their own networks to doctoral candidates who might be interested in participating in the study. In order to address the potential asymmetry in terms of power dynamics between the researcher and the participant (Kvale, 2006) I requested that participants arrange the time and place for the meeting, or select a neutral venue or office space, rather than availing of a meeting space associated with my role as a part-time staff member (Student Learning Advisor) in the university where the preliminary research was conducted. I provided participants with an Information Sheet on the aims of the project and were asked to sign a Consent Form which I then co-signed (see Appendices for examples of the Information Sheet and Consent Form). On average participants completed the questionnaire and interview process in approximately one hour.

I transcribed the notes from each interview, none of the participants who took part in the preliminary phase of the research elected to have the interview process audio recorded. The

notes generated from each interview were emailed individually to each participant. The purpose of sharing the transcripts with participants was to increase transparency of the research and to ensure that I sought to make visible the practices which underpinned the construction of knowledge (Pillow, 2003), to ensure I had understood the interviewees' experiences and responses (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2018) and to address any potential bias or subjectivity (Creswell, 2012) both in the context of my role as researcher (Pillow, 2003) and in my role as a fellow doctoral candidate. The data generated from the standard closed questions in the questionnaire was analysed using simple descriptive statistics (Pallant, 2005) to generate data on the frequency of participants' responses. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted on both the open questions responses within the comments box in the questionnaire and the data generated within the interview responses.

5.16. Overview of individuals who contributed to the preliminary research study

Eighteen participants from a single university in Ireland took part in the preliminary research study and all completed both the questionnaire and interview process. Four additional interviews were conducted with academic staff and postgraduate student representatives, to provide additional context on the doctoral study process and stages of progression and assessment during candidature from early stages to completion of the thesis. Details of doctoral candidates who participated in the preliminary research study are outlined in the table below.

5.17. Table 3: Full and part-time PhD learners who took part in the preliminary study

Stage of the research process	Enrolment status	Discipline of study	Gender	Total
Completed/graduated	Full-time	AHSS	F = 1	2
	Part-time	AHSS	M = 1	
Late Stage (Viva)	Full-time	AHSS	F = 2	4
	Full-time	AHSS	M = 2	
Mid-stage (Confirmation process)	Full-time	AHSS	F = 4	7
	Full-time	HS (Health Science)	F = 2	
	Part-time	AHSS	F = 1	
Early-stage (induction)	Part-time	AHSS	F = 4	5
	Part-time	HS (Health Science)	F = 1	
TOTAL				18

5.18. Participant demographics and discipline of study

Eighteen participants contributed to the preliminary research study, fifteen of the participants were from an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) discipline and three were from a Health Science (HS) field of research. I was not successful in recruiting participants from the Science disciplines, as I did not have any contacts or doctoral networks in these research fields.

However, I interviewed a member of academic staff within the Sciences who confirmed that there are very few part-time PhD candidates in the Science disciplines as most doctoral candidates in the Science disciplines are full-time and undertaking research within a laboratory and team-based community of researchers. Statistical data on enrolments within doctoral programmes in Ireland show that over half of part-time doctoral candidates (52%) are based within Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) fields compared with Health Science (22%); Science (20%) or other fields (Higher Education Authority, 2018d). For the main phase of this study, I made the decision to focus on the experiences of learners who completed a PhD in an

Arts or Social Sciences and Humanities discipline due to the high levels of enrolments of part-time doctoral learners in these fields, and comparatively low rates of part-time doctoral candidates within the Science disciplines.

5.19. Demographics and enrolment status of participants (Preliminary study)

Participants who contributed to the preliminary phase of this research included full-time (11) and part-time (7) doctoral learners. Four of the full-time candidates were international doctoral candidates, both from inside and outside the EU. All the seven part-time doctoral candidates (of which there were six females and one male) were resident in Ireland during the doctoral process. Both full and part-time candidates varied in terms of age range from 25 to over 55 years of age on commencing doctoral studies. A third (6) of full and part-time candidates were under thirty years of age on starting the study process and both full and part-time participants included individuals who had started studies, aged in their forties and fifties. Both full and part-time candidates reported studying whilst working and caring for family members.

The primary reason given by full-timers for working while studying was to supplement income from PhD funding grants and to meet financial commitments associated with the everyday cost of living, such as rent, food, utilities and travel. Full-time respondents tended to work on a part-time and occasional basis, often in a role within the university or related to the PhD research topic during studies. In contrast participants who were undertaking doctoral studies on a part-time basis tended to be in full-time employment, often in a role outside of the academic institution and separate to the doctoral process. The responses from participants illustrated the diversity of full and part-time candidates' experiences of managing doctoral studies in the context of other responsibilities, which suggests further studies on doctoral candidates' experiences of balancing studies with other commitments beyond the scope of the current study. Researchers recommend further studies which explore and acknowledge the

multifaceted dimensions of learners' lives, within and beyond the doctoral process, such as work and additional roles and responsibilities (Hopwood et al., 2011; McAlpine et al., 2012).

5.20. Stages of the doctoral process (early/middle/late/completed)

Participants in the preliminary phase of the research included both full and part-time doctoral candidates at different stages (early/middle/late/completing and completed) of the PhD process. Participants who were at the later stages of the doctoral process, in particular individuals who had recently graduated, had a strong sense retrospectively on what had facilitated or hindered doctoral progress (either institutional or personal) at each stage of the journey. In comparison participants who had yet to experience formal assessment of the doctoral process, for example at the mid-stage confirmation or late-stage viva interview did not have as clear an understanding of the potential challenges and academic requirements at different stages of the doctoral process. Therefore, for the main phase of the research I concentrated on an exploration of part-time learners' experiences of navigating the PhD to completion. The goal of the main stage of the study was capture learners' retrospective experiences of completing a PhD on a part-time basis, rather than explore the experiences of early or mid-stage candidates.

As early or mid-stage candidates did not have the personal experience of making the transition from novice to independent researcher (Lovitts, 2008) and had yet to generate research which makes an original contribution to existing knowledge, which has been defined as the main outcome from the PhD process (European University Association, 2016). The decision not to explore the experiences of part-time candidates who had dropped out or who did not successfully complete the PhD journey was because the goal of the study was to shed light on candidates' experiences of successfully navigating and completing different stages of assessment within the doctoral process. Researchers suggest there are a number of challenges for doctoral candidates at various stages of the journey which require different types of responses from the

academic institution which require different types of support and training (Pifer & Baker, 2016). In addition, there are challenges which need to be navigated by the candidate over the doctoral journey, for example the completion of coursework and modules in the early stages and evaluation of progress with the research at the mid stage and finally assessment of the quality of the research at the final viva and thesis submission stages. Candidates who had dropped out or who did not complete the doctoral process would have less direct experience of what had worked or not worked at each stage in comparison with learners who had navigated each stage and successfully completed the PhD. The implications of undertaking a research study based on the retrospective experiences of individuals who had completed doctoral studies will be discussed in the methodology chapter for the main study.

5.21. Access to doctoral programme support and information

Participants' responses to the semi-structured interview questions illustrated the diversity of individuals' experiences of undertaking doctoral studies in the context of frequency of access to the physical campus environment during the working day. Participants' accounts of accessing academic and peer-based communities within the academic institution, primarily on a face-to-face basis, concurs with existing research which illustrates the barriers non-traditional learners can face in terms of accessing academic networks and social supports on campus (Gardner, 2008).

Part-time candidates who participated in the preliminary phase of this research tended to visit campus on a sporadic basis, on average once a fortnight and outside of working hours. In comparison participants who were undertaking a full-time PhD reported the advantages of regular access to academic staff and peers, primarily in a face-to-face and the benefits of working in a shared office space with fellow doctoral candidates as providing opportunities to develop informal academic and personal support networks.

“I find out a lot of information by bumping into people [staff and peers] in the corridor or by chatting at the kettle when making a cup of tea” [Quote from full-time participant].

Part-time and full-time international students or those who were first in family to undertake a doctorate or who had not completed a previous undergraduate or postgraduate qualification in the university reported challenges to accessing academic and peer networks in the university. Recommendations include greater attention to addressing potential barriers that some doctoral learners can face to accessing research and personal networks on campus by augmenting face-to-face support with online and web-based resources (O'Regan, 2020b, 2021).

“It's there somewhere online [doctoral programme information] but it can sometimes be hard to find” [Quote from full-time participant].

While both full and part-time candidates cited the supervisor as an influence on doctoral progression and quality of the learning experience, part-time learners cited a dependency on the supervisor, or a fellow full-time doctoral candidate, to source information and find out about academic resources and opportunities. Lack of access to campus on an ongoing basis was identified primarily by part-time doctoral candidates as a challenge to building up collegial relationships with academic staff and peers. As one full-time participant observed about part-time doctoral candidates:

“Where are they? [part-time candidates] – we never see them.” [Quote from full-time participant].

5.22. Summary of findings from the preliminary research study

In summary the responses from participants illustrated the diversity of learners' experiences of pursuing doctoral studies in the context of access to doctoral programme supports and communities on campus. Both full and part-time doctoral candidates who contributed to this study illustrated the challenges faced by students who manage additional employment and

personal commitments with academic pursuits. Due to the small sample of participants, the responses from individuals who contributed to this study cannot be generalised to a wider population of learners undertaking doctoral studies. However, the responses from participants highlighted the challenges that individuals, namely part-time doctoral candidates, can face in terms of accessing research and support networks due to limited and often infrequent presence within the academic institution. The responses from participants who had completed or were at the late stages (e.g., viva and thesis submission) of the doctoral process provided insights into individual learners' accounts of navigating the doctoral process, in terms of what had influenced progression at each stage of the journey.

The next chapter presents the methodological approach and process for the main study, namely an exploration of learners' experiences of completing a PhD on a part-time basis within the university sector in Ireland. The rationale for exploring the experiences of individuals' who completed studies in different universities was to overcome any inherent bias in focusing on doctoral candidates within a single academic institution, particularly one which I was familiar with, both as a doctoral researcher and a member of staff within Student Learning Development Services.

Chapter 6. Methodology for main phase of the study

6.1. Introduction

This chapter describes the methodological approach and research process developed to explore individuals' accounts of navigating a PhD to completion on a part-time basis within different universities in Ireland. Qualitative and exploratory methods were employed to provide participants with the opportunity to share their own stories. This included a questionnaire to gather data on participants' demographics, background information and motivations to undertake a doctoral qualification on a part-time basis. A semi-structured interview process was developed to provide individuals with the opportunity to reflect on different aspects of the doctoral journey, for example institutional, academic and personal factors relevant to their own circumstances and experiences of pursuing the PhD to completion. The issue of post hoc rationalisation was addressed, namely the potential for revisionism or reframing of experiences by participants who were recounting their stories of completing doctoral studies retrospectively, versus a study on the experiences of candidates who were still in the process of undertaking the PhD. A thematic analysis of the participants' narratives revealed the unique experience of undertaking a PhD for each person in the context of multiple additional, and often conflicting, occupational and caring responsibilities, which will be addressed in this thesis.

6.2. Review of the preliminary phases of the study as influencing the main study

The research study was conducted in two phases over the lifetime of this (part-time) doctoral project from 2016 to date (2021 at the time of writing up the thesis). The preliminary research phase (2018-2019) was based on responses from eighteen PhD candidates at different stages of the research process, from start to completion, from different disciplines, within a single university in Ireland. The findings from the preliminary study contributed to the development of the research instruments, namely questionnaire and interview protocol, sampling and

recruitment strategy (learners who had completed a part-time PhD) and method of analysis for the main study.

The purpose of reiterating these points and reviewing how the research evolved over the different stages of the process is to help set the scene for the main study. This included clarifying the choices made at different points within the study and highlighting the role of all the participants (preliminary and main stage) in shaping the focus and direction of this research. An overview of the stages and decisions taken at each point in the research study is outlined in the following table.

6.3. Table 4: Summary of participants and decisions at each stage of the research

Phase of study	Purpose	Participants	Decision and outcome
Preliminary study Research activity 1:	To develop research and data collection instruments, namely the questionnaire/interview). To identify sample and recruitment strategy for main study.	18 (11 full-time and 7 part-time) PhD learners participated in the preliminary research phase. Data was generated via participants' responses to the questionnaire and semi-structured interview. (TOTAL: 18 participants) Additional interviews with 4 PG staff/advisors from a single university. (TOTAL: 4 participants)	Decision to focus on the experiences of completed part-time PhDs from different universities in Ireland. Decision to focus on learners who completed a PhD on a part-time basis in an AHSS discipline due to high level of enrolments of p/t PhDs in non-science versus Science/Health Science fields in Ireland. (HEA Statistics, 2018).
Preliminary study Research activity 2:	To explore experiences of (part-time) Professional doctorate learners.	Interviews with 4 individuals who had undertaken Professional doctorates from two different universities in Ireland. (TOTAL: 4 participants)	Participants valued peer/cohort aspect of programme which was not a feature of part-time PhD learners' experiences.
MAIN STUDY	To explore experiences of learners who completed a PhD (part-time) in an AHSS field in different universities in Ireland.	Eighteen participants from 5 different universities in Ireland. (TOTAL: 18 participants)	Participants' stories illustrated the diversity of learners' experiences of navigating a PhD to completion on a part-time basis
TOTAL	Preliminary & Main study	44 participants in total	

6.3.1. Decision to focus on the experiences of learners who completed a (part-time) PhD

The decision to focus on the experiences of individuals who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis, rather than individuals who were at the earlier or middle stages of the doctoral process, was to understand retrospectively what had influenced each learner's account of navigating the

PhD at each stage of the journey. This included the goal of understanding how each individual navigated the transition from novice to independent researcher, which has been identified as a key challenge of the doctoral process (Lovitts, 2008). Early-stage doctoral students who participated in the preliminary research phase had not completed the later stages of assessment within the PhD such as the viva interview and submission of the thesis, therefore, had no personal experiences of what had worked at each stage of the PhD which influenced submission and completion of the whole doctoral process.

6.3.2. Decision to focus on part-time PhD learners v Professional/Educational doctorates

As part of the preliminary research study, four individuals who had completed alternative forms of doctoral study to the PhD, on a part-time basis, namely a Professional doctorate were interviewed (2019-2020). The rationale for exploring the experiences of individuals who had completed or were completing a Professional doctorate was to ensure that I did not pursue this study from a position of bias, namely focusing only on the experiences of individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis. As I was undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis myself I felt it was important to demonstrate objectivity and make visible each of the decisions I made at each stage of the doctoral process in terms of sampling criteria and research questions.

Responses from individuals who had elected to pursue a Professional, for example Educational, doctorate illustrated the value of undertaking doctoral studies within a cohort or peer group, which has been identified as a benefit of the Professional doctorate (Bourner et al., 2001), yet not associated with the part-time PhD candidate's experience of navigating the doctoral journey.

6.3.3. Differences between (part-time) PhD and Educational/Professional Doctorates

In contrast to the participants who pursued Professional doctorates, the part-time PhD candidates who contributed to the preliminary phase of this study did not report experiences of participating in cohort or peer-based communities. Challenges to accessing academic and peer-

based networks within the campus setting has been identified as a feature of the part-time PhD learner's experience (Gardner, 2008 and Watts, 2008). Therefore, I made the decision to concentrate on the experiences of individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis for the current research study, rather than other modes of doctoral programme such as the Professional doctorate.

6.3.4. Learners who completed a PhD in an Arts, Humanities and Social Science discipline

The initial phases of this study helped to identify the focus for the main study, which was to explore the experiences of individuals who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis in an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) field in different universities in Ireland. An analysis of national statistics from the Higher Education Authority (Higher Education Authority, 2018d) reveals that over half of part-time PhD candidates (52%) are enrolled in an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) discipline with lower rates of participation, namely less than 25% of enrolments in either Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics or Health Science fields. Some disciplines of study, for example Education tends to attract high levels of part-time enrolments at doctoral level (Maher, 2004). The implications of focusing on experiences of individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis in an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) discipline, particularly the tendency for part-time candidates to be attracted to certain fields of study, such as Education are addressed in later chapters of this thesis, particularly in terms of sampling strategy and research findings.

6.4. Research questions

The research questions developed within this study sought to provide part-time doctoral learners with an opportunity to tell their stories of completing the PhD process within the context of different potential personal and environmental factors pertinent to each person's experience. This included an exploration of the position of each learner both in relation to access to doctoral programme resources within the academic institution and potentially from

other sources of support, for example within the individual's own personal and academic networks. As well as exploring learners' experiences of interacting with the academic institution to access doctoral programme supports and resources during the doctoral process, the research questions were developed to understand if individuals had any experiences which challenged or facilitated progression with studies. The goal of the research was also to understand if learners demonstrated agency or sought help to advance with and complete the doctoral process. The research questions for the main study were:

1. What were individual part-time PhD learner's experiences of accessing doctoral programme information and support (face-to-face and online) from the academic institution during the doctoral process, within an Arts, Humanities and Social Science(AHSS) field to completion?
2. In what ways did individual part-time PhD learners report any factors (personal or institutional) which facilitated or impeded progress and completion of doctoral studies?
3. In what ways did individual part-time PhD learners give accounts of demonstrating agency and seeking help (inside and outside the academic institution) to progress with and complete doctoral studies?

6.5. Considerations within the interview questions and process

The choice of open and non-directional questions developed for the semi-structured interview process provided an opportunity for participants to discuss and reflect on various influences, for example institutional, academic or personal, as they related to each person's story of navigating the PhD journey to completion.

Researchers recommend an exploration of doctoral candidates' experiences which recognises the multi-dimensional aspects of people's lives, including personal, employment and caring activities, within and beyond the doctoral process within the academic institution (Hopwood et al., 2011). Watts (2008) recommended acknowledging that part-time doctoral candidates are

not viewed as a single group in terms of mode of enrolment which can include movement between full and part-time status over the duration of the doctoral process to completion, often over five to six years of candidature. The exploratory and qualitative nature of this study provided part-time learners with an opportunity to recount their experiences of pursuing a PhD and adding their stories to discourse within doctoral education.

6.6. Narrative analysis and learners' experiences of navigating the PhD journey

According to Reissman (2005) narrative methods are valuable in that they provide story tellers with an opportunity to not just to describe but also to reinterpret and reimagine the past and make connections between different events (Reissman, 2005). As a method narrative analysis tends to be more suitable for understanding the experiences of a small rather than large numbers of individuals (Reissman, 2005). Qualitative research studies on the experiences of part-time doctoral learners have included varying numbers of participants, from two individual researchers' accounts of undertaking part-time doctoral studies (Bates & Goff, 2012) to the experiences of thirty-five women who recounted stories of navigating doctoral studies in the context of motherhood (Cronshaw, 2017). Reissman (2005) identified different approaches to undertaking a narrative based study, which vary depending on whether the emphasis is on structural features of the story, such as language and content of the account or whether the focus is on the interaction and dynamic between narrator and listener, for example in the process of the co-constructing the narratives. Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou (2013) identified the value of using stories and narratives as a means of illustrating the connection between personal experience and themes such as agency and identity.

Burr (2003) discusses the importance of narrative analysis as a method to understand how people tell themselves stories, which can provide insights into how people view themselves, and demonstrate agency in validating their decisions and actions.

6.6.1. Narratives and the experiences of doctoral candidates

Researchers have used the metaphor of the journey (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009; Wisker et al., 2010) to describe individual learners' experiences of undertaking doctoral studies. The doctoral process has been acknowledged as challenging in that it requires the individual to navigate different stages of the research process from induction to completion (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011) and to successfully make the transition from novice to independent researcher (Lovitts, 2008). My interest in the use of narrative analysis in the main study emerged from my experiences of communicating with and listening to participants during the preliminary research study. The open question format of the interview process developed within the preliminary phase of this study were non-directive. Participants could recount any factors that potentially facilitated or impeded progression with doctoral studies, including institutional, academic or personal, based on each participant's experience of navigating the PhD. The interview questions elicited not just brief responses but narratives, for example stories with a beginning, middle and end (O'Farrell & Fitzmaurice, 2013) around specific episodes, significant people, stresses and triumphs (Crossley, 2007). Participants' responses gave a rich insight into the individual's world and the factors that had influenced the experience of pursuing a PhD. According to Banyam (2015) narrative analysis is a research approach which captures the time, space and place dimension of human experience. An approach which recognises the time, space and geographical dimensions (Banyam, 2015) of individual's stories may provide insights to part-time learners' experiences of navigating doctoral studies, beyond the context of the academic institution. For example, to explore if alternative factors, such as the employment setting, job role, home environment, personal responsibilities or the learners' own actions influence academic advancement and completion of studies.

A narrative-based account of learners' experiences of navigating a PhD on a part-time basis addresses recommendations for further studies on the experiences of non-traditional doctoral candidates (Gardner, 2008) beyond assumptions based on the full-time PhD learner's

experiences, which are prevalent in doctoral education research, policy and practice (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009).

6.7. Narrative analysis and the experiences of non-traditional learners

Researchers (Minichiello, 2018) employed narrative methods to explore the experiences of non-traditional learners (working while studying and more mature in years than fellow students) who participated in a distance-learning programme which prepared students for entry into an Engineering undergraduate programme. The narratives illustrated how non-traditional learners managed similar personal and family related responsibilities as administrators and staff who were co-ordinating and teaching on the Engineering programme. Minichiello (2018) recommended that teaching and academic staff recognise non-traditional learners as adult peers in terms of life experience, in comparison with more traditional learners who undertake undergraduate programmes post-secondary level education. The findings of the study by Minichiello (2018) illustrate the value of narratives, not just in terms of understanding individuals within their own context and experiences, but potentially in relation to other stakeholders, for example within educational systems and academic institutions. The current research explored individual's accounts of pursuing a PhD on a part-time basis in the context of understanding the complexity of each learner's own circumstances and additionally sought to identify themes across participants' experiences with the aim of providing insights to part-time learners' accounts of navigating the PhD. The core element of narrative analysis, according to Weatherhead (2011) is the self-construct of the participant and what has shaped this view. The role of the interviewer is to offer encouragement to the interviewee, for example via non-directive questions, for example 'what happened next?' to encourage the individuals to recount their own stories and experiences within the main narrative (Weatherhead, 2011) which in the case of this study was an exploration of learners' experiences of navigating the PhD on a part-time basis.

The next section addresses the issue of post-hoc rationalisation or revisionism, which needs to be considered based on undertaking a study where the outcomes is known. Namely that the participants know the results of their PhD studies, in that they have successfully completed the doctoral process, which may retrospectively shape their experiences, for example interpretations of their own role or the influence of others in shaping the outcome of the doctoral journey.

6.7.1. Post-hoc rationalisation

Researchers have highlighted the issue of post-hoc rationalisation, which has been defined in terms of making excuses, for example rationalising one's own decisions or behaviour (Maruna & Mann, 2006). This includes the inclination to attribute personal or internal factors to the achievement of a successful outcome or goal and to attribute external or environmental causes to negative outcomes (Maruna & Mann, 2006). Researchers recommend further empirical research to define the concept of cognitive distortion (Maruna & Mann, 2006). McAlpine et al. (2012) have discussed a tendency for academic institutions to attribute responsibility for progression with doctoral studies at the level of the individual student, which can contribute to a culture of blame, and lack of accountability at an institutional level. In a study which explored different individuals' experiences of pursuing doctoral studies Devos et al. (2017) found that both non-completers and completers attributed both internal and external causes to the outcome of the PhD research process. Internal attributes included the learner's ability, effort and perseverance. External factors associated with academic advancement included clarity in terms of the aims of the research project, access to participants and access to materials and resources needed to progress the research. Individuals who did not complete the doctoral process reported higher levels of frustrations and challenges in terms of practical, intellectual and emotional barriers to advancing with the research process than individuals who completed the PhD (Devos et al., 2017). The sense that the learner was advancing with the research

process (due to a combination of individual and environmental factors) was identified as key to progression with doctoral studies (Devos et al., 2017).

6.7.2. A comment on post hoc rationalisation in relation to the current study

It was unclear if individuals who pursued a PhD on a part-time basis would attribute advancement and completion of doctoral studies to individual or environmental causes, or potentially a combination of both. However, the theme of post-hoc revisionism, for example attribution of success to own efforts, or attribution of frustrations with the doctoral process to environmental or external factors will be addressed in the Discussion Chapter of this thesis. As part of the interview process the participants were asked to reflect on the experiences of undertaking and completing a PhD to ascertain if there is anything they would do differently, based on their own experiences, if they had the time again. The goal of this exercise was to capture any insights or reflections retrospectively from participants and potentially to provide recommendations to future learners who decide to undertake a PhD on a part-time basis. Acknowledgement of post-hoc rationalisation, is pertinent in this study due to the emphasis on individual's narratives and accounts of experiences which have happened in the past. Namely that the individuals who contributed to this study had completed doctoral qualifications and have the benefit of hindsight and, potentially, the opportunity to reflect on, or possibly reframe their experiences, based on knowing the outcome, e.g., successful completion of a PhD on a part-time basis. The theme of post-hoc revisionism, in relation to this study is addressed within the Discussion Chapter of this thesis.

6.8. Review of the decisions which contributed to the main research study

The previous sections have reviewed the decisions taken following the preliminary research study which informed the research questions, data generation instruments (questionnaire and interview process) sampling strategy and method of analysis. The qualitative and exploratory nature of this study, primarily based on understanding each participant's experience of

navigating a PhD to completion within the context of their own lives, influences, commitments and concerns were discussed in this chapter. Narrative methods and analysis were proposed to explore participants' experiences of navigating the doctoral journey and to add the part-time learner's voice to discourse within doctoral education. Some potential issues related to undertaking a study based on retrospective experiences of learners who have already completed a PhD were discussed. For example, the fact that the participants knew the outcome of the PhD, successful completion of the doctoral qualification, which may have coloured their memories, namely attributing success to internal factors and abilities and attributing challenges to external causes.

6.9. Research design and approach

The pilot study was conducted to develop the research instruments (questionnaire and interview protocol) and identify recruitment and sampling strategy for this research. The method of analysis, namely thematic analysis of the interview transcripts is addressed. Findings are presented in later chapters in this thesis.

6.10. Pilot study for the main phase of the research

The research instruments (the questionnaire and semi-structured interview protocol) were developed in the preliminary phase of this study. The interview schedule was adapted to obtain more in-depth data on learners' experiences of completing a PhD on a part-time basis. The questionnaire was adapted to provide additional context to the learner's experiences of pursuing a doctoral qualification on a part-time basis. Examples included a more in-depth exploration of learners' experiences of managing personal commitments (for example work and/or family roles) while studying as well as exploring individual participant's motivations for undertaking doctoral studies and choice of programme and academic institution. Examples of the questionnaire and interview protocol are included in the Appendices. As part of the pilot for this study I contacted an individual who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis, who agreed

to participate in the study and give feedback on the research process and data-collection instruments (questionnaire and interview questions) for the main study. The participant was not known to me personally but was made aware of this research project by a mutual contact. To address any imbalance of power between the interviewer and participant (Kvale, 2006) we arranged to meet at a venue selected by the participant, often a meeting room at their place of work. I provided the participant with a Research Information Form and a Consent Form (see Appendices) which was signed by the participant and which I then co-signed. I sought and received permission from the individual to audio record the interview process. I transcribed the interview data verbatim and sent the transcript to the participant to review or amend and return by email.

By sharing the data which was generated through the interview process and seeking further comments from the participant I sought both to make visible the practice and construction of knowledge and to address any potential subjectivity or bias on my part (Pillow, 2003) as like the participants, I was pursuing a PhD, on a part-time basis. Therefore, it was important to reflect on my role as a doctoral student and my decisions and actions as a researcher throughout this process.

6.11. Observations from the pilot study

The participant who contributed to the pilot study within the main phase of the research study did not suggest any amendments to the research process or data collection instruments (questionnaire and interview protocol). Therefore, the data generation instruments (questionnaire and semi-structured interview) developed and reviewed by the participant via the pilot study was used to generate data from participants who contributed to the main study. As part of my own journey as a I was a part-time PhD candidate and, additionally, I was a researcher undertaking a study on the experiences of individuals who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis, I kept a reflective journal to capture my own thoughts, insights, observations and decisions during the research process. An excerpt from the reflective journal is included in

this chapter. The opportunity to gain experience from the advice and reflections of individuals who had completed the doctoral journey was an unforeseen benefit to me from undertaking this study and is discussed further within this thesis.

6.12. Sampling strategy for the main study

The sampling strategy for the main phase of the research study followed a similar protocol to the approach taken in the preliminary research study which was predominantly based on snowballing recruitment strategies (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Ishak et al., 2014). This involved sourcing potential participants, who could then refer me to other potential participants who met the research criteria. Unlike the preliminary research phase, which explored the experiences in a single institution, the main phase sought to explore the experiences of individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis in different universities in Ireland.

Therefore, I sought to promote the aims of the research through as many communication channels as possible due to the potential challenges of accessing participants who may be difficult to locate and identify (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). This was because the participants had finished their PhD studies so, therefore, were no longer enrolled as doctoral candidates in the academic institution. For the main research study, I aimed to generate a diverse sample of participants who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis in different universities in Ireland, where I may have had no contacts, such as colleagues or acquaintances. To source potential participants, I promoted the aims of the research in person via attendance at conferences and academic networking events and via email and social media platforms, such as LinkedIn.

Researchers recommend using non-traditional communication channels and social media sites as a means of accessing hard to reach participants (Dusek, Yurova, & Ruppel, 2015).

6.13. Sampling criteria and recruitment of participants

I generated a Recruitment Information Sheet (see Appendices) outlining the characteristics of the participants I was hoping to recruit for the main study, namely part-time doctoral holders

who had completed a PhD in one of the universities in Ireland. The email and Linked-In contacts were generated from my personal, academic and professional networks. Researchers (O'Brien, 2015) used LinkedIn to conduct a longitudinal study (2000-2010) investigating employment destinations of (11,000) PhD graduates from different universities in Ireland. The criteria for participating in this research study is detailed in the following section of this chapter.

Selection criteria: Main phase of the research study

The following criteria were developed to recruit participants for the main phase of this study:

- **Individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis** (and registered as part-time during the PhD).
- **In a university in Ireland.** According to national statistics (HEA, 2018) over 80% of part-time PhD candidates are based in universities rather than other academic institutions in Ireland.
- **In an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) discipline.** Over 50% of part-time PhD candidates are based with an Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences in Ireland, with lower rates of part-time enrolments (less than 25%) reported in either Health Science (HS) or Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) disciplines (HEA, 2018).

6.14. Challenges of recruiting participants who completed a PhD on a part-time basis

I communicated with over one hundred individuals to promote this research, for example at conferences, via social media and from my own networks to overcome the potential challenges inherent in focusing on the experiences of potentially invisible (Atkinson and Flint, 2001) and difficult to reach (Dusek, 2015) participants, namely learners who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis. Although there was a very positive response and interest in the project, most

individuals who were willing to participate in the research did not meet the recruitment criteria. This included individuals who had completed other modes of doctoral studies to the PhD (on a part-time basis) such as a Professional doctorate, or alternatively individuals who had undertaken studies outside of the university sector in Ireland, predominantly in the UK or Europe. The challenges of recruiting such a specific sample as individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis within the university sector in Ireland are addressed within this thesis.

6.15. Research procedures, data generation and analysis for the main research study

As part of the research generation process for the main study I arranged to meet each of the participants who contacted me at a venue and time selected by the individual, often at a location within, or near, the person's workplace. Researchers (Rapley, 2001) have recommended that data generated via interview are influenced by the context and location where the interview occurred as well as the interaction between the interviewer and participant. Each participant was provided with the following forms, Recruitment Form (to ensure that the respondent met the research criteria), Participant Information Form (see Appendices). Each person completed the questionnaire (closed questions and open text comments boxes, where applicable) and interview process, which was recorded and transcribed.

6.16. Researcher reflexivity and ethical considerations re data generation and analysis

The approach to the current study was qualitative and exploratory in nature and the goal was to generate data on individual's accounts of navigating the PhD to completion on a part-time basis. Researchers often use interviews as a method within the Social Sciences to understand participants' stories in relation to a particular topic or experience (Squires et al., 2014). Interaction and interpersonal relationship between the interviewer and interviewee has been identified as an influence on the research process and Squires et al. (2014) highlight the

importance of researcher reflexivity. Recommendations include providing a space for the participant to tell their story, listening attentively and encouraging the interviewee to share their experiences and insights (Squires et al., 2014). Reflexivity is an important part of the research process, including ethical considerations, decisions at each stage of study, recruitment of respondents and potential power dynamic between the researcher and participants (Kvale, 2006). There are no prescriptive recommendations on undertaking and analysing narrative research, which will vary from one researcher to another, additionally, according to Squires et al. (2014) the decisions on presenting findings can be challenging due to the often extensive data generated and analysed within a narrative-based study.

6.17. Reflective diary and decisions within the research process

As part of my own research journey, I kept a reflective journal throughout the process. The purpose of keeping the reflective diary was twofold, firstly to address how my own attitudes and knowledge and background might influence the interview process and research (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2006) as like my participants I was pursuing a PhD on a part-time basis. Secondly, I sought to document and record the decisions I made and actions I took at each stage of the research process (Pillow, 2003). Researchers recommend that the power dynamic in terms of potential asymmetry between the interviewer and interviewee is addressed, namely in terms of the position of the researcher within the interview process (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2018; Kvale, 2006). The following is a brief extract from the reflective journal I kept, which illustrates how I addressed the ethical aspects of undertaking research on the experiences of part-time PhD learners, as I the researcher was undertaking a part-time PhD, and explores issues of potential power dynamics and confidentiality. A research journal can be used for multiple purposes including helping to shape thinking, writing and decision-making about the study as well as helping the researcher to reflect on progress and sift through ideas (Murray, 2017).

6.17.1. Background to the excerpt from the reflective diary (Summer 2019)

I had just met with a participant who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis. I realised at this point the difference between my role as the novice researcher who was still navigating my way through the different stages of the doctoral process and the expert perspective and insights of the participant who had finished the PhD. This helped me to clarify my role as researcher and relationship with my participants, namely I was the novice researcher, and my participant was the expert on their own experiences of progressing with and completing the PhD on a part-time basis.

6.17.2. Excerpt from reflective diary (Maeve O' Regan)

I met X [name of participant] in her place of work today where she arranged to meet me to take part in my research. As I was listening to her story, I realised that the experience and benefits of hindsight, from being able to reflect on each stage of her journey of the PhD to completion was invaluable to me as an earlier stage researcher, currently at the mid-point and data collection stage of my PhD.

I realised that my position within this study and as a fellow part-time PhD learner was that of the novice researcher compared to my participants who had finished their journey and gone through all the stages of the PhD from induction to viva interview to submission of the thesis. This helped me to clear up in my own mind any concerns about the potential asymmetry of power, as I realised that my participants were the experts on what it was like to complete a PhD on a part-time basis. I was the novice researcher still finding my way along the path. I felt very privileged that the participants shared tips and resources and cautionary tales on navigating the PhD process to completion. It was like having my own band of mentors.

6.17.3. Review of the value of the reflective diary within this research process

The above excerpt illustrates the value of keeping a reflective diary in terms of monitoring progress, decisions and addressing my own position as researcher (Kvale, 2006) within this

study. A challenge within the study was the fact that there are so few individuals who have completed a PhD on a part-time basis in Ireland. My concern was not just in terms of the challenges of accessing such a hidden sample of individuals to participate in the study (Dusek et al., 2015) but also in terms of giving voice to individuals (Kvale, 2006 p480). I had concerns about providing participants with the opportunity to present their life stories in their own words (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001) and exploring issues deeply with respondents (Lopez and Whitehead, 2013) without revealing identifying details or compromising participants' anonymity.

6.18. Ethical consideration in recording and reporting participants' stories

The interview process can be understood as a co-construction of knowledge (Squires et al., 2014) between the storyteller (interviewee) and listener (researcher). Interviews can move between a continuum where the goal of the interview process is to understand the participant's experiences and context to a situation where the interviewer and interviewee are equal partners in the co-construction of knowledge (Berner-Rodoreda, 2018). Narrative voice is co-constructed between the interviewer and participant and narrative research can contribute to exploring social experiences about which little is known (Squires et al., 2014). However, having addressed the power dynamic within the interview process between myself as the researcher and the participant (Kvale, 2006) I felt my role as researcher was more in terms of facilitation rather than equal partnership. This included providing a space (in a location selected by the participant) supported by active listening skills and encouragement to facilitate individuals to share their accounts of completing a PhD on a part-time basis. The rationale for the study and ethical issues, such as confidentiality, participant anonymity, data collection, record keeping, and storage of data were detailed in the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Forms (jointly signed by the participant and researcher) which are included in the Appendices of this thesis.

6.18.1. Sharing the interview transcripts with participants

To ensure confidentiality and protect the anonymity of each participant I advised each interviewee that I would remove any identifying details from the transcript and pseudonyms would be allocated to each participant's comments and data. After the interview I shared the written interview transcripts with each of the participants, advising them to amend or edit any sections of the transcript they did not wish to disclose. Written material, namely signed Consent Forms and completed questionnaires detailing participant's demographics and background information were stored in a locked cabinet which only I, the researcher, had access to.

Interview transcripts were anonymised and encrypted on my personal computer and were only shared (once pseudonyms had been given to participants) with my supervisor, for discussion and guidance.

6.19. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data (interview transcripts)

Following the data generation process I typed up the interview transcript and emailed it to each participant for comments and feedback. I advised participants that I would anonymise the completed questionnaires and interview transcripts and that each participant would be issued with a pseudonym selected by and only known to me. The data generated from the interview transcripts was evaluated qualitatively using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) methods. Thematic analysis was selected due to the flexibility of the approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) in terms of the active and organic role the researcher plays in generating codes and developing the themes in order, not just to summarise but to identify patterns and meaning within and across the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis can be used to analyse virtually any type of data such as interviews, focus groups and qualitative survey responses. This includes both homogenous and heterogenous groups (large or small scale) and can be used to analyse both deductive (theory driven) and inductive (data driven) information. The flexibility of the approach to conducting a thematic analysis of data suggested by Braun and

Clarke (2006) was particularly appealing for the current research in light of reported heterogeneity and lack of robust body of existing research of part-time PhD candidates' experiences. Examples include lack of consensus on the classification of part-time status across academic institutions (Irish Survey of Student Engagement, 2018, 2019; Watts, 2008) and the potential influence of diverse factors on experiences of part-time doctoral candidature such as managing work and caring roles while studying (Watts, 2008). In order to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the qualitative data generated by the participants in response to the interview questions I followed the checklist and criteria for undertaking good thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This included ensuring that the transcripts were transcribed faithfully and checked against the tape recording for accuracy. In addition, I emailed participants with a copy of the transcripts which provided an opportunity for ensuring that the records of the interviews were transcribed accurately and reflected individual's responses and provided an opportunity for participants to clarify, qualify, expand or edit any points. In line with recommendations for analysing the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) themes were extracted by analysing each line of text, one by one from each interviewee's transcript. The themes were then collated, analysed, reviewed and interpreted, rather than just described. Details of developing, identifying, coding and analysing the themes from the interview data generated by participants is outlined within this chapter.

6.20. Manual analysis of the data versus use of qualitative data analysis software

I explored the possibility of using qualitative data analysis software (such as NVivo or Maxqda) to facilitate the data analysis process. However, while making enquiries about purchasing a qualitative data analysis software package and sourcing a training course to become familiar with the usability and features of the software I started to conduct a manual thematic analysis of the data, to gain experience of the methodology in practice. I had conducted a manual thematic analysis of the data in the preliminary phase of the study however, the greater volume and

richness of the data generated from participants' responses to the interview questions in the main study required an in depth and intensive level of analysis. This involved recording and coding each theme, quote or line of the text one by one for each participant, then actively collating, evaluating and reviewing each theme and returning to the to the original transcript and audio recording of the interviewee recounting their experiences of undertaking and completing a PhD on a part-time basis. The next section provides a brief overview of the eighteen participants who contributed to this phase of the research study and who shared their experiences of completing a PhD on a part-time basis within five different universities in Ireland.

6.21. An introduction to the participants who completed a PhD on a part-time basis

Of the eighteen participants who contributed to the main phase of this study thirteen identified as female and five identified as male. None of the participants selected the gender descriptors detailed within the questionnaire, namely "*I prefer another descriptor*" or "*I prefer not to disclose [my gender].*" The participants had undertaken and completed a PhD on a part-time basis in five different universities in Ireland and varied in age, from under 25 to over 55 years of age on starting doctoral studies. Participants included individuals who were single or who had a partner or spouse and those with and without caring responsibilities (children and other family members, such as elderly relatives) during the doctoral process. All participants were employed, primarily on a full-time basis prior to commencing studies and continued to work during the doctoral process. Participants were employed in both public and private sector organisations and some worked and lived near the academic institution, where they were undertaking studies, whereas other participants had to undertake a long commute from work (or home) to the university where they were enrolled on a PhD programme on a part-time basis.

Pseudonyms were given to the eighteen participants (to ensure anonymity) as follows:

**Charlotte/Elaine/Fiona/Gary/Heather/James/Karen/Laura/Mary/Matthew/Mike/Natalie/
Nina/Rose/Sarah/Shane/Una/Vivienne.**

The variance in the participant's stories illustrated the diversity of learner's accounts of navigating the doctoral journey to completion on a part-time basis. The next section provides details on the approach to analysing the data and generating themes from participants' responses to the interview questions. An overview of data generated from participants' responses to the questionnaire is detailed in this chapter including demographic details, background information and participants' motivations to undertake doctoral studies, including choice of institution and mode of study.

The diversity of responses illustrated the multiple factors that prompted participants to undertake the doctoral journey and the various personal, academic and institutional experiences that contributed to individual's accounts of navigating the PhD to completion on a part-time basis.

6.22. Questionnaire responses (Participants' demographics/background details)

The previous sections gave details on the process of generating and analysing the data from the interview transcripts using examples from participants' stories to illustrate how the themes and subthemes were identified and refined. The following section provides an overview of the eighteen individuals (13 females and 5 males) who had completed a PhD within five different universities in Ireland, based on participants' responses to the questionnaire. This section includes details on participants' demographics, incidence of family and working responsibilities, motivation to undertake a part-time PhD and choice of academic institution. The purpose of this section was to provide demographic details and background information on the participants to help frame the Findings Chapters which were based on thematic analysis of the individual's interview transcripts.

6.22.1. Participant details: Discipline of Study (responses to the questionnaire)

All individuals had completed a PhD on a part-time basis in an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) field, primarily (n=14) within the field of Education or an associated discipline, such as Educational Technology. Traditionally certain disciplines, such as Education have tended to attract high levels of part-time doctoral candidates (Maher et al., 2004). The sampling and recruitment strategy developed for this study is addressed in the Discussion Chapter within this thesis. Over half of the eighteen participants who completed a PhD on a part-time basis (n=10) had completed PhD studies within six months to two years prior to the commencement of data collection for this research (June 2019- February 2020). An additional five individuals had completed doctoral studies between 2011 and 2015 and one person completed doctoral studies in 2010. Responses from individuals illustrated variance in length of part-time PhD candidature from under five to over ten years candidature from start to completion of qualifications. A third of participants had completed studies in under six years.

6.22.2. Age range and incidence of work and caring responsibilities during PhD studies

Participants ranged in age from 25 to 55 years and over on starting doctoral studies. Individuals who contributed to the study included people who were balancing studies with family responsibilities such as caring for children and others, for example elderly relatives as well as participants who did not indicate additional personal and caring responsibilities during the pursuit of PhD studies. All the participants reported working full-time while undertaking doctoral qualifications. The experience of working full-time, the nature of the work and employment environment were identified by all participants as significant influences (both positive and negative) on progression with doctoral studies. Individuals accounts of balancing employment with a part-time PhD are addressed within the Findings Chapters of this thesis.

6.22.3. Motivations to undertake doctoral studies

Participants gave diverse reasons for undertaking doctoral studies, primarily for career development or for personal interest and fulfilment. The following qualitative comments (which supplemented participants responses to the closed questions in the questionnaire) illustrated the different factors which motivated individuals to pursue a doctoral qualification. Pseudonyms have been used to anonymise the participant's comments.

"I knew if I wanted to apply for an academic position it was necessary now in this day and age to have a PhD." (Karen)

"I was bored stiff in my job. I decided to put my energy to good use for a change instead of putting it into my job. I decided to invest it in myself and do research on a topic of interest to me." (Matthew)

"You can argue that I was completely bonkers in doing this. But financial gain wasn't my motivation. It was education. It was the challenge and motivation and about keeping options open in terms of career development." (Mike)

The responses from participants support existing research which suggests that the decision to pursue doctoral level study can be motivated by both personal and professional reasons (Loxley & Seery, 2012). According to researchers (Loxley & Kearns, 2018) doctoral qualifications have increasingly become the entry level requirement for many professional and academic posts. Further research beyond the scope of this current study may provide further insights into career development plans and aspirations of part-time doctoral candidates.

6.22.4. Choice of doctoral programme and mode of study

Choice of doctoral programme and mode of study was influenced by different factors. For some participants time constraints due to work and family commitments influenced the mode of study. The greater structure potentially provided by the Professional (for example an

Educational) doctorate in terms of the completion of training modules and assignments was perceived as a barrier for individuals who felt that another commitment and potential travel to and from an academic institution, on top of existing work and other personal responsibilities was not feasible for them. For other candidates, the desire to be autonomous and to work on doctoral research outside of the structure of a programme and assignments was deemed an attractive aspect of the PhD versus the Professional doctorate. Therefore, the merits and disadvantages of undertaking different modes of study were influenced both by practical issues such as time constraints and in some cases the desire to take ownership of the research process on the individual's own terms.

"I did consider different options, but I thought the PhD would give me more freedom to get myself into a topic that I wanted to research rather than being pushed into a direction that a programme might push me in." (Elaine)

"The logistics and time commitment of travelling to undertake a doctorate in Education and commit time to doing the structured modules was difficult, in light of my work and personal commitments. But the four-year duration of the doctorate in Education may have been more attractive than the longer time frame commitment for the [part-time] PhD." (Fiona)

"I didn't know all it [the PhD] was going to entail, which is a good thing – because if you did you might run away! I didn't know anyone who had done a PhD. I was quite naïve."
(Matthew)

Decisions for selecting a particular academic institution and mode of study (part-time PhD versus Professional/Educational Doctoral) tended to be influenced by financial and practical factors, such as the ability to link the doctoral research project to activities within the everyday job role.

“I think choosing an institution you can access is very important. I know a lot of people who have gone to the UK and that is great, but it is an added expense to go over to meetings and I think it is more of a barrier in terms of socialising with people and I think that is very important.” (Rose)

“One of the reasons I didn’t do it full-time was I didn’t want to be poor. I had a job, and I didn’t want to give up a job to do the PhD.” (Charlotte)

6.23. Review of participants’ demographics and background information

The participants’ demographics, personal circumstances and incidence of working and managing caring roles during the part-time PhD journey illustrates the uniqueness of each learner’s story in the context of multiple influences, responsibilities and motivations to pursue a doctoral qualification.

6.24. Defining and coding the themes from the interview transcripts

This section outlines the process I undertook from reading and coding the participants’ interview transcripts to reviewing and analysing the themes. I initially reviewed each participant’s interview transcript and wrote each participant’s quote or unit of text (such as a sentence from the interview transcript) on single post-it. I then analysed, reviewed and grouped each unit of text into the following main themes and associated subthemes.

Main theme: Doctoral process [within the academic institution].

Subthemes: Structure of the PhD; stages of the PhD; doctoral programme information; training, personal support; supervisor (s); services, systems and help-seeking behaviour.

Main theme: Family and personal concerns

Subthemes: Support; challenges; negotiation of time within family commitments; children; life-stage; negotiation of space within family home; guilt; wider family networks, friends; personal commitments.

Main theme: Employment and work commitments

Subthemes: Job role; organisational culture; physical distance or proximity to academic institution during PhD, time commitments; management; colleagues; support; skills; advantages of working while undertaking PhD; challenges of working while undertaking PhD.

Main theme: Personal factors influencing PhD completion on a part-time basis

Subthemes: Personal agency; self-generated networks; online support, face-to-face support; personal skills; time; life stage, commitments, family responsibilities; personal health; resilience; challenges; benefits; part-time status; reflections; recommendations.

6.25. Analysis of the themes within and across the interview data

At the end of the process of reading each interviewee's transcript I reviewed the themes that were identified across all the transcripts to see if there were similarities and differences in individual participants' stories of navigating the doctoral process to completion. Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend that the researcher adopts a flexible approach to defining what constitutes a theme, not solely in terms of whether the theme is prevalent in the data sets [interviews] but also in terms of how it captures something important in relation to the overall research question. The overarching aim of this research study was to understand how individual learners navigated the PhD process to completion without making any assumptions as to who or what, influenced progression with studies considering existing limited research on part-time learners' experiences of navigating the PhD journey to completion.

6.26. Major themes versus subthemes within the interview recordings and transcripts

Some themes, identified as major themes, were recurrent in all participants' accounts of navigating a PhD on a part-time basis, namely the incidence of balancing doctoral studies with employment responsibilities. However, within the theme of employment there were several

subthemes including: sector of employment; role and responsibilities, support from management, support from colleagues and relationship between doctoral research topic and job role. A major aspect of all interviewees' stories was the incidence of combining personal commitments with doctoral studies and experiences varied from one individual's story to another. This included experiences of harnessing support from family; challenges of juggling family and childcare commitments with studies and negotiating time and space within the home to pursue the PhD. Participants included individuals who had a partner or spouse as well as individuals who were not in a relationship during the doctoral process. All participants recounted a mixture of experiences including challenges and triumphs during the PhD journey to completion.

6.27. Example of the process of analysing the interview data to generate themes

The variance in participants' personal and employment circumstances while undertaking a part-time PhD illustrated the multi-dimensional nature of each learner's world (Hopwood et al., 2011) in the context of various influences and responsibilities, primarily beyond the setting of doctoral environment within the academic institution. I have added the theme in bracket to illustrate how I coded the different themes within participants' transcripts. The following excerpts from a sample of participants' interview transcripts illustrates the process of describing, analysing and interpreting the themes in relation to a sample of participants' accounts of navigating the PhD to completion on a part-time basis. The excerpts were selected to illustrate the variance in participants' accounts of navigating doctoral studies. The different experiences that participants shared demonstrated how a single theme for example employment, can have multiple interpretations, depending on the position of the individual, not just in relation to challenges of undertaking a PhD while working full-time, but also in terms of the nature of the work and culture of the employment environment. For example, the benefits of working in a supportive environment, often where other staff have experience of undertaking doctoral studies versus working in an employment context which does not support employees to pursue doctoral

studies. In summary, this section illustrates how the themes (identified via thematic analysis) are interpreted in different ways in each individual's narrative account of pursuing a PhD. For example, in Heather's story, the experience of working in a university, provided her with a supportive community of colleagues, who could help her with queries on the doctoral process, despite her absence from the campus setting during a period of Maternity Leave. In contrast, Shane's story of completing a PhD on a part-time basis, illustrates the challenges of working in a challenging role, which is not in the university where he is undertaking a PhD, offering little opportunity to connect with peers and colleagues within the campus setting, due to the demands of the day job. However, Shane's story illustrates the role of the supervisor in providing support and guidance, usually within the context of structured meetings, outside of the hours of the working day. Therefore, the stories shared by participants illustrate the different ways that the themes (for example, employment, family and academic support) are interpreted and experienced differently and reflect the uniqueness of each individual's story and highlight the importance of providing doctoral learners with the opportunity to share their stories to contribute to discourse and reforms within Doctoral Education.

6.27.1. Heather's story –

“Don't have kids while trying to do a PhD (part-time)!”

Heather (pseudonym) was working as a staff member in the academic institution where she was undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis. Her story is a balancing act of work, family and a PhD.

*“I was already fairly stressed trying to manage a new-born **[Theme: Family]** and not knowing what I was doing with that **[Subthemes: Children/Life stage]** but also being a first time PhD student and not knowing what I was doing with that!*

*It's extremely difficult to become a parent and work on a doctorate and to work full-time **[Theme: Employment]** I do kind of wonder while I decided to tackle all three.*

However, the one thing that was constant throughout the doctorate was my job [Theme: Employment] so that actually helped [Subtheme: Employment as advantage during PhD]. I was very lucky to have very supportive colleagues [Subtheme: Employment/Colleagues] on campus [Subtheme: Employment setting/context] who gave me as much space and time as they could within reason to do doctoral work, so that was helpful.”

6.27.2. Reflections on the themes and subthemes in Heather’s interview transcript

On the surface Heather’s story described the experience of balancing personal life, namely motherhood with the pursuit of doctoral studies, which has been identified as challenging, particularly for part-time candidates (Cronshaw, 2017). Heather’s advice (albeit half-jokingly) to other doctoral candidates was “Don’t have kids while working on a part-time PhD!” However, a deeper reflection and interpretation of Heather’s story, gleaned by re-reading the transcript and listening to the audio recording again, revealed the importance of the position of learner in relation to the doctoral programme environment within the academic institution. Absence from the university during Maternity Leave presented challenges in terms of managing home life and progressing PhD commitments. However, Heather’s position as a staff member in the university had a positive impact on progression both in terms of support from her colleagues and providing a consistent and structured environment that she was familiar with in contrast to the newness of motherhood and starting a PhD process. The story illustrates the different roles that work, and family played in one individual’s account of progressing with and completing a PhD on a part-time basis. The themes of work, family, personal commitments and access to doctoral programme information and support within the academic institution will be addressed in the Findings Chapters of this thesis.

The example of Heather’s story illustrates the process of moving from description to coding, and subsequent interpretation and evaluation of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of

refining and reflecting on the themes was facilitated by the process of keeping a reflective journal to record my research process, activities and decisions during the doctoral journey. Following an initial analysis of the transcripts I realised the importance of understanding each learner's experience of navigating the PhD on a part-time basis in the context of different (academic, personal, work and family) influences. This included an awareness of position the of the learner in relation to doctoral programme resources and supports in the academic institution and in the context of other work and personal commitments. The goal of the study was to provide each participant with the opportunity to recount their own experiences of navigating the PhD in the context of their own stories, circumstances and journeys without any preconceptions as to what might have influenced progression and completion of studies. The themes and narrative interpretations of participants' interview transcripts are addressed in greater detail in the Findings Chapters of this thesis. However, to conclude this section of this chapter, two additional narratives of participants' experiences will be presented to illustrate how the position of the learner in relation to doctoral programme resources and supports within the academic institution varied from one individual to another, depending on their own personal circumstances and work commitments.

6.27.3. Karen' story

“The thing that helped me to make progress with the PhD is that I made the decision to tie my research topic to the job.”

Karen had three grown up children and was established in her career when she decided to do a PhD on a part-time basis. She worked in the university where she was undertaking doctoral studies and was able to connect her research topic to her everyday job role. There were colleagues in her department who were also undertaking doctoral studies and she found it helpful to have the support of others. Karen described herself as a very independent and efficient worker. While the work environment provided a context for her research project she

described the challenges of negotiating time and space at home to work on her PhD, in the context of family life.

Karen acknowledged the challenges family can experience in supporting an individual through the “*long process of the PhD – often five years or more.*”

“I felt a little bit unsupported at home [Theme: Family] and I think that five years [Theme: Doctoral process/Subtheme: Time] is a long time to be supportive of someone – I think spouses [Theme: Family] can get a bit fed up and sick of hearing about it” [the PhD].

To maintain motivation and overcome a sense of isolation in the pursuit of the PhD Karen drew on her own resources, such as self-management skills and referred to an online doctoral blog to help with tips and recommendations to progress with and complete the PhD.

“Anything I needed to know I went into the blog [Themes: Personal Agency and Doctoral process/Subthemes: Resources/Online] now that I think about it I should have acknowledged the author of it [the blog] in my acknowledgements!”

6.27.4. Reflections on Karen’s story

Karen’s story illustrates the value of linking her PhD research to her work topic but the challenges of negotiating time and space in the family home, over a long period of time [5 years] during the PhD. Her story illustrates the value of personal agency and seeking out help from an online PhD blog.

6.27.5. Shane’s story

“When I go into the university I have to stop my work to go in there.”

Shane worked in a job role and sector which was separate to the academic institution where he was undertaking a PhD. Despite working at a short commute from the academic institution he

was unable to take time off work due to the nature of his employment and responsibilities to spend time in the academic institution, apart from pre-scheduled appointments with his supervisor. He had no colleagues or personal contacts who were undertaking a PhD.

He had a good relationship with his supervisor who was the main source of contact within the academic institution throughout the doctoral process. Shane's motivation for undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis was for personal rather than career-based reasons. Shane was able to link his doctoral research topic with his day job. He enjoyed the balance of working in a busy dynamic environment with the solitude of working on the PhD in an office space at home.

"I'm surrounded by four hundred to five hundred people every day [Theme: Employment environment]– I love the solitude of it [the PhD] – being on my own [Theme: Doctoral Process/Subthemes: time and space] it doesn't happen very often!"

However, despite enjoying the balance between his everyday working life and the separate time he spent on the doctoral research at home in his study, he experienced challenges in accessing information and resources from the academic institution. He experienced frustrations to progressing with the doctoral process and cited lack of access to information on doctoral processes, regulations and guidelines from different academic and administrative departments within the academic institution as challenging.

6.27.6. Reflections on Shane's story

Shane's story illustrates the challenges of undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis in the context of a full-time job, which is physically, academically and occupationally separate to the doctoral process and the campus environment of the university. While he reported that the structure of his working life and his personal management of his time within his homelife helped with PhD progression, academic isolation, limited contact and lack of interaction with fellow doctoral candidates presented challenges to progressing with and completing the PhD for Shane.

6.28. Summary

This chapter has outlined the research approach, including data generation instruments (questionnaire and interview) and methods of analysis developed within this study to explore individual's experiences of undertaking and completing a PhD on a part-time basis within different universities in Ireland. Eighteen individuals who completed a part-time PhD in five different universities in Ireland contributed to this study.

Background information and characteristics of the different learners was provided within this chapter, including motivations for undertaking doctoral study, incidence of balancing work and other responsibilities with the PhD process and choice of doctoral programme and institution. The variety of stories and accounts of navigating a PhD to completion illustrates the uniqueness of each participant's experience mediated within the context of different institutional, personal, social and work-based influences. The following chapters address the findings in relation to:

- **Chapter 7:** Participants' experiences of accessing doctoral programme support and information from the academic institution during the (part-time) PhD process. Excerpts from four participants' stories will be included in this chapter to illustrate the diversity of individual's accounts of navigating the PhD journey on a part-time basis.
- **Chapter 8:** Family and Employment roles as influencing progression and completion of the PhD on a part-time basis.
- **Chapter 9:** Personal Agency, recommendations and reflections on undertaking and completing a PhD on a part-time basis .

Chapter 7. Access to doctoral programme support and resources

7.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the themes which came from the analysis of participants' experiences of accessing doctoral programme resources and supports from the academic institution (and from alternative sources) from induction to completion during the PhD process, on a part-time basis. The chapter opens with an introduction to four of the eighteen participants who contributed to this research. The four participants' stories are interspersed with comments from all (eighteen) individuals who contributed to this study. The presentation of the four accounts (Elaine/Matthew/Sarah and Una) of completing the doctoral journey, supported with additional comments from the other participants provided a way to give voice to each person while drawing out themes, commonalities and differences between the respondents' accounts of navigating and completing the PhD on a part-time basis. The stories, based on the unique experiences of four of the participants, provide a context in which to understand the themes which were identified based on an analysis of the interview transcripts of the 18 individuals who contributed to this research, all of whom had completed a PhD on a part-time basis within the university sector in Ireland. The narratives illustrate the individual nature of each participant's experience, in particular how the position of the learner, in terms of employment and (in many cases) personal and family commitments and physical proximity or absence from the academic campus environment influenced experiences of navigating the PhD on a part-time basis. The stories illustrate the variance in each individual's experience of navigating the PhD process, seeking help, accessing academic resources and participating in supportive doctoral networks. Each participant's story needs to be understood on its own terms mediated in the context of different influences unique to each individual who shared their experiences of navigating a PhD to completion on a part-time basis.

The narratives presented at the beginning of this chapter illustrate the variance of four participants' accounts of pursuing a PhD on a part-time basis (Matthew/Sarah/Elaine and Una). The chapter follows from the narratives of the four individual's accounts to present, in a more general way, the themes which were identified from an analysis of all 18 participants' interview transcripts. The thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) namely evaluating and reviewing each participant's interview transcript to identify and code themes highlighted different dimensions of doctoral learner's experiences. This included the participants' accounts of accessing doctoral-programme resources and support both inside and outside the academic institution (on a face-to-face and online basis).

Additionally, the themes identified through an analysis of the interview transcripts illustrated the role of employment responsibilities and work setting, family and personal commitments as both positive and challenging aspects of each individual's experience of advancing with and completing the doctoral process on a part-time basis. Finally, participants' reflections and accounts of personal agency, resilience and seeking help (or not in some cases) were identified as key themes in participants' stories of progressing through the doctoral process. The findings from the thematic analysis of the participants' interview transcripts are addressed in three separate chapters in this thesis.

This chapter (Chapter 7) addresses themes relating to participants' accounts of accessing doctoral programme support and resources during the doctoral process to completion. Chapter 8 addresses themes relating to personal and employment factors which influenced (both positively and negatively) individual's experiences of advancing with studies. Chapter 9 addresses participants' personal reflections on completing a PhD on a part-time basis. The findings are presented in Chapter 10 (Discussion Chapter) and Chapter 11 (Conclusions Chapter). The next section provides an introduction to the themes relating to participants' accounts of accessing programme-based resources and supports during the doctoral journey.

7.2. Themes relating to participants' accounts of navigating the PhD (part-time)

This chapter is based on an analysis of participants' accounts of navigating the doctoral process in the context of access to doctoral support and information (primarily from the academic institution) during the PhD process. The following themes are addressed:

- **Access to information, training and resources within the academic institution.**
- **Structure and stages of the doctoral programme.**
- **Access to support from the supervisor.**
- **Access to supports and services (e.g., Library) within the academic institution.**
- **Harnessing support and resources to advance with the PhD journey.**

The findings from this chapter illustrate the diversity of each learner's experience of accessing doctoral programme resources and support within the academic institution during the PhD journey. Factors identified as positively influencing advancement with studies and the quality of the doctoral candidate's experiences included a positive supervisor/supervisee relationship, particularly when the supervisor had experience of supervising candidates to completion and was familiar with the academic system and key personnel in the university. Access to training courses, administrative and academic support and opportunities for interacting with peers and academic staff were identified by participants as positively impacting on the doctoral experience. A key challenge to participating in research and social communities and accessing supports on campus was due to work commitments as all eighteen participants who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis worked full-time during the (9am to 5pm) working day.

The influence of work and personal/family commitments on learners' experiences of navigating the PhD to completion on a part-time basis is addressed in a separate Findings Chapter in this thesis (Chapter 8). The chapter concludes with examples of individual's accounts of demonstrating personal agency and seeking help to advance with and complete studies, for example sourcing research training and resources and generating peer-based support networks, both face-to-face and online. The findings demonstrate the importance of proactive behaviour

and resourcefulness as influencing learners' experiences of navigating and completing the doctoral journey on a part-time basis.

7.3. Participants' stories of completing a PhD on a part-time basis

The selection of the four individuals (who have been given the following pseudonyms: Elaine/Matthew/Sarah and Una) to share their stories of navigating and completing a PhD on a part-time basis was due to the variance in each participant's personal circumstances, employment commitments and context. The variance in learners' incidence of family and caring roles and responsibilities within the employment context impacted on participants' experiences, namely opportunities to access research information and support from the academic institutions during the doctoral process to completion, which reflects the diversity of experiences of the wider group of (eighteen) participants who contributed to this study.

For example, Una's story was primarily about the challenges of undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis in the context of juggling the demands of work, parenting and commuting. The theme of balancing family caring roles with studies was identified as a challenge by participants who contributed to this study. Matthew's story illustrated the benefits of working in a role and organisation which allowed regular access to the academic institution, due to the working hours (8am to 4pm) and proximity of the work location to the academic institution. This provided Matthew with the opportunity to avail of training and support and to develop collegial relations and research networks with academic staff and peers.

In contrast Elaine's story highlighted the challenges of working in an environment (private sector education provider) where doctoral qualifications were not valued by the employers, exacerbated by a lack of access to academic and collegial communities in the work setting, in addition to this Elaine had limited access to the academic institution during the day, due to the nature and demands of her job role. Sarah's story addressed the benefits of working in an environment where management were supportive of employees undertaking doctoral studies,

which offered the benefits of having a network of colleagues who were also undertaking, or who had completed doctoral studies, who could offer advice, understanding and moral support to Sarah. However, Sarah's story illustrated the challenges of undertaking doctoral studies in an institution which was located at over 200km from her place of work, which presented challenges in terms of accessing resources and resolving (technical) problems as she was situated at a physical and geographical distance from the campus.

7.4. Presentation of the themes relating to learners' accounts of navigating the PhD

The participants' stories are presented to demonstrate the different dimensions of learners' experiences in terms of opportunities to avail of doctoral programme supports, resources, and communities from the academic institution and additionally to identify any barriers to accessing campus-based supports and communities within the academic institution which were experienced by participants.

The accounts provided by the individuals who contributed to this study illustrated the position of the learner, namely located in proximity or at a distance from the academic institution during the doctoral process. Distance or proximity to the university environment impacted on the experience of pursuing a PhD on a part-time basis, not just in terms of opportunities (or not) to participate in research activities, access support networks and source training from the academic institution during the working day but also in the context of juggling studies with work, family and personal concerns.

The selection of vignettes based on four participants' experiences (Elaine, Matthew, Sarah and Una) was influenced by a study (McAlpine et al., 2012), which explored twenty-four learners' experiences of seeking help from individuals both inside and outside the academic institution to advance with doctoral studies. Illustrative vignettes were presented, based on a sample of participants experiences, which were interspersed with comments from other respondents to

provide detail and to elaborate on the themes relevant to individual's accounts of navigating the doctoral process (McAlpine et al., 2012). Like the findings by McAlpine et al. (2012) the participants who contributed to the current research identified various academic, institutional, personal, financial and employment-based factors which either facilitated or impeded individual's experiences of navigating the doctoral process to completion, on a part-time basis.

7.5. An introduction to the four participants: Stories of pursuing a PhD (part-time)

The four participants' accounts, particularly in relation to their physical and situational location, namely within the employment setting as influencing or challenging progression with PhD studies provided a context for understanding the experiences of the individuals who contributed to this study. Matthew, Sarah, Una and Elaine completed their doctoral studies in three different universities within two provinces in Ireland. Each of the four participants worked full-time, in different organisations and sectors before and during the PhD, as did all the eighteen individuals who participated in this study.

The eighteen respondents varied in terms of their experiences of balancing studies with family commitments and caring roles. Despite differences in participants' accounts of managing studies with childcare and family responsibilities all individuals recounted personal experiences, for example health problems, life changes, disruptions, setbacks and sacrifices, as well as triumphs and opportunities during the PhD process. The findings illustrated the multifaceted dimensions of the doctoral candidate's world within and beyond the context of the doctoral programme and the academic institution (Hopwood et al., 2011). As highlighted in previous chapters the participants were provided with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

7.6. Matthew's story

“I was there [in the academic institution] so much that once I was invited to a staff party”

Matthew decided to pursue a PhD because in his own words *“I was bored stiff in my job.”* He wanted to undertake a doctoral programme for personal interest, rather than for career development. He felt his job in a public sector environment wasn't very stimulating. Although the PhD would not provide him with opportunities to advance within his current role he decided he was going to invest in his own personal development and do something that he found meaningful. He explored other types of doctoral programmes but decided on the PhD on a part-time basis because he wanted to focus on the research process rather than pursue a more structured course of study.

“I didn't want to be a student again, if I was going to do this [PhD] I wanted to dictate what I study, when I study and where I study.”

Matthew had completed a Masters' programme in Education and took a year off afterwards to consider if he would do a PhD and to explore and weigh up the different options and institutions where he could pursue his studies. He said that he was quite naïve and that he didn't know anyone who had done a PhD, some of the other participants also said that they were naïve about what the PhD entailed prior to undertaking studies. Matthew decided to study for a PhD in the institution where he had completed his master's programme. He said there was another institution that was probably a better fit with his research topic, but he liked the feel of the place where he had completed his previous postgraduate qualification. A member of academic staff offered to be his supervisor for the PhD and Matthew said he felt very comfortable and supported in the institution.

Although Matthew's job role was separate to his PhD work, as he did not work in a sector where doctoral studies were recognised as a valuable qualification for employees, the work

environment did provide him with certain advantages. The job role was structured from 9am to 4pm and was at a reasonable proximity to the academic institution so he could go to the library in the academic institution after work, every evening from Monday to Friday and this helped provide a structure for his doctoral studies. Matthew also acknowledged that he was naturally very disciplined, motivated and self-directed which helped with managing the PhD process. He was aware that the responsibility for advancing with and completing the doctoral process lay with him and not the academic institution. However, he appreciated the collegiality and support within the institution, particularly from his supervisor, and staff on campus. He became such a familiar face that one year he got invited to a staff party.

The structure of the doctoral programme with regular assessment via a formal interview each year with his supervisor and a panel of academic staff helped Matthew to set goals and monitor his progress with the research project on an ongoing basis. Both full and part-time doctoral candidates, from different schools and disciplines were required to attend compulsory course modules each year throughout the PhD process from start to completion. Matthew stated that the formal research modules were very helpful in the early years of the PhD and provided an opportunity to engage with fellow doctoral candidates throughout the process. However, towards the end of the PhD when he was finishing the research and writing up the thesis he found the modules were less helpful as he wanted to focus on writing up the thesis and completing the doctoral qualification.

Matthew's experience of undertaking a PhD in the context of access to campus-based supports, doctoral information, training modules and collegial networks, namely academic staff and peers presented a very positive example of one individual's story of pursuing and completing a PhD on a part-time basis. While he admitted that he did not find his job role particularly stimulating, the working hours and proximity to the academic institution provided Matthew with the opportunity to develop a disciplined and structured routine around his PhD research and to develop

academic and personal relationships with colleagues on an ongoing basis throughout his studies, within the campus setting.

7.7. Sarah's story

"I had problems with my IT and email not working. I actually went down to the university one day and said – guys I really need to get this sorted. I cannot leave today without this sorted!"

Sarah said that her motivation to do a PhD was because she worked in an academic environment where there was a culture of learning and development and an expectation that staff would undertake a doctoral level qualification. Also, on a personal level she was motivated to pursue doctoral studies. She said that her manager was very supportive, both financially in terms of payment of fees and by providing the time for Sarah to attend research modules within the university where she was studying for a PhD which was over 200km from her place of work. She found her work colleagues very supportive and said that it was very motivating to be asked how she was getting on, and to be offered advice and help from peers who she was working with who were also undertaking or had completed a PhD or alternative doctoral qualification.

As part of the doctoral process Sarah was required to undertake compulsory modules over the first two years of the programme. However, she said that the course co-ordinators and lecturers were very supportive and flexible in terms of adapting the timing of the training modules and providing shorter tea breaks between lectures so doctoral candidates who lived at a distance from the university could, in Sarah's words *"leave early and get back on the road to go home."* Sarah acknowledged that the flexibility in terms of meetings, for example with the supervisor, in the academic institution was very helpful because she was a part-time candidate with a heavy workload and commitments within her job role. Sarah credits her supervisor with providing her with great support and feedback on the research project. The supervisor encouraged Sarah in her professional development and facilitated networking opportunities, for example the chance

for Sarah and fellow supervisees to present their research at an international conference. Her interaction with colleagues, peers and sources of support tended to be very structured, intentional and for a specific purpose, such as attending a meeting or event.

“I couldn’t attend meetings or tip into the university to meet people on informal basis or to have queries answered without taking time off from work and taking the long journey there and back [to the university campus].”

Sarah’s work environment, culture and nature of her job complimented the aims of her PhD research. On a personal level she benefited from support and interaction with various individuals including her manager and colleagues at work, her supervisor and her fellow PhD peers. However, the location of Sarah’s place of work, at over 200km from the academic institution where she was undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis presented challenges, particularly when she encountered a systems-based problem with her IT and email. She said this was a very stressful issue for her as she was not able resolve the problem remotely, for example via phone or email and she had no intermediary who could act on her behalf in the university. As she said herself

“It was really stressful because it was not your supervisor’s job to sort out it was a problem on a whole different level, and no one was giving me answers!”

Sarah had to take time off work and go down and sort out the problem in person on a face-to-face basis.

“I wasn’t getting anywhere remotely [via remote access], I wasn’t getting any answers and I was being pushed from this person to that person.”

She harnessed the support of a contact she knew who worked in the university, one of her PhD classmates, who brought her to the appropriate people in the IT department who could help her to sort out the problem with the email. Sarah described her experience of seeking support from

her fellow PhD colleagues who were familiar with the systems and setting of the academic institution as invaluable in helping her to resolve administrative and systems-based problems. Sarah acknowledged that she received a lot of support from individuals within her workplace and in the academic institution where she undertook the doctoral process, also she herself was very proactive and building relationships and seeking out support from people to help her progress with her studies. However, the physical distance between the academic institution and her place of work, and nature of job responsibilities within a full-time role presented challenges at time to managing part-time doctoral studies with other commitments.

7.8. Elaine's story

“What got me through [the PhD] was the kindness of strangers. Online support networks from people I'd never met and who were going through the same thing as I was or professors from the other side of the world who just wanted to help PhD students who needed help. I've never met them, and I probably never will – but there you go they were the people who helped me. A group of strangers helping each other out.”

Elaine's motivation for undertaking doctoral studies was to secure a role within a higher education institution. She was in a full-time role within an educational environment in the private sector, which in her own words *“was not very research focused.”* Her decision to do the PhD on a part-time basis was for personal fulfilment and *“to go to the top of the tree on the Framework of Qualifications.”* Elaine had recently completed a master's qualification in Education the year before starting doctoral studies.

She had completed her master's qualification in the same institution where she enrolled in a PhD programme. Her main source of contact in the academic institution during her doctoral studies was her supervisor. She had a good relationship personally with her supervisor but commented that her supervisor was a relatively new member of academic staff in the university

and did not have experience progressing doctoral candidates to completion. Elaine found it difficult to access information online, for example relating to doctoral programme guidelines which she said were not always clear and easy to interpret. On hindsight she said that she might have benefited from selecting a different type of doctoral programme than undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis, for example one provided greater structure and taught modules and opportunities to meet other doctoral candidates. However, in terms of her job role she said that it might have been difficult to get the time off work to attend classes, so the part-time PhD process suited her from that perspective. In general Elaine spent very little time in the academic institution during the day due to the nature of her responsibilities within the full-time job. She tended to go into the PhD workspace in the academic institution in the evening after her working day. She would sometimes get a chance to chat to two other (full-time) doctoral candidates who were working in a shared space for doctoral candidates, which was provided by the academic department. She found her peers very helpful in terms of picking up informal tips and resources.

“There was one guy [a full-time PhD candidate] who was very helpful, he told me about resources, particular a software package that might be helpful for me to use in my research. It turns out that I did use it and it was very good.”

Interaction with sources of support within the academic institution were on a sporadic basis for Elaine who could not just leave her place of employment during the day, as the day job still had to be done. Elaine developed a structured approach to managing her PhD commitments on top of the work commitments, namely she worked all week at her job, on a full-time basis, and reserved the weekend for her doctoral research and writing.

Elaine would have liked if the doctoral process had provided more opportunities for her to become emersed in a supportive and scholarly community, for example with fellow PhD candidates in the academic institution. However, despite being located within a short walking

distance from her place of work to the academic institution where she was undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis, the nature and time commitments of her job role did not offer Elaine the opportunity to avail of resources, peer-based and academic communities and supports on campus.

7.9. Una's story

“When I look back on it [the PhD] I think how did I do that? But now it's done.”

Una had a busy life including a long commute to work, a demanding full-time job and a young family to look after. In addition to these commitments, she was undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis. Work on the PhD was carved into little units of time, for example on her long commute from work to home each day. She said that sometimes she got so focused on her studies that

“I nearly missed my stop to get out!”

Family life and activities required major juggling and time management skills and Una said her husband and her mother were very helpful in this regard and really encouraged her to do the PhD. Her supervisor was a great support. He was very experienced and established in the university and had progressed a lot of doctoral students to completion. Also, the supervisor was very familiar with the university system, culture and personnel and he was Una's main source of contact with the university during the PhD.

Una was in full time employment in a location that was close to the academic institution. She was able to drop into the university for meetings or coffee mornings with academic staff and peers over the doctoral process. However, her job was very busy, and she did not work in an organisation where there was much support for employees undertaking doctoral studies, financially, personally or practically in terms of flexibility with working hours and arrangements.

However, she wanted to pursue an academic career, which was her primary motivation for undertaking the PhD. She cited the various and often conflicting work, home and time commitments as the greatest barrier to progressing with studies. Una credits her supervisor as providing her with academic guidance and her spouse and mother as providing emotional and practical support, for example with childcare. In terms of her own skills, Una acknowledged her own self-discipline and time management skills as influencing progression and completion of the PhD on a part-time basis. Una said that she always felt that she could go to her supervisor with any concerns or queries and that she would have the support of other academic and administrative staff in the department. However, Una had very little contact with other PhD researchers including part-time candidates. Una felt that her busy life in the context of multiple other working and personal commitments meant that she had to make choices and it suited her to be at home

“I had kids and I was still working – something had to give, and it was the publishing side of things.”

On reflection Una would have liked to have devoted more time to developing her academic writing skills and to publishing her work. Towards the end of the PhD process, she accessed the Teaching and Learning Centre and availed of the writing and research classes that were held within the university. She discovered her own style of working and towards the end of the PhD process Una developed a routine where she would work in short bursts for a couple of hours, which she found more productive than trying to block off a whole day to work on her thesis. The proximity of Una’s place of employment to the academic institution provided opportunities to meet with her supervisor and access academic writing support from the academic institution. However, lack of opportunities to make contact with fellow PhD candidates may have led to an isolated experience of undertaking doctoral studies. The distance of Una’s home, which was a long commute from both her place of work and the academic institution and the challenges

juggling a busy family life with other commitments forced Una to make choices and draw on her own resources and time management skills to progress with and complete the PhD. Una's story which was not unique among participants illustrates the challenges of undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis, often squeezed into the gaps of everyday life in the context of multiple other commitments and often conflicting demands on time. She recounted some personal challenges, for example poor health of a family member and various life events which could potentially have disrupted her progress. In her own words:

“These bumps on the road just happen and sometimes you have to juggle. When you are in the middle you don't see this. But when I look back on it I do think how did I do that? But now it is done.”

7.10. Review of participants' stories of pursuing a PhD on a part-time basis

This section presented four different individual's accounts of navigating a PhD on a part-time basis in the context of various employment and personal commitments. A significant theme in learners' stories of navigating doctoral studies on a part-time basis was the position of the learner, both within their own work context and in terms of proximity or distance from the academic institution as influencing access to doctoral programme resources and communities. Despite physical proximity to the academic institution, the time commitments and nature of Elaine's job role presented challenges to participating in research and peer-based networks on campus during the day. In contrast Una was able to drop into the academic institution during the day, as her place of work was a short distance from campus. However, Una's busy family life and long commute from home to work, presenting challenges in terms of carving out time to work on the PhD. Matthew's working life, namely a short working day and proximity to the academic institution, presented opportunities for Matthew to connect with academic staff and peers and to become a familiar face on campus over the doctoral process. Sarah credited her supervisor, work colleagues, manager and fellow doctoral candidates as a key source of support,

while also acknowledging her own resilience and networking skills as factors which helped her to progress and complete the PhD. However, Sarah found that undertaking a PhD at over 200km from her place of work presented difficulties in resolving technical problems via remote or e-mail methods, and that she was required to harness to support of her fellow PhD candidates and to resolve issues on a face-to-face basis. The stories from individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis illustrate the need for further studies which explore the position of the learner in relation to the academic institution on a physical, temporal and geographical basis as influencing or, potentially, inhibiting access to doctoral programme resources and support (O'Regan, 2020a, 2021).

The next section presents the different themes from participants' interview transcripts, based on part-time learners' experiences of accessing doctoral programme support and information from the academic institution during the doctoral journey. Examples from Elaine, Matthew, Sarah and Una's stories are presented throughout the Findings Chapters. Additional comments are provided by other participants to illustrate the different themes and to understand how various personal, institutional and occupational factors influenced individual's accounts of navigating a PhD on a part-time basis.

7.11. Access to information and support within the academic institution

Access to information and support within the academic institution was identified by all participants as an influence on progression and completion of doctoral studies, particularly in the context of the impact of the of job role, work environment, time commitments and proximity to the academic institution. The findings support existing research on the challenges part-time doctoral candidates can face in terms of often limited access to campus-based academic and student support services (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014) due to often juggling studies with work and personal commitments (Watts, 2008).

7.11.1. Structure and stages of the doctoral programme

This section addresses the theme of doctoral programme structure. The subthemes relating to participants' experiences of navigating the doctoral journey included access to doctoral programme procedures and guidelines, coursework and assessment at different stages of the PhD process from induction to completion.

Comments from the participants' illustrated the variance in levels of structure and formal support within each person's experience of navigating the PhD to completion on a part-time basis. Matthew described a highly structured programme with compulsory modules and formal modes of assessment each year and at key stages of the doctoral process (e.g., mid-stage and final viva interview). The structure of the doctoral programme provided Matthew with opportunities to engage with peers on a regular basis, via the course modules. The process of a formal research review each year via an interview with his supervisor and a panel of academic staff provided feedback on his progress and helped Matthew to set and agree goals and a plan for the next phase of his research study. However, towards the end of the PhD Matthew found the compulsory modules less helpful than he had at the beginning of the doctoral journey, as in the late stages of his study process he wanted to focus exclusively on finishing the research and writing up the thesis.

Sarah also experienced a formal structure of coursework, but only within the first two years of her PhD. Sarah acknowledged that she was very proactive in sourcing help and identifying opportunities for personal development and over the last few years of her studies she focused on academic writing, networking and self-development. Individuals had different experiences of accessing doctoral programme information and support from early to late stages of the PhD qualification. However, some participants reflected that they could have been more proactive themselves in seeking out help during the PhD and availing of some of the academic and

research training offered by the university, for example academic writing skills programmes and IT support.

“To go from first year research methods, support to nothing – there has to be something!” Mike

“I didn’t really know what was available [PhD support and information] so I didn’t try to access it.” (Gary)

“I should have done more in terms of sourcing information. Sometimes we don’t take our own advice, or we don’t take the advice offered until we need it.” (Mary)

7.11.2. Subtheme: Access to doctoral programme guidelines and handbook

Participants recounted experiences of accessing doctoral programme information from the academic (Gardner, 2008) institution at different stages of the PhD process. This included the doctoral programme handbook and guidelines.

“The handbook was useful. The only assessments that really happened were at the end stage and the mid stage of the PhD, for example the mid-stage Confirmation process – or upgrade, halfway through the doctoral process and the final viva interview at the end. My supervisor gave me some guidance on what was required at each point.” (Fiona)

“Information on the PhD is in a handbook, but it doesn’t really go into the ins and outs of a PhD.” (Karen)

“A hundred-page long document on the PhD guidelines is not always easy to interpret.” (Natalie)

“Someone, be it the academic administrators or the Student Registration function, needs to sit you down and say that there are hoops you need to go through to pass the PhD. Even an online resource stating that there are six things you need to do to pass, or there

are six things you must have on the front pages of your PhD thesis before you submit.”

(Vivienne)

The findings highlight the variance in individuals' experiences of accessing doctoral programme information and guidelines. The need for information in a user-friendly format, preferably with access to resources online as well as on a face-to-face basis was highlighted by individuals who contributed to this study. In general participants depended on face-to-face contact with knowledgeable individuals, often the supervisor, to help interpret guidelines and procedures. Researchers have identified a tendency for individuals to depend on informal communication on a face-to-face basis (Gardner, 2008) which could potentially lead to doctoral candidates accessing out of date, incomplete or inaccurate information. Researchers have recommended that the institutional systems and doctoral procedures are made visible to help doctoral candidates to navigate each stage of the journey.

7.11.3. Subtheme: Access to training and resources during the doctoral journey

The following comments were based on participants' experiences of navigating the PhD at different stages of the process and include learners' accounts of transitioning from one year to the next in the context of access to formal and compulsory processes, such as the mid-stage and final viva interviews , as well as access to informal and voluntary research and training support.

“Every year I had to do a presentation like a viva. They put us through a rigorous interview after our presentation and they made us stand over everything we were going to do.” (Sarah)

“We had progress reviews twice a year. One formal and one informal to see if you have made enough progress to move from one year to the next. A Postgraduate Review Form is signed and completed to allow you to move on to the next year of the PhD process.”

(Laura)

“Progress reports were just used as part of the system for the student to move from one year to the next and to pay fees.” (Vivienne)

7.11.4. Subtheme: The mid-stage assessment process

The mid stage transfer interview is a formal process, usually within the first three years of the PhD, which offers the doctoral candidate a chance to formally present their research progress to a panel of academic staff and to receive feedback and guidance on moving forward with the study.

“At the mid-stage there was a formal process which is an assessment process used to establish if you are ready to continue along the PhD path or not. I found this a very useful process.” (Rose)

“Nobody sat down and explained what a Confirmation Process was. Nobody told us anything about Progress Reports at the end of the year and the logistics of being a student [e.g., registration and progression etc.]” (Vivienne)

7.11.5. Subtheme: viva voce examination and associated assessment process

The viva voce oral examination process is often the final formal assessment of the participant’s research outputs and written thesis by a panel of internal and external examiners . The respondents’ comments illustrate the variety of experiences of this process, either as negative or positive, depending on the influence of different personal and institutional factors as experienced by each person who completed a PhD on a part-time basis. This included availability of comprehensive guidelines, opportunities to practice a mock viva with a member of academic staff, selection of examiners and the extent to which the candidate themselves were prepared for the viva and ready to submit the final thesis.

“The viva process has a set of guidelines around the process in my institution. It is brilliant! I read through the viva guidelines several time and they (the institution)

organised a mock viva, which your supervisor co-ordinates. I had a full mock viva and people internally read my PhD.” (Mary)

“There should be more supports even from the college – in terms of getting ready for the [mid-stage] Confirmation and viva interviews, even just a general lecture – even someone like me coming in [for example who completed a PhD on a part-time basis].”
(Mike)

“Duty of care on the part of the academic institution is not there. The Appeals process is very difficult. I could not get the support in the university.” (Natalie)

“I proposed a few names for my viva externs. Because you are an expert in the field, and you know who the experts are. The examiners were very good, and the viva process was very professional and courteous.” (Shane)

7.12. Review of participants’ experiences of accessing support from the university

In summary participants reported different accounts of navigating the PhD process at different stages of the journey. The more dynamic and interactive modes of regular formal assessment (for example face-to-face annual progress interviews with a panel of academic staff) were valued by participants as providing an opportunity to present and develop their research to academics at regular intervals over the PhD process. The findings support existing research that illustrates the different challenges that individuals can face in terms of making the transition from novice to independent research (Lovitts, 2008) and confirms the need for targeted assistance for doctoral candidates at different stages of the research journey (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Pifer & Baker, 2016).

A primary theme within the context of access to academic support related to the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee as an influence on doctoral progression and completion. Two subthemes were identified in terms of participants’ experiences of engaging

with the supervisor during the PhD, namely personal relationship and communication and research support and feedback. Additional forms of support within the academic institution which were identified by participants included the Library, academic and administrative staff and peers.

7.13. Theme: Relationship with the supervisor

All the participants identified the influence of the relationship with the supervisor as a key influence on the experience of pursuing doctoral studies, which was a prevalent theme in individuals' interviews and transcripts. In some cases, the only person in the academic institution that the part-time learner interacted with during the doctoral process was the supervisor. In many cases the supervisor was experienced in progressing doctoral candidates to completion and was very familiar with the key academic and administrative procedures, systems and personnel in the institution. For individuals like Sarah and Una, who had limited access to the campus environment, an experienced supervisor was identified as a significant support and the main source of information and guidance on the doctoral process, primarily on a face-to-face basis, within the academic institution. Matthew's experience illustrated the importance of an open and friendly relationship with the supervisor, which proved invaluable at a critical stage within the research process.

"I remember at the middle stage of the PhD I felt really stuck. I knew I needed an external voice telling me it was okay that I was going to be fine and that I would get through it. I rang my supervisor and asked to meet for a coffee. I told him I needed him to talk me off a cliff as I was tempted to throw it [the PhD] out the window. So, I got through that, and my supervisor was a great help." (Matthew)

7.13.1. Subtheme: Participants' experiences of interacting with the supervisor

This section describes participants' accounts of interacting with the supervisor or team of supervisors over the doctoral process and the comments highlight the variance in participants'

experiences. The opportunity to clarify expectations of both the supervisor and the doctoral learners' role including frequency and mode of meetings (face-to-face and online) and expected turnaround time for feedback on draft chapters and research progress was identified and beneficial in terms of advancing with doctoral studies. The role of the supervisor (s) as a source of motivation and encouragement was valued by some participants.

However, challenges identified by participants were primarily in terms of the experience of the supervisor, if a supervisor had limited experience of progressing doctoral candidates to completion, or was not familiar with the academic institution, doctoral process and personnel in different academic and administrative departments. A supervisor who had experience in progressing doctoral candidates to completion and who was well established and familiar with the academic institution including key processes, departments and personnel was cited as an invaluable source of support. The following comments illustrate the variance in participants' experiences of interacting and communicating with the supervisor (or supervisors) throughout the doctoral process.

"Myself and supervisor had a good relationship from the outset in terms of my expectations of him and his expectations of me during the doctoral process. We had that conversation early on." (Fiona)

"My supervisor was good at making sure I kept going. There were a lot of times due to personal circumstances that I said to my supervisor that I might take leave of absence. She encouraged me to keep going." (Natalie)

"The meetings with my supervisor were very good." (Shane)

"My supervisor gave the confidence to submit by telling me that work was at standard. I couldn't have done it otherwise." (Laura)

The findings support existing research on the influence the supervisory relationship had on an individual's experiences of navigating the doctoral process in terms of fit between the supervisor and the supervisee (Pyhältö et al., 2015). In general participants cited the importance of a good interpersonal relationship and open communication with the supervisor as a positive influence on the process of undertaking doctoral studies on a part-time basis. However, part-time enrolment status has been identified as presenting challenges not just for doctoral candidates, but also for supervisors in terms of building and sustaining communication on a regular basis over the part-time doctoral process (Watts, 2008). The issue of interacting with the supervisor and, for example receiving timely feedback on the research and thesis writing progress were identified by some participants as presenting challenges to progressing and completing the PhD. Timeliness of feedback was cited as important particularly for part-time candidates, who often had to plan ahead and take annual leave from work to commit time to redrafting thesis chapters, based on feedback from the supervisor. The findings support existing research which suggests that doctoral candidates prefer a supervision style based on project management and goal setting rather than a more laissez-faire and informal style of supervision (Lee, 2008). McAlpine (2014) recommends that the doctoral process is recognised as an institutional responsibility and priority rather than falling within the remit of individual members of academic staff. The following comments illustrate some of the challenges that participants experienced in the context of the supervisory relationship.

"The difficulties with having two supervisors are that they didn't often get a chance to talk to each other about what they were saying to me and sometimes I was getting conflicting advice." (Gary)

"I kept getting the same chapters back to me [the introduction chapter], you know red pen and all that kind of thing. I kept thinking yes but we've been through all this, but what about the next chapter, what about chapter 4 etc?" (Karen)

“I would plan ahead and take a week off to go to work on feedback based on a date agreed by the supervisor. But the feedback might not come until next month. Delays in response from the supervisor, the feedback loop, whatever you want to call it, really scuppered progress.” (Vivienne)

“I know it goes against new supervisors, but I would definitely recommend picking a supervisor who has progressed people and has a record of completing PhD candidates.”

(Rose)

“I am only one of the supervisor’s students, not the only one – they are busy people.”

(Shane)

“I felt that the supervisor had other students that were brilliant. They were very driven. They were full-time. I probably used up a lot of his time and energy and effort and I’d say he was going – Jesus! You know?” (Una)

7.14. Review of the theme: supervisory relationship

The findings illustrate the different dimensions of the supervisor/supervisee relationship in terms of responsibilities, communication and frequency of interaction and feedback. Contact with the supervisor, primarily on a face-to-face basis was identified by many participants as a key influence on the doctoral process. For some individuals, the knowledge and experience of a supervisor who had progressed candidates to completion, and was familiar with the systems, processes and personnel within the university was invaluable in accessing resources and sourcing information.

The power of the supervisor to facilitate access to developmental opportunities and research networks has been identified as impacting on satisfaction with doctoral studies (Lee, 2008). Participants cited examples of the supervisor providing guidance and feedback with academic writing, offering mentorship and support, particularly at a juncture when the individual was

struggling with the doctoral process. In some cases, the supervisor was instrumental in facilitating access to research networks and conferences for doctoral candidates. The responses illustrate the complexity of different aspects of the supervisory process, not just in terms of interaction between the academic staff member and the doctoral candidate but also in terms of access to wider academic and administrative systems and procedures at an institutional level which influenced the quality of individuals' experiences and progression with doctoral studies. Participants recognised that supervisors had a range of responsibilities, of which supervision may be only one aspect of the job role. Some individuals, who contributed to this study, acknowledged the difficulties that a staff member who did not have experience of progressing doctoral candidates to completion, or who was not familiar with the academic institutional systems and personnel.

The outcome from this research concurs with findings from existing research studies which recommend greater support in terms of access to doctoral programme information, procedures and policies, not just for doctoral candidates but potentially for new supervisors and recently appointed academic staff (McAlpine et al., 2012). Researchers recommend that academic institutions combine the strengths of the apprenticeship model of supervision with the advantages of greater structure and support within a research environment in the institution, in order to facilitate doctoral candidates to develop the skills required to generate original knowledge and research (Byrne et al., 2013).

7.15. Theme: Access to the Library and other Student Services within the university

This theme addresses participants' experiences of accessing the range of supports from the academic institutions, beyond the supervisory relationship, for example from the Library and other individual academic, administrative and support staff and services. The findings illustrate the often-intentional nature of participants' interaction with resources and sources of support

within the academic institution, for example for a specific purpose, such as to attend a seminar or training course or to meet with the supervisor, often outside of office hours. Management of time and prioritising research activities was a feature of many of the participants' accounts of navigating the doctoral process on a part-time basis. Una commented that she would have liked to have developed her academic writing skills and availed of the Teaching and Learning Support Unit on campus, as well as sought more opportunities to publish and present her research during the doctoral process. However, the long commute home in addition to a busy family life after a long day at work meant that Una had to prioritise where she focused her energies. As a result, she tended to use small pockets of time to work on the research and thesis writing process, rather than avail of some of the services on campus, which she felt on hindsight, would have helped her to develop her research and academic writing skills. The following comments highlight participants' experiences of accessing supports and services within the academic institution, beyond the supervisory context.

"The Library staff were always extremely nice and that made it a bit easier going into the Library on a wet Sunday afternoon." (Heather)

"I do think the psychological thing, encouragement and help with academic writing is important. I should have asked for help earlier from the Writing Centre in the university. The help is available, and I was always told about it, but I never accessed it. I should have done that earlier." (Una)

"Coming to the end of the PhD I did access the Teaching and Writing Centre – writing and research classes that were available in the university and I found them very good."
(Heather)

"I did get some administrative support in the academic department as there was some issue with my fees going through, which were being paid for by my employer. It was

face-to-face and by email communication. She was very helpful, and it was what I needed at the time.” (Fiona)

“I formed a lot of informal relationships with administrators, and they just have so much knowledge that I wasn’t aware of. I went to Academic Registry, and they were lovely. They helped me to sort out and get clarity on an issue I had relating to registration and submission of PhD.” (Laura)

7.16. Review of participants’ experiences of accessing support from university services

The tendency to access information via informal communication on a face-to-face basis, for example via the ‘grapevine’ (Gardner, 2007) may potentially result in doctoral candidates receiving incorrect, out of date and incomplete information. However, face-to-face interaction was valued by doctoral candidates, particularly for individuals with limited opportunities to participate in research and peer-based communities on campus. The findings illustrate the importance of community and sense of belonging as enhancing doctoral candidates’ experiences (Coffman et al., 2016; Lahenius, 2012; Pilbeam & Denyer, 2009; Vekkaila et al., 2013).

Researchers recommend that academic institutions provide equity of support and access to resources for full and part-time doctoral candidates, but suggest that some institutions may not have the resources to support part-time doctoral learners (European University Institute, 2017). Sursock (2015) recommends that Student Support Services can play a role in supporting postgraduate students who are often balancing personal and family commitments with studies. The findings illustrate the need to compliment face-to-face interaction with online resources and support to enhance access to timely and needs-based information outside of office hours, particularly for individuals with limited access either to peer based and academic support networks or the physical campus environment during the working day (O'Regan, 2020b, 2021).

7.17. Theme: Harnessing support and resources to advance with PhD studies

The dependency on face-to-face interaction and reported challenges of accessing doctoral programme information and guidance from online and web-based sources was identified as a challenge for some participants, particularly when trying to interpret a particular policy or regulation relevant to the doctoral process. Difficulties sourcing information and support via remote access were exacerbated by part-time status and lack of proximity to the campus setting during the working day. Sarah's experience of taking a day of annual leave from work to travel over 200km to the academic institution to resolve a problem with IT and email illustrates the difficulties that individuals faced when trying to resolve problems due to limited access to the physical campus environment during the working day. Sarah had been unable to sort out the difficulties via online and telephone-based communication. In the end she harnessed the support of a fellow PhD candidate who worked in the university, whom she described as *"a real social butterfly who knows everyone in the university."* Her friend was able to help her to resolve the issue on a face-to-face basis. Other examples included the challenges faced by participants (for example Heather and Natalie) who struggled to find clear and accurate information on doctoral programme policies and regulations via online and document-based media.

"The information was there [online] but it was hard to find and difficult to interpret in a 100-page document. I needed to contact an academic who was a friend of mine and worked in a different country to help me to interpret the guidelines and to help me to navigate an aspect of the PhD. I would never have been able to do that on my own without help from an outsider." (Natalie)

"I knew that I was clear in my interpretation of the regulation, relevant to my circumstances and progressing with the doctoral process. But it took me contacting a friend who I worked with in the academic institution, who was a Senior Administrator to advocate on my behalf and speak to the Head of Department where I was pursuing

doctoral studies to resolve the issue. I felt like a child, kind of a case of ‘Johnny has my ball will you go and help me get it back?’ I didn’t appreciate it. I didn’t appreciate it at all, and I had a lot going on in my personal life at the same time.” (Heather)

The above examples illustrate participants’ accounts of accessing support, primarily on a face-to-face basis from a colleague or contact within the university, or who was familiar with academic procedures who could help to resolve the issue. Researchers have highlighted the importance of personal agency and seeking help, often from personal contacts as helping individuals to navigate the process and progress with doctoral studies (McAlpine et al., 2012). Understanding the academic and administrative procedures and developing relationship with faculty and staff within the academic institution has been identified as influencing progression and completion of doctoral studies (Maher et al., 2004).

However, the participants’ stories of seeking help to progress with studies were not always based on the experience of facing a difficulty or challenge in relation to advancing with studies, for example emanating from a procedural system-based issue at the level of the institution. Some individuals sought out opportunities for personal development to develop their own skills as a researcher and to participate in a community of scholars.

Self-generated networks, both face-to-face and online, primarily with other doctoral researchers and academics were identified as a key source of academic and personal support, particularly for learners who acknowledged feeling socially and academically isolated, for example in the workplace or within home and family life during the doctoral process.

7.18. Subtheme: Self-generated doctoral support networks

The following examples illustrate individuals’ experiences of seeking help and generating support networks, face-to-face and online to advance with doctoral studies. The examples illustrate the variance in learners’ motivations to source information and develop support

networks, for example to enhance social contact and to source research training and opportunities to develop as a scholar.

“There was a few of us needed statistics training and they (the university) brought over someone [from the UK] for us. I got a petition going. They were good, the institution and the supervisor, if I needed funding or to access any training.” (Mary)

“It wasn’t that we (part-time peers) were in the same space. We were colleagues and we worked together, and we were learning together and making sense of something together. Methodology is one of the few parts of the PhD where you can connect with people doing different topics but doing the same method.” (Laura)

“I met this group of European PhD candidates at a conference, and they were flying ahead. They were generating papers and I thought here is a network of people that know what they were doing. I knew this guy who moved to another country because he wanted to do his PhD under a particular expert. So, I started to see that I didn’t source information very well. But I started to see how it worked in other places and started to get information from them.” (Mary)

“A group of us PhD students, full and part-timers from different institutions met at a conference and we set up a group where we would meet every few months, share information and resources and give each other feedback. We eventually organised a one-day conference ourselves in one of the institutions. We became very proactive because we were all studying in the same area – but we were all in different institutions and we all felt isolated in our own institutions. I found it really helpful, and I’d be in touch with these people still.” (Matthew)

“What got me through was the kindness of strangers. Online support networks, from people I’d never met who were going through the same thing as I was on the other side

of the world who just wanted to help PhD students who needed help. I never met them, but they were the people who helped me.” (Elaine)

“All communication with my part-time PhD networks was email and online.” (Vivienne)

7.19. Review of participants experiences of sourcing supportive doctoral networks

Participants demonstrated initiative in sourcing doctoral programme support via different networks of face-to-face and online communities. The findings concur with existing research which has highlighted the importance of academic and peer-based networks for part-time learners (Zahl, 2015). The examples given by participants highlight the role that learners played in sourcing and developing their own networks outside of the context of the academic institution, for example the online doctoral forums that Elaine connected with or the self-generated group of doctoral candidates from different academic institutions described by Matthew. The findings shed a light on the role that online doctoral programme support can have in enhancing academic development and social interaction for learners with limited contact to doctoral researchers from academic or other work-based and personal networks. Online networks can enhance connectivity and sense of belonging for learners at a distance from the academic institution (O'Regan, 2020a, 2021). Researchers recommend further studies on the role of technology in enhancing access to educational opportunities for learners (Fumasoli, 2019).

7.20. Reflections and learning points from this chapter

Eighteen learners' experiences of navigating the PhD journey to completion on a part-time basis in (5) different universities in Ireland were explored in this chapter. The findings illustrated the variance in learners' experiences of navigating a PhD to completion on a part-time basis. A key finding was the position of the learner, geographically, temporally and physically in relation to the academic institution which was largely influenced by the individual's employment circumstances and time commitments. In general participants tended to source doctoral

programme support and information and support, primarily from the supervisor, on a face-to-face basis within the academic institution. The challenges of navigating doctoral programme regulations and systems, for example via online and document-based resources were addressed by participants. The findings support existing studies which recommend greater understanding of the experiences of non-traditional, namely part-time doctoral candidates (Gardner, 2008) including the factors that can potentially facilitate or impede advancement with studies for a diverse and little understood mode of doctoral candidature.

7.21. Summary

This chapter has highlighted the multifaceted dimensions of the part-time doctoral learners' life (Hopwood et al., 2011) often in the context of limited access the academic institution, largely due to work and caring roles (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014; Watts, 2008). The theme of employment and personal roles as influencing individuals' experiences of progressing with and completing doctoral studies is discussed in the next chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 8. Personal and employment factors influencing part-time doctoral studies

8.1. Introduction

The themes presented in this chapter relate to participants' comments on the role of work and personal commitments as an influence on the experience of progressing with and completing a PhD on a part-time basis. All eighteen individuals who contributed to this study were in employment, primarily full-time, throughout the doctoral process. Some participants changed job, career and place of employment during the PhD. The theme of employment and work commitments was prominent in participants' narratives and illustrated the complexity of balancing doctoral studies with employment responsibilities. However, work culture and environment provided a source of community and support for some participants. For others, the nature of the job role, particularly where doctoral qualifications were not recognised or supported by the employer exacerbated the sense of academic and collegial isolation that was reported by some individuals.

In contrast while family and caring roles have been identified as impacting on learners' experiences of undertaking doctoral studies (Cronshaw, 2017; Watts, 2008) not all participants had partners or children while studying. However, personal, health and life concerns featured in all individuals' stories of navigating the PhD on a part-time basis. The findings support existing studies which suggest adopting a holistic understanding of doctoral candidates lives and activities, both within and beyond the context of the doctoral process and the academic institution (Hopwood et al., 2011). The themes described in this chapter illustrate the different ways that employment and personal roles influenced the pursuit of doctoral studies. In some cases the work environment influenced academic progression, either in terms of providing collegial support and opportunities to develop research skills and networks. In other cases the work environment and employment responsibilities presented challenges to advancing with

doctoral studies, for example due to academic isolation, nature of the job role and lack of recognition from the employer.

Family and friends were identified as providing more practical and emotional, rather than academic support, or presenting challenges for participants in terms of managing and negotiating the different aspects of home life with work and PhD commitments.

8.2. Managing employment commitments with part-time studies

For many participants, the employment role was the “*real job*,” and the PhD was managed in pockets of time around occupational and personal responsibilities, often in the evenings after work or at the weekend. While participants varied in age, for example from mid-twenties to fifty-five years and older on commencing doctoral studies all were already established in a job role, and in some cases a career path prior to starting the PhD. This suggests a contrast between the experiences of individuals undertaking doctoral studies in the context of existing employment commitments in comparison with doctoral candidates who progress to a PhD directly from undergraduate or postgraduate studies. Researchers recommend challenging the assumption of the doctoral researcher as young, full-time and free of other occupational or caring responsibilities which is prevalent in doctoral education policy, discourse and funding arrangements (Hopwood et al., 2011). The following comments illustrate participants’ experiences of balancing doctoral research with work commitments.

“I used the long train journey from my place of employment to home to work on the PhD.

It was very focused work. Sometimes I thought I would miss my stop I was so focused!”

(Una)

“I think one of the good things for me is that you are working, and you have your job. I

mean the job keeps going. The PhD is one of the things you are doing along with other

things. It was part of my life – it wasn’t all of my life.” (Charlotte)

“I couldn’t afford to do a PhD full-time. I had financial responsibilities. I needed to work, pay the mortgage and the bills.” (Mike)

“I was working in two places simultaneously while doing the PhD. The priority of my work took priority over my PhD.” (Nina)

The findings highlight the benefits, as well as challenges of working while undertaking a PhD. For some individuals job security and a regular income provided the financial stability and means to pursue doctoral studies, which may not have been possible otherwise, in the context of existing personal and financial commitments.

8.2.1. Benefits of working while undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis

Some individuals recounted the benefits of working in terms of the opportunities presented by the employment context. This included access to supportive peers and management, research skills and in some cases access to research participants, where doctoral candidates were able to link their doctoral studies to the day job.

“The only thing that help me to progress was that I deliberately tied the research topic to my job, so everything fed into the PhD and added value to the institution where I was both working and studying. That helped.” (Karen)

“Being able to continue with my work helped my thinking to evolve and contextualised my thinking because I did my PhD research in an area of my work. Work contextualised my study, and my PhD research activities were relevant to my work.” (Shane)

“I had access to my participants for my research and in my day job. I had built up good relations and networks via my work.” (Rose)

“My PhD topic and work experience contributed to my work as an academic – I brought cutting edge research to the classroom debate.” (Nina)

“I got my full-time contract in the university on the basis of completing the PhD.” (Mary)

Researchers recommend further studies on the benefits that part-time, often mature learners who are undertaking research within the work setting can bring both to academic and research communities (Bates & Goff, 2012). Support from employers, in terms of recognition of the value that a doctoral researcher can bring to the work environment can act as an incentive to employees undertaking doctoral studies (O'Regan, 2019), especially as doctoral level qualifications have become the entry level requirement for employment in different sectors, within and beyond academia (Loxley & Kearns, 2018).

8.2.2. Accessing support from colleagues and peers in the workplace

Participants who worked in an environment where doctoral qualifications were valued, for example within a higher education institution, particularly within a research-based rather than administrative or Student Support Services role, reported the benefits of collegial and institutional support. Some individuals who worked within the private sector or alternatively within the field of education outside of academia reported the challenges of pursuing a PhD often in the context of demanding jobs, isolation and limited support or recognition from employers. Individuals who worked in a sector where doctoral studies were not recognised as a valuable qualification and relevant to the work role tended to self-fund their studies, in comparison some individuals, primarily those who worked within the higher education sector often received funding for fees from their employer. Financial support from employers was appreciated by participants, not just in terms of the monetary value but also in terms of motivational benefits. Individuals who received funding for fees felt that the employer endorsed and valued the employee, and the potential contribution of the research to the work environment.

“I worked in an environment where there was a culture of learning and development and an expectation that staff would undertake a PhD/Level 10 qualification. I think the leadership in the Higher Education Institution where I worked was really important

because they understood the commitment you had to the PhD and the time you needed to work on it.

I had to take time out to go to the academic institution where I did my PhD and there was never a question of me not being able to take that time. That acknowledgement from my director/manager of the value of the PhD being undertaken by a staff member is very important. The academic institution where I work really did right by me.” (Sarah)

“I knew it wasn’t an issue if I needed someone to pay for something related to my PhD. I always had that backbone of support from the institution, which in fairness was good.” (Mary)

“I got support from my peers in the work environment because a number of them were also doing a PhD. One had started at more or less the same time as me. So we were a big support to each other in terms of recommending readings and sharing things with each other.” (Karen)

“The work culture where I am employed is very research oriented, whereas my previous job was more teaching focused. The PhD is valued in my work environment and matters in a way it hadn’t in my previous place of work. Support from colleagues is a huge advantage if you are working in the world of research anyway compared to others who may not have that.” (Fiona)

“I was funded for my research from the academic institution which gave a value to my PhD topic. It showed my research was of interest the fact that the university was willing to fund it.” (Rose)

8.2.3. Review of benefits of working while undertaking a part-time PhD

Responses from participants illustrated the influence of the work environment, culture and job role on the process of undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis. The prevalence of work as a

theme in learners' accounts, not just as a backdrop to the process of pursuing a research qualification, but as a positive or negative influence on advancement with studies and access to resources and collegial communities requires further investigation beyond the scope of this study. For some individuals, the work environment did not provide practical, academic and social support. Participants with limited opportunities to engage with research communities either within the academic institution or via personal and professional contacts described an isolated journey, often lacking in direction, skills development and social interaction.

8.2.4. Challenges to pursuing a PhD on a part-time basis while in employment

Some participants who were employed in an environment where research qualifications were not recognised or supported by management reported the difficulties of working in what was often a demanding job which was not related to the doctoral topic or activities. Some individuals (for example Elaine) reported *"depending on the kindness of strangers"* namely accessing support from doctoral discussion boards and online fora to overcome a sense of academic and social isolation, resulting from limited opportunities to access support within the academic institution or via personal and work-based contacts.

"See I'm just in and out of the university. Because you can't just disappear from the office and just say – I'm gone for the rest of the day. You can't because your work has to be done. So you're juggling – it makes more sense to get the work done during the week in the office and leave the PhD until the weekend." (Elaine)

"The thing about work is that I was working in a private [sector educational] institution and they had no interest in their lecturers doing a PhD. They say they do. I paid for this on my own and I got no time off to do it. I could have done with more support in the workplace." (Una)

“I had to negotiate time with management to attend modules which I managed to do but it was awkward sometimes. I could work a bit late or do something to make up the time.” (Gary)

8.3. Review of factors related to working while pursuing a PhD on a part-time basis

Time commitments associated with working full-time have been identified as presenting challenges for part-time doctoral candidates in terms of opportunities to access campus supports during the working day (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014; Watts, 2008). However, the responses from participants illustrate the different dimensions that work setting and job role contribute to the experience of undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis. In some cases individuals had to negotiate time off from work to attend training or events on campus. This was the case for individuals who worked within the university setting, but in department separate to the environment where they were undertaking a PhD, and for individuals who worked in a location outside of the academic institution, and in some cases in a separate organisation or sector.

Therefore, the position of the learner in the context of the work environment, regardless of whether the job role was physically near or far from the campus setting presented challenges in terms of accessing supports to enhance progression with doctoral studies. The role of the employer and the culture of the employment environment had a significant influence on learners' experiences of accessing supports, both within and beyond the academic institution, during doctoral studies. For example, although Sarah was undertaking a PhD at over 200km from her place of work she cites the culture of her workplace within the higher education sector, and support of her manager as facilitating progress with doctoral studies. This included the fact that employees were encouraged and supported to pursue research qualifications. When Sarah experienced a problem with her (doctoral) student email which she could not resolve via remote and online communication methods she was given permission by her employer to take a day off

work to go down to the university where she was pursuing the PhD to resolve the issue on a face-to-face basis.

In contrast Gary, Elaine and Shane reported the challenges of accessing doctoral supports from the academic institution during the working day, despite working within proximity to the university due to the nature and time commitments of the job role, which was independent of the doctoral qualification and research activities. The findings illustrate the hidden nature of the learner's world, for example work commitments and culture of the employment context which can potentially impact positively and negatively on individuals' experiences of accessing supports and resources from the academic institution. Researchers recommend that academic institutions consider the needs of part-time learners as different to traditional full-time doctoral candidates (Gardner, 2008) and that education providers aim to provide equity of services to part-time as full-time doctoral learners (European University Institute, 2017). Sursock (2015) recommends that Student Support Services can provide support and contribute to the quality of experience for individuals who are managing postgraduate studies in the context of other work and personal responsibilities.

8.4. Family as an influence on advancement with doctoral studies on a part-time basis

Family commitments and caring for children has been cited as impacting primarily on women's experiences of undertaking doctoral studies (Cronshaw, 2017; Maher et al., 2004). Participants who contributed to this study cited family responsibilities as influencing experiences of undertaking doctoral studies. Family and caring roles were cited as a positive influence and enabler to doctoral progression in terms of providing practical support such as babysitting and childcare. However, family and caring commitments were also cited as a barrier to progression and a source of stress. This included carving out time to work on the PhD and often negotiation

of a space and place within the home, for example *“the kitchen table”* (Karen) to work on the doctoral thesis.

Disruptions to doctoral progression included caring for a family member who was ill or, for example, in some cases where the doctoral candidate was experiencing the bereavement of a close relative (e.g. parent) or friend or just in the day-to-day management of undertaking a PhD in the context of work and family life. The findings from this research support existing studies which recommend recognising the complexity of learners’ lives, beyond the pursuit of doctoral studies within the academic environment (Hopwood et al., 2011).

Responses from participants helped to unpack the influence of family and personal roles on doctoral progression and completion as a part-time learner.

8.4.1. Balancing parenting roles with doctoral studies

Participants described the delicate balancing act of organising family life around work and doctoral commitments. Eight of the eighteen completed part-time PhD holders who contributed to this study had dependents while undertaking doctoral qualifications. This included adult, teen-aged, primary and pre-school aged children, toddlers and new-born babies, and for some a combination of children at different ages and stages of life. Life-stage of the participant undertaking doctoral studies, coupled with the ages of children, was identified as contributing to learners’ experiences of navigating the PhD.

“I got married and had a baby during the PhD. Women make big sacrifices to do the PhD.

I had a baby monitor, the cup of tea and the laptop on the table. I’d think with a bit of luck I’ll get some of the analysis done.” (Nina)

“It is extremely difficult to become a parent, work on a doctorate and work full-time.”

(Heather)

“When I look back on it, I think now how did I do that? But now it [the PhD] is done. I think it would have been more difficult now as my children are older, they have more activities and responsibilities. I think I did it at the right time when they were small.”

(Una)

“Having kids – that’s a barrier. Family is a barrier to doing the PhD. It’s a facilitator but it’s also a barrier.” (Mike)

“I was at a good stage in life and my children were reared when I started the PhD. It might have been different if my children were at a different stage.” (Rose)

8.4.2. Review of the influence of personal and family commitments on doctoral progression

The impact of managing caring and personal roles has been acknowledged as influencing learners’ experiences of pursuing doctoral studies, in terms of balancing studies with motherhood (Cronshaw, 2017) or in the context of women’s accounts of competing a doctoral process (Maher et al., 2004). This suggests that gender has an influence on experiences of navigating the doctoral process. Some of the participants recounted the challenges of giving birth, minding a newborn and trying to progress with the PhD and maintain communication links with the academic institution while on maternity leave (Heather). Male participants also acknowledged the challenges of balancing family and childcare responsibilities with employment and doctoral studies. Both male and female participants who were in a relationship with a spouse or partner, acknowledged the importance of having the support of another who understood the demands of undertaking a PhD and was willing to share family responsibilities. However, many of the participants were not in a relationship or managing childcare roles while studying, yet life experiences and personal circumstances influenced the doctoral journey. The different dimensions of each individual’s personal situation and working arrangements

illustrated the uniqueness of each learners' journey in the context of multiple factors, within and beyond the pursuit of the PhD (Hopwood et al., 2011).

8.5. Life events and the pursuit of doctoral studies

Life experiences, both positive and negative have been identified as contributing to individuals' accounts of progressing with doctoral studies (McAlpine et al., 2012). Participants who contributed to this study mentioned various life events which occurred during the doctoral process including starting or ending a romantic relationship, illness of a family member, bereavement, having and rearing children, moving house and changing job. Personal factors such as health concerns and burnout as well as sacrificing social life, hobbies, weekends and evening leisure time were identified as contributing to progression and completion of the PhD. These findings highlight the resilience and determination it takes to pursue doctoral studies (Kearns et al., 2008; Maher et al., 2004) yet also raise questions about wellbeing and mental health of doctoral candidates, which researchers have expressed concerns about (Devos et al., 2017; Levecque, Anseel, De Beuckelaer, Van der Heyden, & Gisle, 2017). The theme of work life balance and wellbeing of doctoral candidates will be addressed in the Discussion chapter of this thesis.

8.6. Summary

This chapter has explored participants' comments in relation to the influence of work and caring roles on the pursuit and completion of a PhD on a part-time basis. The findings illustrate the different ways that employment and personal roles influenced participants' experiences of navigating the doctoral process. The employment setting, culture and job role offered opportunities for some participants to access support from colleagues and develop skills in an environment where research skills and doctoral qualifications were valued. For others who worked in sectors or organisations where research skills and activities were not recognised as adding value within the employment context, the doctoral pursuit was often a socially lonely and

academically isolated process. The findings illustrate the importance of employment culture and collegial support from management and peers as contributing to motivation and quality of the doctoral experience for part-time candidates (O'Regan, 2019). Based on participants' accounts work environment and employment responsibilities impacted both positively and negatively, depending on the learners' experience and context, on access to academic communities and research skills. In contrast family and caring roles were identified by individuals as influencing more practical and emotional than academic aspects of the doctoral process. A supportive partner, or family member was identified as key to providing motivational support and helping with childcare and other commitments in the home. Different dimensions of learners' lives have been presented in this chapter, namely the influence of work and personal commitments on the pursuit of a PhD on a part-time basis. The next chapter addresses individuals' reflections on undertaking and completing doctoral studies on a part-time basis. This includes individual learner's perceptions of their own role and actions as influencing progress on the doctoral journey.

Chapter 9. Participants' reflections on completing a PhD on a part-time basis

9.1. Introduction

This chapter explores individual's experiences of completing a PhD on a part-time basis and their reflections on what they did, or what, on hindsight they might have done differently.

Researchers suggest that the capacity to progress with a research project which is meaningful to the individual in the absence of frustrations, obstacles or delays influences progression and completion of doctoral studies (Devos et al., 2017). However, participants who contributed to this study did experience delays, difficulties and frustrations, both in relation to undertaking doctoral studies and in relation to other personal, social and employment related factors and life events. The insights shared by participants, both in terms of their own learning experiences and recommendations to institutions on supporting part-time learners offers an opportunity to reflect on and challenge academic norms and assumptions within doctoral education discourse which tends to understand doctoral candidature in terms of the full-time PhD researcher.

Participants who contributed to this study and shared their experiences demonstrated resilience and tenacity (McAlpine et al., 2012), often overcoming various personal, academic, institutional and situational obstacles to complete a PhD on a part-time basis.

9.2. Personal agency and positive self-talk

Personal agency has been defined in terms of proactive behaviour and seeking help from others to overcoming obstacles and advance with doctoral studies (McAlpine et al., 2012). Yet in the absence of external sources of support or when faced with a challenge that only the individual doctoral candidate could resolve themselves participants drew on their own personal resources to help with motivation and to progress with the PhD research. Archer (2003) suggests that individuals are not passive but can respond and reflect on constraints and enablers in the social environment, via internal dialogue and conversations to modify their behaviours to enhance the

possibility of reaching a personal goal, which in the case of this project was the completion of a PhD qualification on a part-time basis. The following examples illustrate the different ways that individuals harnessed their own skills, reflected on progress and took action to navigate the doctoral journey to completion.

“The greatest support was from me! I think the recognition is that you have to be self-motivated, self-motivating and a self-starter.” (Karen)

“In the last few weeks I had in my head this image of a huge fire breathing raging bull-type mythical creature. I kept saying to myself – you are going to have to wrestle this beast to its knees – that’s what the PhD is. Every night I was just working at the kitchen table all night those last few weeks. I would say to myself the [PhD] beast is down on its knees; its head is going down, and we are there. You’ve got to keep on top of the beast! That was the only way I could manage was to give the PhD embodiment, personality if you like. That’s how I did it really. Mythical beast bull!” (Karen)

“I experienced a number of setbacks within my personal life and hindrances like my car being broken into a number of times over the space of a few months. I was managing a sports injury, so I didn’t have my usual outlet of training and participating in sports activities. While these hindrances distracted me, they also drove me on with the PhD. My attitude was always that is that this must get done. The work still had to be done. I still needed to focus on the PhD. I think I got into the frame of mind just plough on. Keep ploughing on.” (Sarah)

“I knew I’d reached that point where I felt I had hit a wall. I didn’t want to give up because it would be a terrible waste, but I couldn’t see the next stage. I pushed to finish the thesis; every minute of the last six months was consumed by the PhD. I look back now, and wonder should I have taken more time, but you can torture yourself.” I got it

done because I was beginning to run out of steam and thought I couldn't sustain it for another year. So I got it done." (Matthew)

9.2.1. Participants' accounts of demonstrating personal agency and positive self-talk

The above comments illustrated the role of personal agency as helping individuals to progress through the doctoral process, particularly at a time where they were finding the process challenging and often in the context of other personal difficulties. The findings highlight the role that the learner played in shaping their own experience of navigating the doctoral process and the importance of drawing on personal resources such as self-discipline, motivational techniques and positive self-talk. Practical and organisational skills were acknowledged by participants as contributing to progression and completion of the doctoral process.

9.3. Project management and time management skills

This section describes the strategies and behaviours adopted by part-time doctoral candidates to stay motivated and task focused to complete the research, thesis and doctoral process. The following comments highlight the importance of organisational and time-management skills as influencing the experience of advancing with doctoral studies often in the context of multiple and often conflicting work and personal responsibilities.

"I would use a time log to see how much time I was putting into the PhD. Because it seeps into your being, and you think you are doing it all the time but you're not. You might be talking about it or complaining about it, but not actually doing it." (Charlotte)

"I kept a record of everything I was reading. Keeping a record of what you read helps you not to forget. It also helps you to highlight your contribution and what the [research] gaps are." (Rose)

"As a part-timer a lot of work I did was in the evening and at weekends or snippets of time between lectures or, you know, at work. I was working with other people who were

doing a PhD part-time, so they had the same challenges that I did. That was a real emotional support.” (Laura)

“I was working full-time, and I worked out that my life circumstances allowed me to leave work and go straight to the Library (in the university) for four nights a week. I took weekends off [until the end]. I made a commitment to myself that I was not going to lose weekends.” (Matthew)

“I set specific pieces of work that I would do and when I was finished that piece of work that was it. Every morning I had a plan laid out each day. I still made time to see my friends during the PhD and that was key.” (Sarah)

“The idea of a PhD seemed so insurmountable at times that I purposely gave myself other interesting things to work on.” (Mary)

9.4. Reflections from participants on undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis

The following section recounts participants’ reflections and learning points from undertaking and completing the PhD process. The comments demonstrate an awareness of participants’ own limitations and recognition that the individual is an active participant in the doctoral process, with ultimate responsibility for navigating the PhD to completion. However while respondents acknowledged that their own actions, and sometimes inaction contributed to experiences along the doctoral journey there was a recognition by participants that the academic institution also had responsibilities to provide support and guidance to facilitate completion of doctoral studies for learners. Participants cited specific challenges pertinent to undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis usually while working in a job role on a full-time basis.

“I should have done more in terms of sourcing information. Sometimes we don’t take our own advice, or we don’t take the advice offered I’m afraid until we need it.” (Mary)

“When I reflect on my PhD and how to do processes there are a lot of points where I could have asked questions but didn’t. Sometimes I didn’t know what questions to ask.”

(Laura)

“There is a level of personal responsibility that I didn’t utilise, for example information on the regulations until later in the process when I was worried. As a student at undergraduate or master’s level I kind of relied on face-to-face time to get information from the relevant people.” (Laura)

“I should have gone to more people because it turned out that what I needed was not more words (e.g. production of the written thesis) but more support.” (Natalie)

“For a while I was flitting around not really sure of myself. Then, you know, finding out the information in a very haphazard way. I think you can be lost for most of the PhD. It’s a good process because you learn a lot about yourself. But I think it adds too much strain in terms of health issues and risks associated with it.” (Mary)

9.5. Review of participants’ comments – *“you don’t know what you don’t know!”*

The comments illustrated the challenges that individuals faced in knowing what information to seek out and what questions to ask in a doctoral process and system which was unfamiliar. The comments illustrate how lost individuals can feel within a doctoral process, particularly with limited opportunities to interact with others to source information. The findings suggest that academic institutions could seek feedback from learners on what they wished they had known at different times of the doctoral process. Researchers suggest that non-traditional students, for example postgraduate and online learners should be included in dialogue to enhance quality assurance and programme based reforms to capture the voice of a diverse body of learners in addition to traditional (e.g. full-time undergraduate) students (Varwell, 2018).

“See the thing is when you are going through the PhD and its ups and downs and it’s all very new to you and you don’t have classmates to talk to who are going through the same thing and doing the same assignments (e.g. at master’s level). You don’t always know what questions to ask and sometimes that only happens retrospectively.” (Elaine)

“I think at some stage you kind of think you should know what you are doing and get on with it. You wonder what information you need. You don’t know what you don’t know.”

(Mary)

“You need a certain amount of information to ask the right questions and I think that is where an induction process would have been very helpful. For example where is it appropriate to go to the Administrator or Director of Doctoral Studies and when should you go to your supervisor? I was naïve about the expectations of the PhD and the work that would go into challenging the supervisor about her expectations. I should have challenged her, but I didn’t know how to.” (Laura)

“It is much harder to see your progress when you are working on your own, not just PhD work on your own, but physically and geographically on your own.” (Laura)

9.6. Recommendations for supporting part-time PhD researchers

This section includes recommendations from participants on measures academic institutions can take to address the needs of part-time doctoral candidates who have been defined as invisible in doctoral education policy and practice (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) and campus-life (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014).

“In many cases part-time PhD students probably aren’t really recognised. They are a sort of hidden group of students, and they are kind of out there somewhere and they only come on campus at night or at the weekend – in the dark!” (Heather)

“Part-timers are professional adults coming together and are part of a professional community but at the end of the day you are a student at the mercy of a big institution.”

(Natalie)

“Get people who have finished the PhD on a part-time basis to talk to part-time PhD candidates. Unless you have done it part-time you have no understanding what the experience is like.” (Shane)

“There should be a formal structure for PhD students, particularly part-timers who aren’t here in the university all the time to support them with the social part, guidance on how to engage with others and form networks and how to present at conferences, including what conferences to go to.” (James)

“Universities need to be a bit creative and a bit intentional about supporting part-time PhD students and not to talk themselves out of doing events because they think no one is going to show up.” (Heather)

“We are novice researchers – we need guidance and again I would argue that we part-timers need additional guidance because unlike full-timers we can’t knock on doors (Monday to Friday) because we are working full-time. Because the bottom line is that no one wants to hear from a full-timer. So you want to hear from someone who has gone through the process part-time and recently – not 20 years ago!” (Mike)

9.7. Summary

This chapter explored eighteen individuals’ experiences of progressing with and completing a PhD on a part-time basis within five different universities in Ireland. The findings illustrate the importance of personal agency and self-management skills as influencing progression with doctoral studies often in the context of limited access to research communities and resources within the academic institution or from personal and professional networks outside of the

doctoral process. This research contributes to existing studies which have recommended greater acknowledgement of the complexity of doctoral candidates lives often in the context of multiple and sometimes conflicting work and personal commitments, within and beyond the doctoral process (Hopwood et al., 2011). In summary the findings from this research illustrate the need understand doctoral candidature beyond an assumption of the full-time learner situated in the academic institution. The Discussion Chapter will address the findings from this study in relation to existing research and offers insights into individual learner's experiences of navigating and completing a PhD on a part-time basis.

Chapter 10. Discussion of findings

10.1. Introduction

This chapter draws together the findings and discusses the contribution of this study to existing research on learners' experiences of progressing with and completing a PhD on a part-time basis. The findings support existing research which acknowledges the different dimensions of the doctoral candidate's life within and beyond the doctoral process, for example, work and family life (Hopwood et al., 2011; Watts, 2008) as influences on learners' experiences of navigating the doctoral journey. The findings from this study are based on a thematic analysis of eighteen participants' accounts (interview transcripts) of pursuing a PhD on a part-time basis within five universities in Ireland. The study illustrates the uniqueness of each person's journey in the context of personal agency and interaction with other human and non-human (e.g. technology-based resources) as influencing advancement and completion of doctoral studies. The research adds the part-time learners' voice to discourse within doctoral education and moves beyond a deficit-based narrative of the part-time learner in terms of absence from research communities and supportive networks (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014; Zahl, 2015) to explore how the individual's own efforts and actions contributed to the experience of pursuing a PhD programme.

The structure of the chapter is as follows; the opening sections address the challenges of exploring the experiences of individuals who pursued a PhD on a part-time basis. This was due to the limited body of existing research on the part-time doctoral candidate, coupled with variance in definitions of part-time enrolment status in different education institutions and systems (Watts, 2008) coupled with a reported absence of the part-time doctoral candidate in policy, practice (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) and campus life (Gardner, 2008; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). Following these sections there is a brief recap on developments within doctoral education

research policy and practice which has recognised doctoral candidature in terms of the full-time learner, undertaking a PhD over the duration of three to four years.

Recognition of doctoral candidature in terms of full-time enrolment status is a common assumption in policy and practice across higher education systems worldwide (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) and in Europe (Hasgall et al., 2019). The rationale for focusing on the experiences of individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis, versus learners at the early or middle stage of the doctoral process is addressed. The challenge of recruiting participants who were in diverse employment and personal settings and who were no longer enrolled in a doctoral programme in the university setting is discussed. The use of snowballing recruitment methods (Atkinson & Flint, 2001) for this study is explored, and the prevalence of participants who had undertaken doctoral studies within the field of Education or an associated discipline is reviewed.

Finally the findings from the study are presented, based on a thematic analysis of the interview transcript from the eighteen individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis in five different universities in Ireland. The outcomes from this study support existing research, namely reiterating the challenges that part-time doctoral candidates can experience, such as limited access to resources and research communities in the academic institution (Gardner, 2008) and studying while managing other employment (Watts, 2008) and personal commitments (Cronshaw, 2017).

However, the personal stories of the individuals who contributed to this study highlights the role of resilience, help-seeking behaviour and harnessing support from self-generated online and face-to-face doctoral communities as influencing learners' experiences of progressing and completing doctoral studies on a part-time basis. Additionally, this study helps to contextualise the learner within their own world and concerns, for example personal, work and time commitments and highlights how the placement of the individual within the employment setting

can impact either positively or negatively on learners' experiences of navigating the doctoral journey. Individuals who worked in a higher education or a research environment cited the benefits of working in a setting where there was a culture where doctoral studies were valued. Examples included financial support in terms of fee payment, and some had the opportunity to draw on support from peers and management who may also have had experiences of pursuing doctoral studies. In contrast, individuals who were based in employment settings for example outside of the higher education sector, or alternatively in private sector organisations cited the challenges of lack of support, financially or personally from management or peers. This was often due to limited recognition of the doctoral qualification to the job role and lack of opportunity to engage with peers or management who could offer support or guidance on helping the individual to navigate the doctoral process (O'Regan, 2019). The findings from this study highlight the value of online as well as face-to-face doctoral support groups and resources for learners with limited access to the academic institution during candidature (O'Regan, 2020a, 2021). The outcomes from this research help to identify the benefits, not just the difficulties of undertaking doctoral studies on a part-time basis.

10.2. Challenges related to undertaking a study on part-time PhD learners' experiences

This study sought to explore part-time learners' experiences of undertaking a PhD beyond the assumption of the candidate as full-time, situated and socialised in the academic institution (Weidman & Stein, 2003), which has been critiqued as not reflecting the experiences of non-traditional (Gardner, 2008; Hopwood et al., 2011), for example part-time doctoral candidates (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). In essence central to this study was the challenge of finding a way to explore the experiences of learners who most researchers agree are absent from policy, practice (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) and campus life (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). The difficulties were compounded by lack of consensus on how part-time candidature is defined which can vary by

number of credits or courses completed, full-time equivalency and length of candidature (Watts, 2008). Enrolment on a doctoral programme on a part-time basis tends to be longer for part-time than full-time doctoral candidates, usually up to six years (Watts, 2008).

However, in a study which reported the experiences of learners who were balancing part-time doctoral studies with motherhood and childcare responsibilities (Cronshaw, 2017), some individuals reported undertaking doctoral studies over seven years or longer. Variance in length of enrolment times on doctoral programmes and reported limited presence of the part-time learner within the campus setting presented challenges inherent in undertaking doctoral studies on a part-time basis. The increase in part-time enrolment figures worldwide over the last decade (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) indicated the potential value of undertaking a study to understand part-time learners' experiences of navigating the doctoral journey.

10.3. Defining the part-time PhD learner

An additional challenge to undertaking this study was the sparse literature on part-time doctoral learner's experiences, which is usually defined in terms of what is lacking, for example access to campus-based research communities (Zahl, 2015) rather than what might be present or advantageous for learners who are pursuing doctoral studies on a part-time basis. There is some scant research which acknowledged the value that part-time doctoral learners can bring to research communities due to often being more mature in years and employment and life experience than many of their full-time peers (Bates & Goff, 2012). In general the full-time PhD researcher undertaking studies over three to four years is recognised as the accepted mode of candidature in doctoral education research (Jones, 2013), policy (European University Association, 2005, 2010, 2016) and practice within European higher education systems (Hasgall et al., 2019) including Ireland. In contrast there is no single interpretation of part-time status which can be interpreted in various ways in different education systems and within different institutions (Irish Survey of Student Engagement, 2018). The variance in interpretation of part-

time status can present challenge for institutions in terms of monitoring completion statistics for part-time doctoral candidates. Part-time enrolment status can include individuals who move from full to part-time candidature at different stages of the process, as well as those who are part-time for the duration of doctoral studies.

10.4. Interpretation of part-time doctoral status in European higher education

Best-practice within doctoral education policies and practices is outlined within the Salzburg Guidelines (European University Association, 2005) which emerged with the aim of reforming education, policies and practices across higher education systems in Europe. Early communication within the Salzburg Guidelines acknowledged the needs of some learners to pursue doctoral studies on a flexible and part-time, rather than on a full-time basis. Part-time status was generally interpreted as an accommodation for researchers who were experiencing personal disruptions to the doctoral process, due to for example having children or securing employment (European University Association, 2005). Therefore, part-time doctoral status tends to be interpreted as a dispensation for individuals who are experiencing disruptions to pursuing a PhD on a full-time basis, which is usually agreed at a local level between academic staff and the doctoral candidate within the academic institution where the learner is pursuing PhD qualifications.

In summary, based on an analysis of different strands of policy, practice and research in the field of doctoral education, part-time PhD candidature seems to be defined in terms of 'not full-time', what has been described as an "othering" (Irish Universities Association, 2020a p1) in terms of differentiating between full-and part-time student status, rather than understanding the experiences of learners who are pursuing a PhD on a part-time basis on their own terms. This study sought to add the part-time learner's voice to discourse within doctoral education and to understand individual's experiences of progressing with and completing a PhD on a part-time basis.

10.5. Research participants: Why base this study on the experiences of individuals who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis?

Researchers have highlighted the issue of attrition and non-completion with doctoral education (Devos et al., 2017; Golde, 2005; Park, 2007). Factors which have been identified as influencing academic progression and quality of the doctoral learners' experiences include socialisation of the candidate into the norms of the faculty and academic department (Weidman & Stein, 2003); relationship with the supervisor (Lee, 2008; Pyhältö et al., 2015) and access to academic and peer communities in the academic institution (Zahl, 2015). However, the difficulty in exploring part-time learners' experiences of accessing communities which influence progression with doctoral studies is the reported absence of this type of learner from research communities and campus life during the working day (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012; Gopaul & Gardner, 2014).

Navigating doctoral studies can be challenge for individuals. As argued by Lovitts (2008) students who are good at completing coursework may not necessarily make the successful transition to independent scholar capable of generating original knowledge which contributes to existing knowledge. The doctoral process is typically understood as comprising of three stages from early induction to mid-stage assessment and final completion of the research (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011) and defense of the thesis (European University Institute, 2017).

Indeed, researchers suggest that doctoral candidates require different types of supports and skills to successfully make the transition between different stages of the doctoral process (Ampaw & Jaeger, 2011; Pifer & Baker, 2016). Prior to understanding this research it was unclear if there was a particular stage or discipline of study that might yield greater insights into part-time learners' experiences of navigating a PhD. An exploratory study was conducted in a single university to identify a potential sample of part-time PhD learners for the main study. Eighteen participants, namely eleven full-time and seven part-time candidates from different faculties and at different stages of the PhD contributed (responses to questionnaire and interview process) to the preliminary study. The responses from participants illustrated the valuable insights that late-

stage or completed learners could contribute to an understanding of what had facilitated or impeded progression at each stage of the doctoral journey in comparison with early or mid-stage PhD learners, many of whom had yet to receive formal feedback on their research progress at the mid-stage or final viva assessment.

While researchers have recommended further studies on the experiences of learners who have successfully completed doctoral studies (Devos et al., 2017) little is known about part-time candidates' accounts of navigating the PhD process to completion. I decided to focus on the experiences of individuals who had completed a PhD on a part-time basis in an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) discipline. Most part-time PhD learners in Ireland (52%) are based within an AHSS discipline compared to less than 25% part-time participation in either Health Science or Science fields (Higher Education Authority, 2018d). I extended the study beyond a single university to include participants who had completed a part-time PhD in different universities in Ireland with the goal of gaining insights into a diverse sample of individual's experiences, beyond the context of a single academic institution. Over 80% of part-time doctoral candidates are based in the university sector compared to enrolments at doctoral level in other higher education environments (Higher Education Authority, 2018d) Eighteen (13 female and five male) participants from five different universities in Ireland shared their experiences of completing a PhD on a part-time basis.

10.6. Challenges of exploring the experiences of learners' who have completed doctoral studies

One of the issues of conducting a study on the experiences of individuals who have completed a study process and know the outcome was the potential dangers of post hoc rationalisation or revisionism, for example, participants reframing their stories based on knowing the result, in this case knowing the outcome of the doctoral process was the successful completion of the PhD. Maruna and Mann (2006) discussed the potential for individuals to attribute positive outcomes

or success to internal factors and to attribute negative outcomes to external factors. However, the reflective and insightful nature of participants' accounts, both in terms of what they had done well and what they felt they could have done better in navigating the PhD to completion, as well as recognition of external factors (work, personal and institutional) which had helped, or hindered, progression suggests that individuals gave a balance account of their experiences of navigating the PhD process on a part-time basis. Devos et al. (2017) recommend further research on the experiences of individuals who completed doctoral studies.

10.7. Prevalence of participants who studied and worked within the field of Education

Finally, before moving from the topic of recruitment and selection of participants and the decision to focus on the experiences of learners who completed a part-time PhD in a non-science discipline within the university sector in Ireland, the characteristics of the participants who contributed to this study require further discussion. Fourteen of the eighteen individuals who completed a part-time PhD had undertaken studies in the field of Education or an associated discipline, for example Education Technology. The other four participants had pursued doctoral studies within the fields of Business, Social Studies and Languages. I recruited participants via snowballing sampling methods, namely asking individuals to pass on the details of the research to any of their personal and professional contacts who might be interested in taking part in the study. The details of the project were promoted and disseminated via social media, conferences and my own professional and personal networks. While the study generated a very positive response, very few people fitted the research profile for the study. Of the one hundred people I contacted, eighteen people had completed a PhD on a part-time basis with an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) field within a university setting in Ireland. Other potential participants had completed an alternative form of doctoral programme to the part-time PhD, such as a Professional doctorate, or had studied in a higher education institution outside of the university sector in Ireland, including the UK and Europe.

The prevalence of respondents who had studied within the field of education or worked within roles in the public, private, primary, tertiary and higher education sectors, may have impacted on the findings of the study. Namely that participants had experience of teaching, learning, education development, academic institutions and systems which may have offered a particular perspective on the experiences of undertaking a PhD as a part-time learner, which might potentially yield different responses from part-time doctoral candidates from different faculties or disciplines whose views were not reflected in this study. Further studies on learners' experiences of navigating the doctoral journey on a part-time basis, based on feedback from participants from a more diverse range of disciplines may yield additional information on the part-time doctoral learner's experience within different contexts. The limitations to the current study are addressed in the Conclusion Chapter of this thesis.

10.8. Review of findings from this study

The research instruments, namely questionnaire (to generate participants' demographics and background details) and interview responses provided an insight into different dimensions of individual's experiences and circumstances. This included different aspects of the learner's experience, such as work, personal life and interaction with resources and sources of support within and beyond the academic institution) as influences on progression and completion of a PhD on a part-time basis. The findings illustrate the diversity of learner's experiences and characteristics in terms of age, stage of life, incidence of managing studies with caring responsibilities, or not, and the role of the work environment, culture and job role as influencing, both positively and negatively, experiences of progressing with a PhD on a part-time basis.

10.9. Access to doctoral programme support and information from the academic institution

In summary the outcomes from this study concur with existing research which suggests moving beyond an assumption of the doctoral researcher as situated within the academic institution (Pearson et al., 2016) with opportunities to socialise and access research support from academic and administrative staff and peers (Gardner, 2008; Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). In general participants preferred to source information on a face-to-face basis, primarily from the supervisor. A supervisor who was experienced at progressing doctoral candidates to completion and who was familiar with the academic systems, regulations, university culture and key personnel was deemed invaluable for participants who had often limited access to the academic institution due to working full-time while studying. Navigating institutional systems, and doctoral regulations have been identified as a challenge for learners (McAlpine et al., 2012). Individuals who had limited access to the academic institution and faced challenges to accessing resources during the working day highlighted the challenges of sourcing information and support, particularly if the supervisor was not familiar with the university procedures and regulations and did not have experience in progressing candidates to completion.

10.10. Support from different sources: Face-to-face versus online and document-based resources

The tendency to prefer to source information (for example advice on training opportunities and guidance on preparing for the viva and submitting the thesis) from within the academic institution, from academic staff and peers, on a face-to-face basis rather than via online and document-based resources presented challenges for learners with limited access to the campus setting during the day. The experience of undertaking studies at a geographical and physical distance from the academic institution has been identified as presenting challenges for part-time doctoral candidates in terms of accessing social and research support within the academic institution (O'Regan, 2018). This study illustrates the need to undertake further studies to

explore how digital technologies can complement face to face learning resources and enhance connectivity and belonging for learners at a physical distance from the campus setting, yet not enrolled on distance learning programmes (O'Regan, 2020a, 2021).

10.11. Work and personal life as factors contributing to learners' experiences of navigating a PhD

Researchers have acknowledged the need for greater recognition of the multi-faceted and often conflicting personal, academic and employment responsibilities that are often part of the part-time doctoral candidates lives, within and beyond the research process and context of the academic institutional setting (Hopwood et al., 2011; McAlpine et al., 2012).

Factors identified as influencing advancement with doctoral studies include both positive and negative life events, for example health, family, work, changing job, moving home, having children and starting or ending a relationship (McAlpine et al., 2012). As one participant noted, life events are bound to happen in the context of undertaking a PhD, which is by design a long process, over a period of years. Participants tended to acknowledge family and personal contacts as providing emotional and practical support, rather than help with the academic and research-based aspects of the doctoral process. Examples included providing encouragement and personal support or helping with childcare and family commitments. Employment activities and work environment tended to facilitate or inhibit progression with doctoral studies, depending on the job role, sector and culture of the work environment. For participants who were employed within an environment where research activities and doctoral qualifications were valued, for example within the university sector, the workplace often provided opportunities to develop academic and supportive networks with management and colleagues. In some cases the participant was able to link the doctoral research topic and process to the job role.

In contrast, some individuals described the challenges of working on the PhD, often with limited opportunities to engage with sources of support within the academic institution, due to the nature of working full-time, often with limited support or encouragement from management. This was typically the case for participants who were employed within an educational role within the private sector, in comparison with respondents who were employed within higher education institutions in the public sector. The findings illustrate the influence of occupational responsibilities and employment context for learners who are working while pursuing doctoral qualifications. Participants' narratives illustrated that work was not just a backdrop to the PhD process but played a key role in either facilitating or acting as a barrier to accessing research communities and skills, depending on the culture, activities and nature of the work activities, sector and environment.

10.12. Self-generated support networks: Face to face and online communities

The role of personal agency and help-seeking behaviour has been identified as influencing learners' experiences of progressing with and completing doctoral studies (Maher et al., 2004; McAlpine et al., 2012). For some respondents, the work environment and job role provided opportunities to source support from colleagues and peers, particularly for learners who worked within an academic or research setting, primarily within the higher education sector. Participants reported the benefits of working in an environment where doctoral qualifications were valued. A culture of support from management and peers provided motivational, psychological and practical benefits for some participants. Examples included encouragement, financial support (e.g. fees) and flexible working arrangements to pursue research and doctoral qualifications. Support from management and employers and recognition of the value of research qualifications can contribute to enhanced motivation and quality of experience for employees who are pursuing part-time doctoral studies while working (O'Regan, 2019).

For some participants who did not work in an environment where doctoral studies were valued, often in the context of limited opportunities to participate in research activities or communities, either in work or in the academic institution the PhD journey was often defined as academically and personally isolating. Examples included respondents who worked in educational settings within the private sector, in comparison with participants who worked within a higher education institution. Working in a higher education institution often provided individuals with the opportunity to connect with other staff, for example who were working in the same environment, who were also undertaking or had completed doctoral studies, which was identified as beneficial in terms of accessing academic and personal support. In contrast individuals who worked in organisations where the doctoral qualification was not recognised or supported (e.g. financially in terms of fee payment) there were often limited opportunities to meet with others who were pursuing or had completed doctoral studies.

This sense of academic isolation was often compounded by a lack of experience of what the doctoral process involved, namely not knowing any personal or professional contacts who had completed doctoral studies. Individuals with limited access to academic or peer groups, for example in the workplace environment or via personal or professional contacts demonstrated agency in seeking out communities of researchers via both face-to-face and online networks. The findings support existing studies which have identified the value of participating in academic and research communities for part-time doctoral candidates (Zahl, 2015). The participants who contributed to this study demonstrated resilience and personal agency in seeking out, building and sustaining research communities with fellow doctoral candidates often outside of the context of the academic institution or from existing work or personal contacts, for example from self-generated peer-support groups, online doctoral discussion groups, social media and blogs. Recommendations from this research include acknowledging the importance of understanding the context of the learner in terms of academic background, work context and personal

circumstances to provides support for learners who may be academically isolated or experience challenges to accessing research and supportive communities within the academic institution (O'Regan, 2020b). The outcomes of this study illustrate the potential for technology, web-based, online and virtual learning environments to enhance access to doctoral programme information and support, outside of office hours and on a 24/7 access basis for learners with limited opportunities to avail of supports and services within the academic institution (O'Regan, 2020a, 2021).

10.13. Key finding in relation to this study on part-time learners' experiences of navigating a PhD

In terms of undertaking on a part-time basis, a key aspect of part-time learners' stories was the intentional nature of each aspect of the doctoral process in terms of carving out time to do the work and creating supportive and academic networks. Opportunities to work on PhD did not present themselves during the working day.

Chances to bump into other doctoral candidates or meet for a coffee or to knock on door of a member of staff in the department to ask a quick query were not a feature of part-time doctoral candidates' stories, in the way that full-time doctoral candidates who contributed to the preliminary study described their experiences. One full-time doctoral candidate who participated in the preliminary phase of the research remarked that as a full-time doctoral candidate she rarely saw part-time candidates, who tended to have limited presence in the department, for example the study space and shared social areas where, usually full-time, students met for a coffee.

10.14. Personal agency and part-time doctoral learner's experiences

The findings from this study illustrate how much of the part-time learners' efforts and activities to progress doctoral studies took place in the absence of the community, outside of the campus setting and unseen by others. The outcomes from this study highlight the role of personal

agency, help-seeking behaviour and actions in helping participants to advance with and complete a PhD on a part-time basis. Seeking help and accessing resources, for example from friends and personal contacts, has been identified as contributing to learners' experiences of progressing with doctoral studies (McAlpine et al., 2012). Individuals also drew on their own resources to progress with the research process, for example developing a structured and disciplined approach to working on the PhD research and thesis writing process, often in the pockets of time between work and family commitments, for example on the commute home from the office, at the weekend and after the working day.

The findings highlight the role of the learner in the context of their own efforts and interaction with multiple (face-to-face and online) resources and networks, both within and beyond the academic institution as contributing to individual's experiences of navigating the doctoral process to completion on a part-time basis. In particular, self-generated supportive doctoral communities (face-to-face and online) were identified by respondents who contributed to this study as positively impacting on both advancement with studies as well as providing a sense of belonging and source of motivation (O'Regan, 2020a, 2021). The recognition of the potential of digital technologies to connect learners across different locations and settings has been acknowledged (Fumasoli, 2019), particularly for students with limited access to campus, for example individuals on distance learning programmes (Andrew, 2012). The next section will discuss the contribution of the conceptual framework developed for this study, which endeavored to explore if part-time doctoral learners demonstrated agency and sought help to progress with doctoral studies.

10.15. Conceptual and theoretical framework and methodology

A key challenge related to undertaking this research was partly due to the limited body of research on part-time learner's experiences of navigating a PhD. Additionally, researchers recommend exploring the experiences of part-time learner's experiences of navigating the PhD.

Additionally, researchers recommend exploring the experiences of non-traditional part-time doctoral candidates experiences beyond an assumption of the individual as socialised (Gardner, 2008) and situated in the academic institution during the doctoral process (Pearson et al., 2016). As part of this study I sought to find a way to explore learners' experiences of navigating a PhD on a part-time basis which provided the individual with the means of sharing their story on their own terms. No prior assumptions were made as to how the individuals might navigate the doctoral journey or if advancement of studies might be influenced by interaction with online and face-to-face resources and networks. This was due to the limited body of existing research on learners' experiences of navigating a PhD to completion on a part-time basis. The questionnaire and interview protocol developed for this study (see Appendices) contributed to an understanding of the multifaceted factors (Hopwood et al., 2011) including personal, academic and institutional influences on learners' accounts of undertaking and completing a PhD on a part-time basis.

10.15.1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire helped to contextualise the learner within the doctoral process, which included ascertaining motivations for undertaking doctoral studies, choice of institution and course of study. Researchers have highlighted the different motivations, for example for personal reasons or for career development which can influence individuals decisions to pursue doctoral studies (Loxley & Seery, 2012). The participants who contributed to this study cited multiple personal and career-based motivations for undertaking a PhD, and in general the reason for undertaking studies on a part-time, rather than full-time, basis was due to existing financial and employment commitments. This included the necessity to continue working, earning an income and managing personal and caring commitments while studying. Responses to the questionnaire helped to identify different patterns of engagement between the learners and the physical setting of the academic institution. The findings support existing studies which

acknowledge the limited presence of the part-time doctoral learner within the academic institution, on an ongoing basis over the doctoral process (Watts, 2008).

10.15.2. Semi-structured interview process

The interview questions (semi-structured interview process) explored via open questions if individuals experienced any barriers or, alternatively, factors (e.g. personal, academic and/or institutional) which facilitated advancement with doctoral studies. The interview questions also sought to explore if the individual demonstrated agency and sought support (e.g. face-to-face or online) and took action to navigate the doctoral process to completion. The responses from participants illustrated the variance in individual's experiences. Accounts of navigating the doctoral process were influenced by the position of the learners in terms of access to academic and peer support networks (in the academic institution and/or work environment) and the role of the learner in sourcing self-generated support networks (face-to-face and online) to progress with studies.

Due to the qualitative and exploratory nature of this study and the very specific characteristics of the participants (namely individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis within the university sector in Ireland), the outcomes from this study cannot be extrapolated to a wider population of doctoral learners. Further research studies which avail of the same instruments developed for this study (e.g. questionnaire and semi-structured interview process), based on recruitment of a broader sample of doctoral learners, may help to establish the utility of the conceptual framework, research methodology and data generation instruments beyond the scope of this study.

10.15.3. My role as researcher in this study

My own role as researcher and part-time candidate may have influenced the sample of individuals who volunteered to contribute to this research. In the main, the participants had undertaken doctoral studies within the field of Education and my own doctoral research was

located within the discipline of Education. Potentially, a researcher from a different background, for example, Business or Social Sciences may have attracted different individuals to participate in this study which may have resulted in different findings, which, again, would need to be explored in further studies beyond the scope of this research.

10.16. A review of the role of Actor-Network Theory within this research study

In order to explore part-time learners' experiences of pursuing doctoral qualifications, beyond assumptions of full-time enrolment status, access to research communities (Lahenius, 2012) or presence on campus two conceptual approaches were considered for this study. Firstly, Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005) was explored as a means of understanding how knowledge is generated and transferred via dynamic interaction between different actors, namely human and non-human (e.g. documents, technology and material) resources. In general Education tends to be human-centered as a discipline and researchers suggest this is why Actor-Network Theory, which acknowledges the role of non-human as well as human actors, may not have gained much of a following in educational research (Fenwick, 2012; Fenwick & Edwards, 2010).

Researchers suggest that academic skills and identity can be developed through interaction with material objects (e.g. textbooks, databases and technological resources), as well as between people, and that learning can take place both inside and beyond the context of the traditional environment of the academic institution (Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010; Gourlay, 2015). Actor Network Theory can provide researchers with a way to "zoom in and out, unpack and repack social phenomena and to reflect on their own positions" (Waldherr et al., 2019 p3967) and "to follow the actors" (Latour, 2005 p154).

The value of Actor Network Theory as a methodology is that it can add a dimension to an individual's narratives by exploring the role of non-human (e.g. technology) as well as human actors in shaping the process of knowledge acquisition and generation (Czarniawska, 2014). The inclusion of Actor Network Theory within this study was tentative and exploratory.

Recommendations from participants who contributed to this study highlighted the importance of providing learners with access to online resources to mitigate against limited opportunities for face-to-face contact within the academic institution. However, this study is based on responses from a small number of participants, namely eighteen individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis within the context of the higher education sector in Ireland. Therefore, further studies may contribute to a greater understanding of the role of online resources and technologies as influencing access to academic resources and supportive communities for learners with limited access to the campus setting during doctoral studies. A critique of Actor Network Theory is the lack of acknowledgement of the role of human agency and established social and cultural structures (Doolin & Lowe, 2002; Michael, 2017) as influencing knowledge generation and social practices. The goal of this study was to add part-time doctoral learner's voices to discourse within doctoral education. Therefore, a study which did not acknowledge social and personal dimensions of the individual's experience, for example age, gender and personal agency would potentially provide an incomplete account (Waldherr et al., 2019) of learners' experiences, which in the case of this study was an exploration of individual's experiences of navigating a PhD to completion on a part-time basis.

10.17. A review of the role of personal agency as influencing part-time doctoral learners' experiences

The outcomes from this study support findings from existing studies which have highlighted the role of resilience and help-seeking behaviour as influences on learners' experiences of undertaking and completing doctoral studies (McAlpine et al., 2012). The ideas proposed by Archer (2003) recognise both social and psychological factors as influencing human behaviour and personal advancement, thereby redressing deficits in other personal development and learning theories which have been critiqued as focusing on either the individual or the environment, rather than looking at the interaction of both influences (Archer, 2003). Archer (2003) suggested that individuals have the capacity to reflect on and respond to structural and

social influences in the environment and to select actions which were deemed by the person as most likely to contribute to the achievement of a personal ambition. Archer (2003) recommends the use of an interview process as a methodology, to explore personal reflections, decision points and actions taken by individuals in the pursuit of a goal, which in the case of this research was the advancement and completion of a PhD on a part-time basis. Learners' experiences of navigating the PhD on a part-time basis were explored via a semi-structured interview in this study. By providing individuals with the opportunity to recount their stories of navigating the doctoral process on a part-time basis helped to give voice to the part-time doctoral learners and offered participants the opportunity to share experiences of taking action, seeking help and overcoming obstacles to advance with and complete the PhD. The individual's stories shared by participants (via interviews) within this study have helped to reframe the part-time doctoral learner's experience beyond a narrative of deficit and absence from collegial and research-based networks in the campus setting, which is prevalent in discourse within doctoral education. The responses from participants who contributed to this study highlighted the role of agency and resourcefulness as contributing to the learner's journey and successful completion of the PhD qualification on a part-time basis.

10.18. Learning at a distance and the Covid-19 pandemic

Since March 2020 many individuals have experienced what it is like to access academic communities and resources via online media, as higher education institutions have moved from face-to-face to online teaching and learning platforms to limit social interaction and combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus (Irish Universities Association, 2020b). The findings of this study illustrated the experiences of navigating a PhD at a physical distance from the campus setting, yet not enrolled on a distance learning programme (O'Regan, 2020a). Participants with limited access to research communities and doctoral programme information, either within the academic institution or via personal and work-based networks, sought support from online discussion groups, academic blogs and doctoral for a. Online and doctoral discussion groups

provided a sense of community, support and access to doctoral programme information and advice and mitigated against the sense of isolation experienced by some of the individuals who completed doctoral studies on part-time basis. The findings from this study may help to inform educational developers on supporting learners with limited access to the physical campus setting, which is currently the experience of many individuals worldwide, beyond the part-time doctoral learners who were originally identified as experiencing challenges to accessing supports, resources and communities on campus. The outcomes from this research illustrated the role that the learner plays in sourcing their own supportive communities, face-to-face and online. The findings from this study indicate the potential benefits of Actor Network Theory as a means of exploring the interaction between human and non-human actors to provide new perspectives on educational policy, digital technologies, teaching and learning, curricular reform and accountability (Fenwick, 2012; Fenwick & Edwards, 2014). Recommendations from participants who contributed to this study highlight the importance of providing learners with access to online resources and opportunities for social interaction, to mitigate against limited occasions for face-to-face contact with collegial networks in the academic institution.

10.19. Summary

In summary this study has contributed to existing studies within the field of doctoral education to explore part-time learners' experiences of completing a PhD. The complexity of the different factors which contributed to participants' accounts of navigating the doctoral process requires a fresh look at part-time learners' experiences from different vantage points to understand the role of personal, institutional and academic factors on PhD completion. The findings from the study illustrate the importance of understanding contextual factors (e.g. academic background, work context and personal circumstances) to understand the support needs of learners who may be academically isolated or experiences challenges to accessing research supports and networks from the academic institution. The findings from this study highlight the role of personal agency, resilience and resourcefulness as influencing learner's experiences of navigating a PhD to

completion on a part-time basis. Potentially this study has helped to reframe the part-time learners' experience beyond a deficit-based interpretation, to highlight some of the benefits of undertaking a PhD on a part-time basis. For example such as the advantages of working in an occupational setting, for example within a higher education institution, where employees are encouraged to pursue doctoral degrees, and where they may be opportunities to engage with colleagues who are also undertaking doctoral pursuits. Findings from this study highlighted the potential of online and technological supports to compliment face-to-face interaction and enhance belonging and connectivity for learners with limited access to the physical campus and academic communities (O'Regan, 2020a, 2021).

Chapter 11. Conclusions

11.1. Introduction

This study adds the part-time learners' voice to discourse within the field of doctoral education and illustrates the uniqueness of each person's story of navigating the PhD to completion in the context of multiple institutional, employment, social and personal influences. The findings were based on responses (questionnaire and semi-structured interview) from eighteen individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis within an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) discipline within five different universities in Ireland. The findings illustrate the diversity of learners' experiences and the different ways that each participant drew on their own resources, namely resilience and resourcefulness to harness support from face-to-face and online networks during the doctoral process to completion.

11.2. Locating the part-time learner in doctoral education research

This study contributes to literature within the field of doctoral education by exploring learners' experiences of completing a PhD beyond assumptions prevalent in existing research namely of the doctoral candidate as full-time, socialised (Gardner, 2008) and situated in the academic institution during doctoral studies (Pearson et al., 2016), which has been critiqued as not reflecting the reality of non-traditional (Gardner, 2008), namely part-time doctoral candidates experiences (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). Work and caring roles have been identified as presenting challenges to part-time doctoral candidates, in terms of often limited opportunities to interact with academic staff and peer-based communities and to access resources from the academic institution during the working day (Watts, 2008). In general research on the experiences of part-time doctoral candidates has focused on the personal aspects of pursuing doctoral studies, for example in the context of motherhood (Cronshaw, 2017). Bates and Goff (2012) cited the potential value of the part-time learner to research communities, for example due to maturity, life and work experience in comparison with traditional full-time candidates

who often progress directly from undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications to doctoral studies. This study adds a dimension to existing research by providing insights to the influence of the employment role, culture and environment as contributing positively or negatively to learners' experiences of progressing with and completing a PhD on a part-time basis.

11.3. Contribution of this study to discourse, policy and practice in doctoral education

Developments in doctoral education have evolved based on a common assumption of candidature as referring to a full-time learner undertaking a PhD over the duration of three to four years. The assumption of full-time doctoral candidature has remained largely unchallenged in discourse (Hopwood et al., 2011), policy and practice within international (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009) and European higher education systems (Hasgall et al., 2019). Researchers have suggested moving beyond assumptions of the doctoral candidate as located in the academic institution during the doctoral process (Pearson et al., 2016) to address the needs of individual learners.

Recommendations from the Irish Universities Association (2020a) include revising definitions of students in terms of full-time or part-time enrolment status to adopt more inclusive approaches to supporting all learners to participate in higher education and advance with and complete qualifications. Despite greater recognition of the multiple factors that can influence the pursuit of doctoral studies for example employment, personal and institutional factors (McAlpine et al., 2012) policy and practice and funding arrangements tends to be based on an assumption of the full-time candidate which may not reflect the realities of many individuals' lives and responsibilities (Hopwood et al., 2011). Higher education policy in Ireland has identified the goal of supporting a diverse body of learners to access educational opportunities, for example online and part-time learners and individuals who are balancing studies with employment commitments, and increasing doctoral level enrolments (Department of Education and Skills,

2011). By moving beyond assumptions of who learners are, namely full or part-time enrolment status to greater acknowledgement of where learners are physically situated, often in the context of other occupational and personal roles, policy makers and practitioners can review doctoral programmes and respond to the needs of a growing and diverse population of learners (O'Regan, 2020a). Therefore, this study contributes to existing research, policy and practice by adding the part-time learner's voice to discourse in doctoral education. Varwell (2018) recommends that online and postgraduate students, as well as undergraduates, are included in dialogue on concerns with enhancing quality assurance and reforming educational programmes. This research has made visible the experiences of individual learners and highlighted the position of each participant in the context of their own occupational and personal responsibilities and physical location in relation to the academic institution during the pursuit and successful completion of a PhD on a part-time basis. The participants' stories may provide insights to policymakers and practitioners on enhancing access to educational opportunities for a diverse body of learners, including learners who are part-time or in employment while undertaking academic pursuits.

11.4. Contributions of this study to existing research within doctoral education

The findings highlight the role of personal agency and help-seeking behaviour as shaping each learner's journey, as well as the value of having access to research skills and supportive communities within the work environment. The current study provides insights into the factors which facilitated and enhanced academic progression for learners with limited access to the academic environment during candidature. The outcomes from this study highlight the importance of fostering agency and independence from a diverse body of learners and enhancing access to programme-based information and support via face-to-face and online resources. Online and digital resources, as a complement to face-to-face interaction could enhance connectivity and sense of belonging for learners with limited access to the physical campus location during the study process (O'Regan, 2020a, 2021). The participants showed

ingenuity and resourcefulness in sourcing doctoral programme information and supportive communities from both online doctoral forums and self-generated, peer-based networks, comprised of other doctoral candidates. The stories from the participants who contributed to this study illustrated the value of networking with others and highlights the role of digital technology and online discussion groups as enhancing access and overcoming a sense of isolation for the learner who is socially distanced from campus resources and communities. In conclusion this research illustrates the need for further studies into the role of technology and document-based resources as providing a source of community, information and support from learners at a distance from the academic institution. In light of global responses to restrict social interaction and combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus, namely the migration of teaching and learning from face-to-face interaction to online platforms (Irish Universities Association, 2020b) the experiences of individuals who are learning at a physical distance from the campus setting but not enrolled on a distance-learning programme is many more individuals than the part-time PhD learners' originally foreseen as the main beneficiaries of this research, when I started this doctoral study in 2016.

The findings from this study illustrate the value of undertaking further research on the role of self-generated support networks as influencing learners' experiences of navigating a PhD, for example peer-groups and online doctoral fora discussion groups. The main contribution of this research, and potential direction for future research is on the role of agency (Archer, 2003), help seeking-behaviour and resilience, particularly in relation to the experiences of learners identified as often having limited access to the physical campus setting, research communities and resources during candidature, for example the part-time doctoral learners who contributed to this study.

This research contributes to existing literature and research by highlighting the importance of recognising the value of understanding the position of each learner within the context of their

own occupational and personal concerns, time-commitments and constraints and enablers to accessing supportive personal and academic communities with the academic institution. The research contributes to existing studies, by adding the part-time learner's accounts of successfully navigating the doctoral process to completion. The stories of success detailed in this study may potential contribute to a more multi-dimensional understanding of the part-time doctoral learner's world.

The study contributes to existing research by reframing assumptions of part-time doctoral candidature in terms of challenges and limited access to doctoral programme supports and resources to highlight the role of resilience, personal agency and help-seeking behaviour on behalf of the part-time doctoral learners. The examples given by participants who contributed to this study included accounts of harnessing resources, including self-generated (online and face-to-face networks and communities, and often displaying tenacity, time management skills and discipline in managing the doctoral process in tandem with other occupational and personal commitments. Further research on the experiences of learners who complete a PhD on a part-time basis may shed further insights into the role of personal agency, and impact of employment responsibilities and environment, as influencing, both positively and negatively individual's experiences of pursuing doctoral qualifications. Greater understanding of the various influences on each learners' unique journey of undertaking doctoral pursuits, may provide insights for academic institutions, supervisors and support staff on providing learning and support plans tailored to the needs of an increasingly diverse body of doctoral candidates which may enhance individual's experiences of progressing with and completing doctoral studies.

11.5. Limitations to this study

The eighteen participants who contributed to this study were from an Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) background, with fourteen participants undertaking studies in the field of Education or a related field. All the participants worked within the education sector, including

further, higher, public, private and tertiary education. This may have influenced the results and suggests the need for future research which explores part-time doctoral candidates' experiences of completing studies based on responses from a broader sample of participants, for example who have undertaken studies in a more diverse range of disciplines (beyond education and education related fields of study). A comparison between full and part-time learners may also be a potentially valuable research project. This may include an exploration of the incidence of work and caring roles to identify similarities and differences between full and part-time doctoral candidates' experiences. Future studies based on an evaluation of various modes of part-time doctoral candidature for example PhD and Professional doctorates could illustrate the differences, similarities and potential benefits of each mode of study for learners with different needs, schedules and availability of time.

11.6. Final thoughts

This study has demonstrated the need to understand where learners are situated (e.g. work and home as well as within the academic institution) and to explore what else is going on learners' lives during the doctoral journey. I hope that in the future education systems consider the needs of individual learners to provide timely and needs based responses and educational supports for learners with different challenges which can contribute to undertaking and completing the doctoral journey on a part-time basis.

Chapter 12. Researcher reflections and final comments

This chapter summarises my own reflections, experiences and final thoughts in relating to pursuing this doctoral research. For the first two years of my doctoral process (2016-2018) I worked on a part-time basis as a Student Learning Advisor in addition to undertaking PhD studies in the School of Education within the same academic institution. In 2018 I was granted a three-year career break from my role as a Student Learning Advisor due to family caring responsibilities (elderly parents and young children) and to pursue the PhD. Therefore, in effect I had a similar experience to many of my full-time PhD peers. For example, the opportunity to access academic and support networks within the academic institution and dedicated periods of time throughout the day to work on the research and thesis writing process. The benefits of the career break were that it bought me time, both to work on the PhD and deal with other family commitments.

Therefore, I had a different experience as a PhD candidate compared to the completed part-time learners who participated in the main phase of my research. All the eighteen participants for the main study worked full-time, predominantly on a continuous basis, often while caring for family in addition to studying. What emerged throughout the research was the role of the work environment and job role in providing structure and focus to the part-time learner's scheduled time to work on the PhD, often in the weekend or at the end of the working day. In comparison, I often had the luxury of getting my PhD work done and being able to drop into college during the day, for example to meet the supervisor, attend a research seminar or catch up with peers before collecting the children from school in the late afternoon. One participant observed *"it's not that full time doctoral students spend more hours on the PhD to part-time candidates is that they tend to spend different hours working in the PhD."* Full-timers who participated in the preliminary phase of this study described the PhD in terms of a job and professional responsibility usually

“between the 9am and 5pm working day and often in the company of other doctoral candidates within an office environment in the university”. (Quote from a participant).

As a result of hearing how part-time learners had managed the PhD process to completion while working I became aware of the need to treat my PhD like a job, to set goals and provide structure to my research activities and day and draw on the project management skills I had developed through my experiences, within employment, over the years. This strategy of compartmentalising and formalising the dedicated time I spent on the PhD e.g., *“treating it like a job”* as some participants advised had an unexpected psychological benefit in that the PhD rarely, got too big or overwhelming (although there were times when it did!). What I realised from my research topic was how much can be learned from the experiences of individuals who worked (e.g., full-time), while studying. Although I had the benefits of access to the academic institution, peers, supervisors, colleagues and training opportunities during the PhD the greatest influence and enabler to progression came from the reflections, advice and experiences that completed part-time PhD learners, who took part in this study, shared with me. Participants shared tips on online resources, personal and time management strategies, positive self-talk and the avoidance of negative behaviours, such as isolation and not asking for help when struggling. This advice was very beneficial to me both in terms of developing resilience and enhancing productivity and progress with the PhD. While some researchers have discussed the potential benefits of peer mentorship for doctoral students (Zahl, 2015) this has yet to be explored in relation to part-time PhD candidates. Also learning from an individual (or mentor) who has successfully completed the PhD and was enrolled on a similar path (e.g., part-time) could be a valuable way for academic institutions to support part-time learners to completion. The insights and reflections which participants shared with me helped me to set goals and review my own progress as a researcher, which I recorded in the reflective journal I kept throughout this process. The reflective journal helped me to document my progress, reflect on next steps and highlighted specific research skills which participants had developed during the doctoral process.

The stories shared by participants and the focus within this study on the role of personal agency and help-seeking as influencing participants' experiences of navigating and completing a PhD on a part-time basis helped me to identify my own training needs and to source networks and resources to help me to develop as a researcher. Some of my participants had advised me to take the opportunity to develop academic writing and communication skills, and some of the respondents regretted not being more proactive about seeking help with academic writing or getting published. Therefore, I was very aware of the need to define explicit goals around academic writing and disseminating the research. I sought opportunities to present my research and seek feedback from academic audiences, policymakers and educational practitioners to develop skills in academic writing. Examples included presenting my research at conferences and publishing articles, at different stages of the research process in international and national peer-reviewed journals and books (a sample of publications and conference papers from this research is included in this thesis).

The experiences which the participants shared during this research highlighted the role of personal agency and the learner's own responsibility in setting goals and progressing the research. In general discourse on part-time doctoral candidature is framed in terms of challenges and difficulties, however, skills developed through life experience and working-life such as project management and goal setting were valuable attributes that the part-time learner brought to the doctoral process. On reflection, I think there should be greater acknowledgement of the benefits that a more mature or part-time learner might bring to the doctoral process in terms of employment experiences and project and time-management skills. This may help individual learners to develop confidence in their organisational and self-management skills and, potentially help reframe part-time doctoral candidature in terms of advantages rather than in the context of disadvantages, which is prevalent in discourse in doctoral education.

12.1. Review of my experiences as a researcher

One of the concerns I had in relation to conducting this research was the issue of potential bias in that I was a part-time PhD candidate and so were my participants for the main study.

However, this fear was unfounded in that my participants were 'experts' who had finished the process and I was still a novice. This was particularly beneficial to me in terms of having my own 'tribe' of mentors and advisors. I felt that the participants had the advantage in terms of expertise and knowledge of what it was like to successfully complete a PhD as a part-time candidate. I was the willing apprentice benefitting from the knowledge and experiences that completed part-time learners shared with me. The diversity of each learner's story illustrated the various ways that each person who took part in this study harnessed their own resources such as resilience, time management and organisational skills as well as accessing doctoral programme information and support networks on a face-to-face and online basis. The opportunity to engage with and interact with individuals who completed a PhD on a part-time basis proved invaluable to me in terms of developing research skills and reflecting on my progress and own personal responsibilities for navigating the doctoral journey.

The unforeseen benefits of undertaking this study on learners' experiences of completing a PhD on a part-time basis, for me as a researcher, were the tips and encouragement that the participants shared with me which helped me to navigate my own doctoral journey as a part-time student. By making explicit the sources of support that participants had sought, both to develop research and academic writing skills, and to connect with academic and peer networks (face-to-face and online) I developed a proactive approach to disseminating my research at intervals during the PhD and reaching out to others to combat social isolation (particularly in the context of online working during the last two years of the Covid-19 pandemic). Attending conferences online and working on publications, while connecting with academics and doctoral candidates around the world via conferences helped with motivation and connection and sense of belonging and personal development a researcher. The outcomes from this study and my

own personal reflections as a researcher highlight the benefits of goal setting, connecting with others and explicitly accessing supportive research-based and supportive networks (online and face-to-face) to enhance momentum, wellbeing and academic progression for learners at a distance from the academic institution.

12.2. Final reflections: Learning in a climate of Covid-19

Pursuing research on the topic of part-time PhD students' experiences, in particular part-time learners' experiences of completing a PhD was challenging. This was due to a general lack of research on part-time doctoral candidature and the difficulty of positioning this study within existing research in doctoral education, policy and practice, which for most part addresses the experiences of full-time candidates. Although the research on part-time doctoral candidates was sparse one of consistent themes was the lack of access to resources and support within the academic institution during candidature, primarily due to balancing studies with work and other caring roles. In 2020 the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a global and proactive response by governments, education providers and society at large to limit face-to-face interaction to curb the spread of the virus. As a result, social interaction and face to face contact was restricted as countries locked down. Education was moved on-line and in most countries all students, from primary school children to doctoral candidates and other adult learners, experienced the shift from predominantly face-to-face, socially connected and situated learners to virtual learners connected by screens, online forums and social media. While these are unprecedented and challenging times more than ever it is important for educators to respond to the needs and lives of individual learners. Therefore, rather than fitting the student into an existing system the system needs to be reconfigured to respond flexibly to different learner's individual circumstances and requirements.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Sample interview questions from preliminary research phase

- What, if any, factors, (e.g., personal/supervisor/peers/academic institution) have helped you make progress/complete your PhD?
- What, if any, barriers (e.g., personal/supervisor/peers/academic institution) did you experience to making progress during your PhD?
- Did you feel you knew what was required of you (as a PhD candidate) in terms of quality of research, forms of assessment, expected output at each stage of the PhD process?
(Please comment)
- Are you satisfied with the level of contact you had (e.g., with the academic department, fellow PhD students and other supports and services within the academic institution) during the PhD process?
- Are you satisfied with the level of contact you had with other supports outside of the academic institution?
- What advice, if any, would you give another student who was on the PhD journey?
- What advice, if any would you give to the academic department and institution in terms of supporting students during the doctoral journey?

Appendix 2: Themes for questionnaire preliminary research phase

Demographics:

Male/Female/Male/Female/Another descriptor/prefer not to respond to this question, etc.

Age range (on starting PhD): 25 and under/ 25 – 35/ 35-45/ 45-55 and 55+

Do you have family or caring roles in addition to undertaking the PhD? Y/N.

If Y please indicate all the following family or caring roles which apply:

partner/spouse/dependent children over 18/children aged 13-18/children 7-13/children aged 7 and under/parent/(s)/family member/other

If you have indicated that you have caring roles for children, please can you indicate the number of children under 18 in each category as follows (13-18); (7-13) and (7 and under):

Distance of your place of residence (during term time) from the university where you are undertaking your PhD). 1-5k/5-10k/10-20k-20k-40k/40-60k/above 60k (please indicate)

Method of transport to college: car/train/bus/other form of public transport/bike or on foot/other

Funding status:

Full-time or part-time student status

Funding status: Fully self-funded/partially funded by self and by the university/ partially self-funded by self and external funding body (please name the funding body)/wholly funded by university/wholly funded by external body to undertake research/ wholly funded by external source (research and living expenses)

If funded by another source, apart from self, please indicate the amount of funding p.a. received: less than 1000 euro/1000-2000 euro/2000-4000/4000-6000/6000-8000/8000-10,000/10,000-12,000/12,000-14,000/14,000-16,000/16,000+

Employment status: Are you in employment in addition to undertaking your PhD studies?

Yes/No If yes is your employment: related to your PhD work/not-related to your PhD work/on campus/not on campus/less than 20 hours per week/20-30 hours per week/30+hours per week)

About your PhD:

Year of commencing PhD: pre-2011 (please indicate what year you started PhD if started pre-2011)/ 2011/2012/2013/2014/2015/2016/2017/2018

Expected year of completion (within the next year/2019/2020/2021/2022/2023/2023+

Please give further details if you expect to finish your PhD before or after your official completion date:

Year of completing PhD (if completed)

Length of time from start to completion (if completed) 3 years/4 years/5 years/ 6 years/6+ years (please indicate number of years)

Discipline/School of study

Stage of PhD process – Early (year 1-2) Middle (year 2-3 for f/t) (year 3-4 for p/t) Late (year 4 or 4+ for full-time) and (year 5-6 or 6+ for part-time)

Interaction with college:

Frequency of time spent on college campus: daily/weekly/2-4 times per month/once a month/every 6 weeks/every 6-12 weeks/3-6 months/less than every 6 months (if less than every 6 months please comment on your answer)

Reasons for visiting the college campus – please tick all that apply: meeting with supervisor/social meeting with peers or fellow PhD students/department-based research seminars, training or events/college-based research seminars training or events/social activities/use of college support services (e.g., Counselling service/Student Learning Development/Careers Service/Postgraduate Advisory Service etc)/other/none (please comment)

Thank you for participating in this study

Appendix 2: Themes for questionnaire preliminary research phase (continued)

Information and support for PhD students:

Do you receive information relevant to the PhD process? (Please tick Y or N/don't know or not relevant) to all the following options: Annual Progress report/Key Milestones and stages of assessment during the PhD process/Regulations and guidelines relating to the PhD process/expected standard of research output at annual intervals/expected standard of research output at the end of the PhD process/Information on Research Methods seminars/Ethics approval/interim Oral or Viva examination/Final Oral or Viva examination/training and support within the department/training and support from college services/Voluntary and compulsory requirements during the PhD (e.g. completion of modules)/ECT (Extra-curricular Credit bearing modules)/Funding/conference/ publishing opportunities/Social events/student support services/Other/none (please comment)

Please indicate the following ways that you receive information relevant to your role as a PhD student. **Face to face:** supervisor meeting/through department-based events and research seminars/through contact with academic staff/through contact with support staff/through fellow PhD students/ socially/college-based research events/college based social events/through wider network of contacts inside college/through wider network of contacts outside college (please give further detail if you get PhD information from wider network of contacts inside and/or outside college)

Online: email from supervisor/email from academic staff in department/email from administrator in department/department newsletter/Course Handbook or Student Guidelines/college-based newsletter/email from college based academic services/emails from student services/Library/Graduate Students Union/Academic Registry/Counselling Service/Postgraduate Advisory Service etc/Department website/College website/other/none (please comment)

Do you attend any events on campus? Please tick Y/N, don't know or not relevant for the following options: Meeting with supervisor(s)/meeting with academic staff in the department/use of Library/use of college supports (e.g. Student Counselling Service)/Social activities/Training or seminars in the department/training or seminars from the wider college environment/Social meeting with peers/Meet with peers to progress research (e.g. research seminars/discussion groups/writing groups)/to undertake employed work within the university/department in addition to the PhD other/none (please comment)

Appendix 3: Recruitment and Project details for the Main Study

Exploring part-time candidates' experiences of completing a PhD

Main Phase of Research Study

Hi there,

My name is Maeve O'Regan, and I am a part-time PhD student in the School of Education in Trinity College Dublin. I am exploring part-time doctoral candidates in Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) disciplines experiences of undertaking and finishing a PhD in a university in Ireland. Although part-time doctoral enrolments have increased worldwide over the last decade, they tend to be invisible in policy and practice (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009). The goal of my research is to provide insights to policymakers and practitioners on supporting part-time PhD candidates to completion.

I am interested in finding out what your journey to completion was like as a part-time PhD candidate. Did you experience any challenges to completion (for example institutional or personal?). Did you experience anyone or anything that helped you on your journey to completion (for example institutional or personal?).

If you:

Completed a PhD on a part-time basis	And were registered as a part-time candidate throughout the PhD process.
In a university in Ireland	83% part-time PhDs are in the university sector in Ireland (HEA 2018).
In an Arts, Humanities & Social Science (AHSS) discipline	Over 50% of part-time PhDs in Ireland are in AHSS disciplines (HEA, 2018).

I would love to hear from you and invite you to take part in this study. Alternatively, if you know anyone who fits the above description who might be interested in taking part in this study please can you pass on this information to them.

My contact details are: gallam23@tcd.ie

Many thanks

Maeve

Appendix 4: Participant Information Sheet (Main Research Study)

Aim of Project: Exploring part-time candidates' experiences of completing a PhD

The study

I am a part-time PhD student in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. I am carrying out research to explore how completed part-time doctoral candidates in Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) fields in the university sector in Ireland experienced access to and participation in research networks and activities within the academic institution as a feature of the doctoral study process. The rationale for the thesis is based on existing research findings that 1) Access to research and personal support communities have been identified as factors contributing to student satisfaction and successful completion of doctoral studies and 2) part-time doctoral candidates tend to have limited time to access university-based research networks and sources of support.

Participant information

I am aware that you are very busy, and I would greatly appreciate your assistance in this project. You are under no obligation to participate in this study. If you agree to participate but at a later stage feel the need to withdraw (**prior to the transcription and anonymising of data – see below**) you are free to do so. **Please answer all the following (circle YES or NO as appropriate).** If you agree to take part in this study you will be asked to complete a questionnaire exploring factors such as frequency of time on campus, modes of communication and accessing information, such as face-to-face and online and access to collegial and research networks and activities during doctoral candidature. These questions should take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Following this you will be asked to participate in a semi structured interview which will be audio-recorded and will take approximately one hour. The interview will take place at a neutral location on campus or a suitable location of your choice and will be scheduled at a time that is convenient to you. I foresee no risks for your participation in the study. All data will be anonymised, and these anonymised results will be included in a thesis and may be discussed at conferences or published in a book or journal. Data will be stored and destroyed in line with College's Policy on Good Research Practice and policy for retention and with Irish Data Protection Legislation and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Non-anonymised data (e.g., Consent form, participant's name and academic institution where doctoral studies were completed) will be destroyed within 13 months of completing the doctoral thesis examination. Anonymised data will be retained for up to 10 years of completing the doctoral thesis examination, to disseminate and publish the research findings. You may withdraw from the research process following your participation in the data generation (e.g., questionnaire and interview process) phase of the study **and prior to the stage when the data is transcribed and anonymised.** I would appreciate if you could advise me of your decision to withdraw from the research as soon as possible after participating in the study as I aim to transcribe the questionnaire and interview data at the earliest possible opportunity after data collection. If you have any questions or if you require any further clarification or explanation on any aspect of the research process, please ask the researcher to explain it to you. Thank you for taking the time to read this and thank you for your interest in this research project.

Researcher's contact details: gallam23@tcd.ie

Supervisor's contact details: loxleya@tcd.ie

Appendix 5 Participant Consent Form (Preliminary and Main Phase of Research)

Title of Project:

Exploring part-time candidate's experiences of navigating doctoral studies to completion – interactive process or solitary journey?

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. If you agree to participate but at a later stage (as outlined below) feel the need to withdraw you are free to do so. **Please answer all the following (circle YES or NO as appropriate).**

I have read and understood the information sheet YES/NO

I understand what the project is about and what the results will be used for YES/NO

I am fully aware of all the procedures involved and any risks and benefits associated with the study YES/NO

I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project following participation in the questionnaire and interview phase of the study **and prior to the stage when the data is transcribed and anonymised**
YES/NO

I am aware that I will not be able to withdraw from the study after the data has been transcribed and anonymised YES/NO

I am aware that I need to advise the researcher of my intention to withdraw from the study as soon as possible after participating in the study as the researcher intends to transcribe and anonymise the data at the earliest opportunity possible
YES/NO

I am aware that no information of a sensitive nature or details that could identify an individual participant will be included in the research study YES/NO

I am aware that my results will be kept anonymous YES/NO

I am aware that non-anonymised data (e.g., Consent Forms) will be destroyed within 13 months of the completed thesis examination process YES/NO

I am aware that anonymised data will be kept up to 10 years following completion of the thesis examination process and will be used for publishing and disseminating the research findings
YES/NO

I agree to participate in the above study

Signature of Participant: -----

Date: -----

Signature of Researcher: -----

Date: -----

Appendix 6: Questionnaire (Main Research Study)

Please answer the following questions by circling the applicable response:

SECTION 1: ABOUT YOU

I identify as:

Male	Female	Another descriptor	Prefer not to disclose
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My age range on starting my PhD was:

Under 25	25-34	35-44	45-54	55 and over
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I was in employment in addition to undertaking PhD studies: **y** **n**

If you answered yes to the question above please tick all the following options which apply

I worked under 20 hours per week during my PhD	I worked over 20 hours per week during my PhD	I worked continuously throughout PhD	I did not work continuously throughout PhD
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Please add any additional comments relevant to your employment status during your PhD

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I had additional family/caring responsibilities while undertaking the PhD: **y** **n**

If you answered yes to the above question please circle all the following options which apply

Spouse/partner	Dependent(s) over 18	Children under 18	Elderly relative (s)
Family member with a disability		Other	

SECTION 2: ABOUT YOUR PHD

Discipline of study: _____

Year of commencing PhD: _____ Year of completing PhD: _____

Please indicate how your PhD studies were funded:

Fully self-funded	Partially funded by self/external source	Fully funded by external source
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If your PhD was partially or wholly funded by an external source please give details below:

My reasons for undertaking PhD studies were: (please write your answer in the box below)

Please answer this question if you completed your PhD on a part-time basis

My reasons for undertaking PhD studies on a part-time basis were: (please write your answer in the box below)

SECTION 3: INTERACTION WITH THE ACADEMIC INSTITUTION DURING YOUR PHD

Please indicate frequency of time you spent in the academic institution during your PhD studies from one of the following options

Daily	2-4 days per week	weekly	Fortnightly
Every month	Every 2-3 months	Every 4-6 months	Less than every 6 months
Other (please give details)			

Please indicate all the following options which applied to you during your PhD studies

I attended events and meetings in the academic institution during my PhD during:

Mornings (from 9am -1pm)	Afternoons (from 1pm -6pm)	Evenings (from 6pm-10pm)
Other (please give details)		

Please add any additional comments relevant to frequency and time spent in the academic institution during your PhD studies

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Please tick all the following reasons for spending time in the academic institution during your PhD

Reason for visiting academic institution during the PhD	Yes	No
Meeting with my supervisor(s) in relation to my PhD research		
Meeting with other academic staff in the faculty/institution		
Meeting with staff within Student Support Services		
Use of resources in the Library		
Meeting with peers/fellow PhD students to progress with research		
Meeting (socially) with peers/fellow PhD students		
Attendance at mandatory research training within the faculty/institution		
Attendance at voluntary research training within the faculty/institution		
Attendance at general skills training (e.g., IT, presentation skills etc)		
Attendance at research seminars, conferences or events		
Development of research networks in the academic institution		
Development of support networks in the academic institution		
Attendance at social event(s)		
Other(Please give details)		

SECTION 4: ACCESS TO INFORMATION RELEVANT TO PHD TRAINING AND ASSESSMENT

Please tick all the following sources of information available to you from the academic institution during your PhD

Source of information from the academic institution	Yes	No	I don't know if this was available to me from the academic institution during my PhD
Guidelines on the doctoral process (e.g., key milestones and assessments) at each stage of the PhD			
Guidelines on the supervisor/supervisee relationship			
Information on expected standard of research output at annual intervals during the PhD			
Information on expected standard of research at the end of the PhD			
Information on mandatory (e.g., ECT credit bearing) research training for PhD students			
Information on voluntary training for PhD students			
Information on Ethics procedure and approval			
Information on Viva/Oral presentation skills			
Information on academic support available to PhDs (e.g., Library resources)			
Information on personal support (e.g., Counselling Service)			
Information on general support (e.g., IT skills)			
Information on research conferences and events within the academic institution			
Information on social events within the academic institution			
Other (please give details)			

Please tick all the following ways that you accessed information and/or support from the academic institution during your PhD studies

FACE-TO-FACE:

Source of information and/or support for PhD students	Y	N
Meetings with supervisor(s)		
Department-based research training and events		
Academic staff in the department		
Administrative staff in the academic department		
Academic staff in the wider academic institution		
Administrative staff in the wider academic institution		
Student Support staff (e.g., Counselling Service)		
Fellow doctoral students		
Network of personal contacts within the academic institution		
Network of academic/professional contacts within the academic institution		
Other (please give details)		

EMAIL OR ONLINE:

Source of information and/or support for PhD students	Y	N
Emails from supervisor (s)		
Emails from academic staff in the department		
Emails from administrator(s) in department		
Emails from different departments within the academic institution (e.g., Library)		
Emails from Student Support Staff (e.g., Counselling Service)		
Online PhD course handbook/guidelines		
Online research training		
Institutional intranet/ Virtual Learning environment (e.g., Moodle/Blackboard etc).		
Department website		
Academic institution website (s)		
Other (Please specify)		

Please add any other comments you feel are relevant to your experiences of accessing information and/or support from the academic institution during your PhD studies

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research
Please email me at gallam23@tcd.ie if you have any further queries

Appendix 7: Open questions for Main Phase of Research Study

What, if any, factors helped you to make progress and complete your PhD?

Prompts: Personal resources/personal circumstances/personal support networks/peers/academic support networks/supervisor/academic department/academic institution/other?

What, if any, barriers did you experience to making progress during your PhD? *Prompts: Personal resources/personal circumstances/personal support networks/peers/academic support networks/supervisor/academic department/academic institution/other?*

Do you feel you knew what was required of you (as a PhD candidate) in terms of quality of research, forms of assessment, expected output at each stage of the PhD process? Please comment

Did you receive information and/or support relevant to the PhD process that was timely and met your needs? Please comment

Is there any other information and/or support that you would like to have received to help you to make progress with the PhD?

If yes, who do you feel could have provided it for you?

Were you satisfied with the level of contact you had with the academic department during the PhD process?

Were you satisfied with the level of contact you had with peers and fellow PhD students during the PhD process?

Were you satisfied with the level of contact you had with other supports and services within the academic institution during the PhD process?

Were you satisfied with the level of contact you had with other supports outside of the academic environment?

What advice, if any, would you give another student who is on the PhD journey (on a part-time basis)?

What advice, if any, would you give to the academic department and institution in terms of supporting (part-time) students during the PhD journey

Thank you for participating in this research

Please email me at gallam23@tcd.ie if you would like to discuss this study further

Sample of Presentations and Publications from this Research

O'Regan, M.A. (2021) Learning at a distance but not a distance learner: Re-examining the support experiences of part-time PhD students. In Keane, M., McAvinia, C. and O' Sullivan, I. (Eds) *Emerging Issues IV: Changing times; Changing contexts*, (EDIN) Educational Developers in Ireland Network

O'Regan, M.A. (2021) Postgrads at the edge: Lessons from 18 learners who completed a PhD part-time. *Resilience in postgraduate education: Adapting, supporting and sustaining* (2nd July 2021) UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) (online)

O'Regan, M.A. (2021) Personal agency, technology and helpful others: Learners' experiences of completing a PhD on a part-time basis. *Postgraduate Student Research Annual Conference School of Education* (8th May 2021) School of Education Trinity College Dublin (online)

O'Regan, M.A. (2021) Face-to-face and online learning networks: Diverse doctoral candidates' experiences. *Reconnection: Placing inclusion at the heart of online learning and support* (7th May 2021) Association for Higher Education Access for students with Disabilities (AHEAD) Annual Conference (online).

Contributed to panel and forum on experiences of postgraduate student engagement (January 2021) as part of *National Student Engagement Postgraduate Project (NSTEPs)* by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI).

O'Regan, M.A. (2020) Networked in or networked out? What can we learn from diverse learners' experiences of progressing and completing doctoral studies? In A. Curaj, L. Dega & R. Pricopie (Eds.) *European Higher Education Area: Challenges for a new decade* (pp. 261-278) Switzerland: Springer International Inc.

O'Regan, M.A. (2020) Learning at a distance but not a distance learner: Meeting the needs of a diverse body of learners post COVID-19 *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education Special Edition (AISHE-J)* 12 (2)

O'Regan, M.A. (2019) How employers can support part-time learners in the workplace: Lessons from the experiences of completed part-time PhD graduates in the university sector of Ireland. In *Occupational Psychology (OP) Matters* (Vol. 43, pp. 17-18) Leicester UK: British Psychological Society

O'Regan, M.A. (2019) Designing education for the 21st century learner: What can we learn from the experiences of completed part-time PhD learners? (6th November 2019) *28th International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) World Conference on Online Learning*. Convention Centre Dublin

O'Regan, M.A. (2018) The PhD student's journey: Exploring how interaction with the academic environment informs part-time student's agency and understanding of the PhD process. Excellence through diversity: *Doctoral education in a globalised world* (14th June 2018). 11th Annual European University Association Council of Doctoral Education (EUA-CDE) meeting. University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia

