

## Early career academics' doctoral experiences

Diana Leonard, Institute of Education, University of London  
SRHE symposium, 11<sup>th</sup> December 2007

The stereotypical doctoral student is young, with little or no labour market experience and few domestic responsibilities, who will go on to an HE teaching post or, in the sciences, a research job outside academe. This may fit most of those who are full time students, funded by the Research Councils and attending Russell Group universities, but many of those doing their doctorates nowadays are actually **already in** paid posts in higher education. That is to say, they write their theses while in the early stages of an academic career.

They fall into several different groups:

- Those who are seconded full time from jobs in universities abroad, who comprise many of our international students
- Home students who have moved from previous professional careers to teach in higher education and who are required to gain a (PhD or professional) doctorate in their spare time to get tenure or promotion, and on the basis of this to be 'research active' in future, and
- Junior research officers who are writing their theses alongside employment on a funded research project, or less commonly, while they are teaching assistants.

This paper will provide brief vignettes of these three groups to outline and contrast their experiences as early-career-academic students, noting how each has been affected by changes through the 1990s and 2000s. It will draw on a Systematic Review of the literature on UK doctoral students' experiences we conducted for the Higher Education Academy (Leonard, Metcalfe et al. 2006), a follow-up study of doctoral students from the Institute of Education in London (Leonard, Coate and Becker, 2004 and 2005),<sup>1</sup> and a pilot study I made of Pakistani residents who had undertaken postgraduate work in the UK and returned home.

This account will therefore draw mainly on the field of Education, but then this is by far the best researched of a number of vocational doctoral fields. There are, however, also many similarly located students in business and management studies, social policy and administration, law, and fields related to medicine, even if there are (assuredly) some differences between these fields. Even in the Education-related data there are gaps because research on the doctoral

---

<sup>1</sup> This involved lengthy questionnaires to all those who completed in 1992, 1997 and 2002 with a 54% response rate.

experience in the UK has generally focused on either full-time home students or international students just while they are in the UK (Leonard et al., 2006). That is to say, it has usually overlooked part-time home students, including those with 'early academic career' job status; and has not noted the context from which international students come and to which they return. In our study of the IoE, nearly half the respondents were already employed in universities when they applied for the degree and more than half of the international students.

Of course, some of the students researchers in Education and other vocational fields undertake a research degree mainly for personal interest – they have a particular problem they want to answer, they are approaching retirement and wish to reflect on their professional life, or they want to go on a voyage of intellectual discovery and personal development, i.e. they are seeking an extended liberal education. They have no intention of working in universities (Usher 2002). But for the 'early career academic' doctoral candidates, their doctorate is – *inter alia* – an important form of CPD.

### **Students seconded from jobs in universities abroad**

#### *Motivations for undertaking a doctorate;*

Many have gained Masters degree in their home country or in the UK and have wanted to undertake a research degree for a long time. A PhD as research experience is essential for promotion beyond the rank of lecturer, and prestigious doctorates are not obtainable in most low to medium income countries. Individuals are also often committed to using their doctorate to contribute to national advancement.

My personal experience has involved working with several African women who had experienced particularly heavy discrimination in their home universities, where most of the opportunities go to men. They wanted doctorates to get promotion and also so as to explore how women have improved their lot in the West, with a view to importing (and transforming) concepts and practices.

#### *Sources of support while studying*

Foreign academics generally have to be proactive and determined to organize the special experience of getting a doctorate in the West, seeking financial support from their employer or their home government (in the case of high income countries) or competitive scholarships from their government or the British Council (in low to medium income countries). Otherwise they depend heavily on gifts and loans from their extended family. They know it is hard to get scholarships from UK universities and that these last only for the first years of study. They then have to get jobs in the UK or draw on their savings.

In Japan, 'salary men', including university staff, may be sent by their employers (and are often not quite sure what their employer wants to get out of the project) but women don't have the right sorts of jobs to be eligible in this highly sex segregated labour market. They therefore usually rely on their parents to pay the high fees and living costs. Both men and women feel under a heavy obligation to their funders (Nishio 2001).

Those who get funding from employers may continue on their previous salaries, but these are cut into by the exchange rates and cost of living in the UK. British Council scholarships are relatively generous. But almost all international students experience a markedly lower standard of private and public living during the years they are studying.

Getting a part-time job in the UK has been helped by changes in visa requirements, but (US research suggests) foreign research students are less likely to get temporary jobs within the university than are home students: they are less likely to get any of the informal tasks that professors etc can hand out, and much less likely to be given any formal teaching.

Pakistani women students in the UK get less well paid work in the general labour market than their male compatriots because they are not prepared to undertake many service jobs.

International students generally do not have children with them when they start their doctorate and leave them (if they have any) with relatives. They may bring them later with a relative or servant to take care of them – if they can get a visa for the carer. (The fact that in our study of IoE students we did not ask about paid and unpaid domestic help, shows we are not immune from the dominant stereotype of doctoral students.)

But doctoral studies often means periods missing families and cultural familiarities, even if improved ICT helps with homesickness, And when they return home they find social life has moved on.

#### *What they looked to get from the university and their supervisor*

As experienced teachers, but in another culture, international doctoral students may be critical of what they find in the UK. They expect – indeed they have eagerly come to learn - a different teaching style and a critical approach, even if they find the actuality hard to adjust to. But they are not happy not to have at least a shared office and good computing or lab equipment. At home they probably had a PA and several TAs. Nor do they appreciate living in accommodation alongside and sharing social facilities with undergraduates. They expect to be treated differently from other students as a mark of their superior, doctoral student status. They may think UK universities should not be taking on more students than they can properly cope with. (These the ones presumably which UK HE management describe as 'having unrealistic expectations' about

the UK.) However, international students seem to welcome the structured research methodology courses and the cohort of students these provide in their first year. (Which is ironic since these were introduced by the Research Councils with home students in mind.) They like direct teaching and feel the courses give value for money as well as providing them with a student cohort.

International early career academics probably have a highly respectful attitude to their supervisor; but resent how little respect they get from other staff in UK departments. E.g. there is seldom recognition of/knowledge about/interest in their home country, nor does anyone except their supervisor know what (sometimes prestigious) jobs they have held at home. At departmental events the UK staff tend to talk to each other rather than to their colleagues' research students. The students also say that their peer group consists largely of other international, rather than British, students.

Like many home students, international lecturers may well not attend departmental seminars, partly because they have a narrow definition of what is 'relevant' to them, and also because they are less likely than home students to be encouraged to do so. Some events which might seem friendly and hospitable to UK staff, e.g. evening meetings in people's houses, are found intimidating, especially by those with ESL (Deem and Brehony 2000) – and may have the added embarrassment for those who having officially been teaching in English but are then confronted by their inadequacies/ non standard usage /non academic writing style when in the UK.

Many are on very tight budgets and are thrown if they can only do restricted amounts of photocopying or if there is little student accommodation for those with families. They often cannot afford to go to conference and so miss out on networking and publishing opportunities. (Editors do not hear them talk about their work and suggest they submit a piece.)

They generally feel under great pressure of time as well as money, including a sense of what they owe (employers and family) back home. This may lead to counter productive activities, e.g. sitting alone at their computers for hours on end trying to work 'hard enough' and missing out on serendipitous discovery of materials or approaches relevant to their thesis argument. They do not often see themselves as making a contribution to the academic community (department, institution, national) while they are here.

#### *Use subsequently made of the qualification and their research findings*

Most international students who study in the UK return 'home', in contrast to those in Australia and the US (Tremblay 2005) (This should be a USP for UK HE when marketing to foreign governments and HEIs.) They have jobs held open for them to which they return, and often get promotion. But they disappear from the UK radar: e.g. HESA in its graduate destinations statistics groups together all

foreign students who 'return overseas' and gives no occupational information on them; and they are also excluded from the UK GRAD study of what *What do PhDs do?* (UK GRAD Programme 2006).

[Note also that quite a number of UK domiciled doctoral graduates also move to work abroad but are not tracked.]

They also find it hard to maintain a research profile and to get articles from their thesis accepted for international peer review journals once they are home. Some join alumni organizations (run by their UK university or by the British Council) and maintain strong sense of attachment to the UK, but with little intellectual outlet.

### **Home students who have moved from professional careers to teach in higher education**

Nearly half of our IoE sample were employed in universities when they started their doctorate.

#### *Motivations for undertaking a doctorate;*

This group have been recruited for their past applied experience, but they are then required by their employer to undertake a doctorate, possibly as a term of probation - though they may also do it for interest and self-esteem. HEIs now want their staff to hold PhDs for credibility and to provide the basis for future research activity; and individuals without them may feel somewhat inferior. We found a 50% increase in the proportion mentioning this as one of their reasons for writing a thesis among those who completed between 1992 and 2002, especially those with jobs in post 92 universities. Some in their 40s have been doing part-time work in a number of different universities and for them a PhD can contribute expert status and the possibility of entry into a full-time job or credibility as a consultant.

Such staff make well-informed decisions about where to study based on whether their fees may be paid or rescinded in their own institution, and/or whether they want a particular person in another university as their supervisor, or a degree from a more prestigious HEI. In the latter case they have to negotiate financial support and will have to travel for supervision and to participate in this other department. They have the advantage over many international students in generally starting with a good knowledge of the UK HE system, an overview of the current literature in the field, and possibly also being known (and therefore accepted) by potential supervisors.

### *Sources of support while studying*

Although they are required to undertake this CPD, existing teaching staff are not given much help by their university employer. It is occasional and largely in kind ('a minor grant for part of the data collection cost and study leave for one term') – but even this is increasingly hard difficult to get as departmental resources are restricted. (Of course compared to the foreign staff group, not having to pay fees is a huge help.) But they do have their own offices, reasonable salaries, academic status, administrative support which is/or was sometimes subverted to their own doctoral work, access to libraries and probably their conference fees paid when they present papers. They may also access some money from staff development funds (e.g. for a women researchers support group (Hatt, Kent et al. 1999).

Their chief problem is time pressure. They are already teaching - and possibly also doing HE Academy and in-house courses on aspects of HE teaching. In their first years of teaching, lots of preparation is required, and in later years in academic life they will have accumulated administrative responsibilities.

They may well also have domestic responsibilities including small children or the care of elderly and disabled relatives. In our IoE study we found the doctorate increasingly fitted alongside children, at least by men. Of those completing in 1992, less than a quarter had small children but of those in 2002, more than a third (more than half of men but fewer women). Some buy in paid domestic help and childcare, but we omitted to ask about this.

### *What they looked to get from the university and their supervisor*

For this group, the doctorate, and their supervisor, occupy a different area in their lives from those who do a doctorate full time and/or when they are young. The PhD does not become 'their whole life'. They are less dependent on their supervisor, and less critical of him/her. Some are not that interested in doing a doctorate and chose an 'easy' topic rather than one in which they are passionately interested - adopting an instrumental approach and maintaining emotional distance. But almost all become absorbed by it. In general they have other sources of self-esteem: some supportive colleagues, friends and a partner and other family members (some use a spouse as a helper with e.g. talking through ideas, IT support, or reading and editing).

This group is the one whose members are most likely to attend conferences (especially in recent cohorts) and to publish before they complete their theses. (We found a third published some material in professional or peer-reviewed journal or as chapters in books before they completed.) If they are give papers at conferences and are active in professional groups, they feel part of a network/academic community and get positive feed back.

If they do their doctorate in the institution where they work, they are likely to be supervised by a colleague. This may provide them with a good mentor, but it can also be difficult if the supervisory relationship breaks down or even if it is not very satisfactory (Denicolo 2004). The pair can in addition be in a multiplicity of other roles in relation to each other – e.g. the supervisor may be teaching on a course which the student is managing. Or other colleagues may think the supervisor is special pleading for a lower workload for their ‘student’ in staff meetings, which may be resented and resisted. There are also issues of how close should such a relationship be, and how much each side wants to self disclose.

Many did not look for at the start, but those in the later cohorts say they gained, skills in reading, writing, research methodology and ‘doing research’ (managing a project to completion).

#### *Use subsequently made of the qualification and their research findings*

This group have secure jobs, but they probably have to chase up the promised promotion. One in ten moved sideways into a similar job and rather more moved up in the same field, or to a more prestigious institution, or into management while studying. Subsequently the doctorate ‘probably helps’ their career, but its hard to put a finger on just how’. There is not an immediate, direct change. Those who are motivated researchers will publish from their thesis, but many do not and some just move on to other projects, being encouraged to ‘bring in research money’.

#### **Research officers who are writing their own theses alongside employment on a project.**

This group comprised only 5% of our IoE sample.

#### *Motivations for undertaking a doctorate;*

Those in this relatively small group start with a great interest in doing some research and/or getting into an academic job. They may have an area of interest from a Masters degree and want to do carry on to a doctorate, so they seek a job as a research assistant (or, much less often in the UK, a teaching assistant job) to finance it. Others apply for a research assistantship (usually on the basis of some prior experience relevant to a specific project, e.g. having worked as a nurse or as a volunteer with children in hospital) and they then decide (realize they need) to do a doctorate and enrol.

#### *Sources of support with while studying*

Those who completed in 1992 continued in the same job through the thesis, later cohorts showed less job stability as project duration has reduced. Such students

therefore get their fees paid and a modest salary, but the salary often didn't last as long as the time it takes them to complete their PhD – so they are dependent on some other source (another job, or parents or spouse) for the last year(s). Their insecure financial situation means many start worrying about the future from the start their studies.

Very few of this (young but relatively poor and time-pressured group) had dependents or domestic responsibilities.

#### *What they looked to get from the university and their supervisor*

Research assistant students are formally part of a department, but often geographically and socially isolated from it – in a office at the far end of another corridor - and do not feel they are part of the community of either teaching staff or the other research students. Some individuals however take a proactive stance and attend seminars and volunteer to help organize events and work their way in (Boud and Lee). They are also less likely to have access to resources that staff with teaching posts

Their position is dependent on the personality of their project director who may also be (one of) their supervisor(s) – with the issues discussed above in relation to supervision by a colleague, but in spades. Acker (1999) notes especially complaints of infrequent meetings. We also got some of the sharpest critiques of supervision/ management from this group. Its members may also be using some of the data which they gathered as part of the larger project - which helps with costs and time but requires negotiation to clarify which work is the student's own; and may mean the researcher does not actually choose his/her the topic. However, if they decide to do something different for their own work, they have to reconcile dual demands and may not get the same support with conferences and publishing on 'their own' topic. They may make useful contacts in the field, or outside academia, when doing fieldwork or contacts through the project leader

#### *Use subsequently made of the qualification and their research findings inc posts and publishing*

Acker (1999) suggests this group of research students which is most disaffected with academe and most likely to leave after they get their doctorate. In our IoE study we found them (all in clinical or educational psychology) going on to do a postdoctorate or further training and returning later either to HE or going into education related public or private sector organizations, or becoming self-employed consultants. Fewer than 1 in 10, all completing in 2002, sought to become generic career researchers

## Conclusion

This study has sought to counter the assumption that individuals do a doctorate and then get a job in higher education, by stressing that, in one vocational field at least, half the research students already had jobs in higher education before they started their doctorate. It then tried to outline, necessarily rather simplistically, how the doctorate fits into the lives of these 'early career academics' – rather than the usual perspective of how their lives fit around the doctorate.; and the differences between those with teaching posts abroad, at home, and those who work as research assistants.

It brings into focus how much academia, and beyond that government, demands of doctoral students both in terms of hard work and cash and social life foregone, as well as intellectually. Also how relatively unconcerned universities are with staff and especially students' sources of self esteem and their 'outside' employment, domestic and financial situation.

In policy terms, we might ask if the compulsory employment-related courses now being provided are appropriate for these groups, or if they need something more tailored. Do we need to be giving these students courses on time management, or should we rather change our practice to recognize more how these groups enrich the doctoral 'community' with external experiences, produce policy relevant knowledge, and transfer knowledge out from UK universities in an organic way.

---

## References

- Acker, S. (1999). "Students and supervisors: the ambiguous relationship." Review of Australian Research in Education **5**: 75-94.
- Deem, R. and K. Brehony (2000). "Doctoral students' access to research cultures - are some more unequal than others?" Studies in Higher Education **25**(2): 149-165.
- Denicolo, P. (2004). "Doctoral supervision of colleagues: peeling away the veneer of satisfaction and competence." Studies in Higher Education **29**(6): 693-707.
- Hatt, S., J. Kent, et al., Eds. (1999). Women, Research and Careers. Basingstoke, Macmillan Press.
- Leonard, D., J. Metcalfe, et al. (2006). Review of the Literature on the Doctoral Experience f, HE Academy.
- Newman, M. (2007). "Fixed term contracts still the norm for researchers." Times Higher Education Supplement November 23rd.
- Nishio, A. (2001). Issues facing Japanese postgraduate students studying at the University of London with special reference to gender, Institute of Education University of London.
- Tremblay, K. (2005). "Academic mobility and immigration." Journal of International Education **9**(3): 196-228.
- UK GRAD Programme (2006). What do PhDs Do? 2004 analysis of the first destinations for PhD graduates. Cambridge, UK GRAD Programme.
- Usher, R. (2002). "A diversity of doctorate: fitness for the knowledge economy?" Higher Education Research and Development **21**(2): 143-153.