



The University of
Nottingham



***How to win friends and
influence people: the value of
the cohort in a doctoral
research training programme***

*A research paper by Kathryn Hinsliff-Smith,
Jan Keane, Daphne Whiteoak and Irina Hawker*

NOTTINGHAM
JUBILEE PRESS



ISBN 978-1-906235-05-5

Kathryn Hinsliff-Smith, Jan Keane, Daphne Whiteoak and Irina Hawker,
2009

First Edition published 2009

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, transmitted or utilized in any form or by
any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or
otherwise, without permission in writing from the Publishers.

The Nottingham Jubilee Press
University of Nottingham
Dearing Building
Nottingham NG8 1BB

Abstract

This article is not about retention and attrition rates, or about successful outcomes, or about supervision, even though these are at the nub of most research on the doctoral experience. This article concerns the experiences of doctoral students undertaking educational research methods training, as opposed to the experiences of the PhD itself. The specific phenomenon identified in this small group study is the value of peer interaction within the cohort. Three strands of this relationship, namely peer support, cultural mix and bonding/ad-hoc social gatherings have been investigated. Our findings illustrate the importance and unexpected value of the 'cohort' on the participants in this study as they journey towards academia.

Introduction

The doctoral research journey is one undertaken largely alone. Although there is some interaction and dialogue with supervisors, it is set within an academic culture that requires the individual student to succeed in a number of areas. Whatever the need to conform to certain norms of 'academicity' (Deem & Brehony, 2000, Petersen, 2007), the student's ultimate goal of undertaking empirical research is an original piece that will contribute to the relevant field.

Despite the uniquely personal and individual journey that each student will take, the majority of published papers about the doctoral experience are written from the perspective of supervisors and 'already arrived' researchers and academics. Very little is written from the perspective of the doctoral students themselves, and their aspirations, frustrations and changing identity. If the process of doctoral study is one of identity transformation from a pre-doctoral identity to that of an 'academic' (Petersen, 2007), then the views and perceptions of students themselves should be a major part of the debate.

This account of an empirical small-scale study of the views of five research students, all undertaking research methods training in a

school of education at a Russell group¹ university, illustrates the importance of peer support and bonding within a culturally diverse group.

The traditional approach to research training

Research education has changed over the past decade. Initially, it was delivered in an ad-hoc fashion with limited governance from research bodies (Humes & Bryce, 2001). Nisbet (2000) described this approach to research training as a “cottage industry” (pg. 415). The UK Government’s introduction of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has placed new and additional pressures on universities and research departments. They wish to attract the best research students, both from within the UK and outside it, to achieve success in finding external research funding (Deem & Brehony, 2000). The 1998 Excellence in Research on Schools report estimated that over £65 million a year was spent on educational research alone distributed by the RAE to over one hundred institutions (Hillage et al., 1998).

Globally, doctoral education has become more widespread and taken up by an increasingly diverse student body (Engebretson et. al, 2008). Mitchell & Carroll (2008) using data obtained from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2006), note an increase of 3.5% in doctorate research qualifiers between 2003/04 and 2004/5 to 15,520 (Mitchell & Carroll, 2008:219), with Cambridge and Oxford universities alone producing over 8,000 PhD graduates (Times Higher Education, 2008). China and Japan saw unprecedented “increases of up to 578%” (Moguerou, 2005 cited in Mitchell & Carroll, 2008:219). Nuemann (2002) and Pearson (2005) indicate that the Australian student population is now “more diverse in age, experience, and educational background” (Nuemann, 2002, Pearson, 2005 cited in Engebretson et al., 2008:2). With continuing debate on the long-term economic and social rewards of higher education, in particular research excellence and the requirements of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), there is a need to explore further the student experience. This is particularly pertinent when considering doctoral students who are

¹ The Russell Group is an association of 20 major research-intensive universities of the United Kingdom. Formed in 1994 at a meeting convened in Russell Square, the Group is composed of the Vice-Chancellors/Principals of these Universities

undertaking research methods training, which is now a compulsory requirement for many PhD programmes in the UK.

Many studies have focused on the Government and ESRC agenda of a world-class research base in the UK, with particular focus on the PhD experience (Deem & Brehony, 2000, Reay, et al., 2002, Chiang, 2003, Reay, 2003, Goode, 2007, Li & Seale, 2007, Engebretson, et al., 2008, Mitchell & Carroll, 2008). The focus for most of these qualitative case studies has, however, centred on issues around cultural diversity (Chiang, 2003, Goode, 2007), supervision experience (Li & Seale, 2007, Engebretson et al., 2008), coping strategies (Reay et al., 2002, Reay, 2003), research cultures (Deem & Brehony, 2000) and misconduct (Mitchell & Carroll, 2008). There is growing recognition of the need to accommodate the 'diversity' of student backgrounds with theory and comment in their research preparation.

Although some research has made reference to the isolation of the PhD (Wright, 2003:218), the relationship, if any, between initial compulsory research training and a lasting and successful outcome for the individual and institution appears to require further investigation. Early studies by Parry et al., (1997) and Deem & Brehony (2000) indeed indicated that some students and supervisors had not "bought into research training cultures" (Parry et al., 1997 cited in Deem & Brehony, 2000:156), although there may now be more acceptance of this. It is recognised that a PhD can be socially isolating, and believed that in the main a student will need to develop only a one-to-one relationship with the principal supervisor throughout their study (Engebretson et al., 2008). Again, this may be changing, particularly in respect of the development of collegiate knowledge learning environments (Engebretson et al., 2008).

The teamwork approach found in the natural sciences has been shown to facilitate student integration into academic culture more successfully than the 'individual' approach favoured by the social sciences, where the role of the cohort has been found lacking (Chiang, 2003). While this study was on a small scale (5 participants), it does make an important contribution to the current debate on the PhD journey and how best to support doctoral students. It also highlights the fact that students are not a homogenous group, and should not be treated as

such; each individual's needs differ both psychologically and educationally.

Challenges faced by particular groups of doctoral students

Certain categories of student may find it more difficult to enter the world of academia than others, most notably part-time, international and female students (Deem & Brehony, 2000), and those in the social sciences (Chiang, 2003). For all these categories, there may be feelings of disempowerment as they make cultural adjustments. Many doctoral students encounter a steep power gradient with their supervisor, which may be based on status or gender, and the cultural norms and expectations that sit within those relationships (Deem & Brehony, 2000, Goode, 2007, Li & Searle, 2007). It may be that doctoral students are not encouraged to engage with the issue of relationships for fear of appearing critical, and for the practical reason of wanting to develop a good rapport with their supervisor. Whatever the reasons, it is important for these experiences to be understood more widely.

Research Questions

The impetus for this small study came from an informal discussion between members of a doctoral research training course. Two questions emerged from this discussion;

1. Can being part of such a cohort benefit students in their transition to academicity?
2. What value do individuals within the cohort place on these peer relationships?

The aim of this study is to answer these questions.

Methodology

Sample

The study explores the experiences of a relatively small sample of doctoral researchers (five) undertaking a taught educational research methods programme at a Russell Group university in the UK. The complete cohort consisted of some twenty students, which formed a

representative sample of all enrolment categories: full time, part-time, home, and international. The course commenced in 2007, and this study took place when the participants were, roughly half way through the formal requirements of the programme. They were involved in an academic writing task, which expected all participants to produce an extended piece of well-argued academic work on the doctoral experience. In order to facilitate this, the course convenor had chosen five relevant articles for consideration.

However, the majority of students felt they would be better served by using their own research interests as a foundation for this task. Only five of this cohort wished to continue with the convenor's suggested topic, and thus decided, after some discussion, to form themselves into a group with the intention of exploring the perceived value of the training programme themselves. In this respect, the 'volunteers' were self-selected and the initial limited reading parameters were extended as the exercise evolved into a genuine and serious study.

In line with BERA ethical guidelines, for the remainder of this study, the participants will be known as Carole, Louise, Martha, Rose, Sarah.

The fact that the participants in this study were all women was purely unintentional, but this does reflect the high proportion of women, 64%, in the 2007 cohort. Although Leonard (1997) reported differences in the power relations of women undertaking a PhD as opposed to that of men, a gender comparison was not the focus here (cited in Deem & Brehony, 2000). Even so, factors such as gender homogeneity of the sample group, along with each participant's particular stance regarding the research process, were carefully weighed when deciding on the appropriateness and validity of data collection methods and the framework for the study.

Data generation / data collection

There are two aspects to the collection of data for this paper – a guided writing task (in that the topic was decided at the outset), followed by an informal focus-type group without facilitator.

Participants were initially asked to record their thoughts to date on the doctoral training experience. It was assumed that at this stage, half

way through their training, participants would be able to reflect appropriately and produce illuminating data. No limitations or restrictions whatsoever were placed on this task, and the results were then subjected to a form of content analysis. Ten areas of comment were identified, and particular points relevant to these themes were teased out from the texts. These ten areas were then collected under two main themes – the course and the cohort.

During the course of the focus group, where the content of the written task was discussed freely, it was decided that the theme of 'the cohort' would form the basis for further exploration. The strength of feeling from the participants cemented the view that this theme was clearly important for them. Secondly, while studies have been conducted on the doctoral experience (Deem & Brehony, 2000, Chiang, 2003, Goode, 2007, Li & Searle, 2007, Peterson, 2007, Engebretson et al., 2008, Mitchell & Carroll, 2008), these studies are limited and neglect to consider the emotional and relational aspect on the value of a doctoral cohort. Therefore, this study and subsequent article adds useful contribution to the debate on the doctoral experience.

The use of focus groups as highlighted by Wilkinson (1998) presents an opportunity for interaction and a true construction of meaning, and is a useful methodological tool for a qualitative study. This research design has the advantage of allowing participant 'voice'; an advantage to other data collection methods, such as participant diaries, questionnaires, or one-to-one interviews, may lack. It enabled, for example, the collection of a large quantity of spontaneous data, which accurately reflects the views of the interviewees, along with the researcher's epistemology and ontological positions. This data collection method, and the decision to have no facilitator, helps to address the balance of power between researcher and interviewee, giving a greater emphasis to the agenda of the research as identified by Wilkinson (1998). Bryman (2004) also supports this view, pointing out that decontextualisation is avoided. Focus groups are a useful research tool that can virtually stand alone as a data collection method (Morgan, 1988 cited in Wellington, 2000).

The spontaneous group decision to have no facilitator enabled genuine group interaction which resulted in a set of group initiated and generated themes, rather than researcher selected and driven themes. Consequently, the study ensured that no agenda had slipped in to steer the discussion and make certain aspects of the doctoral experience stand out. The themes identified in this study are truly relevant to the

participants, in contrast with some funded studies whereby the use of focus groups can be manipulated to reflect a certain agenda, and thereby seriously compromise the integrity of any findings (Kleiber, 2004). However, it is worth mentioning that conducting a focus interview with no facilitator was possible in this study partly because it reflected the style and nature of the doctoral training programme, in which the participants were involved. Some elements of the directed teaching on the programme allowed students to work together in this way.

Moreover, the focus group setting enabled any inconsistent views held by individual participants to be challenged in a non-threatening environment (Bryman, 2004). Therefore, it appears that one particularity of generating data through group interaction is the opportunity of an ad hoc reconsideration of certain assertions in the light of the feedback and alternative viewpoints from peer respondents.

An advantage of receiving a written task prior to the focus group was an opportunity for individual reflection before joining the group discussion rather than merely relying on the spontaneity of the group interaction as a source of generating themes. The framework for the study encouraged participants to share their thoughts prior to the focus group on the value of the research methods training programme, and to read about other people's views, thus enhancing both reflectivity and reflexivity as participants and researchers.

One of the possible disadvantages of having prior access to other participant's views is the danger of participants submitting to 'group think'. Some respondents may feel that their views do not fall within the general tendency of the group and may be tempted to give up ideas that may otherwise prove valuable to the group discussion. This was addressed by focusing on themes of agreement identified by the five participants.

A small case study based on one focus group is not likely to have any major impact on the policy making of an institution, even though the findings may be pertinent because there will always be the argument of generalizability. Even so, this study has revealed how the use of a focus group with few participants can still provide illuminating and challenging themes, which add to the debate.

Findings

From our transcribed interviews, theme of 'cohort' was divided into three sub-themes: peer support, cultural mix, and bonding/ad hoc social gatherings. These sub-themes were given equal weight by participants, implying equal importance to their doctoral journey. The discussion will therefore focus on these three main themes in the context of other studies conducted in this area (Deem & Brehony, 2000, Chiang, 2003, Goode, 2007, Li & Searle, 2007, Peterson, 2007, Engebretson, et al., 2008, Mitchell & Carroll, 2008).

Peer support

Support networks became a prominent feature of the interviews with the participants. They spoke of "great peer support both academically and emotionally" (Louise) and said that "comradeship has helped me to begin the adjustment of my former self" (Rose). According to other participants, the support network was "the real glue that holds you together" (Louise) and without which "I honestly wouldn't have coped well" (Carole). All participants felt that the network had great value for them.

Steele et al., (2005) reported similar findings in their study of student nurses and suggested that support manifests itself in many guises - emotional, financial, social, and educational. However, Steele's study highlighted the importance of support as part of the college philosophy, with the attitudes of course tutors as a prominent feature. It also took account of the work conducted by Tweedal (2000) on mature students, suggesting that the feeling of belonging and being part of a group 'when the going gets tough' was important. Tweedal goes further by suggesting that institutions should exploit these social networks and support groups (cited in Steele et al., 2005).

Wright (2003) and Engebretson (2008) both note that isolation is seen as one of the major drawbacks of doing a PhD. Students undertaking initial work in research methods are spared the solitary nature of the more traditional PhD experience in that they are thrown together with other research students in their first year. In research seminars, both academic and social integration takes place. In the words of Martha, a part-time student,

...the course has been valuable to me in that it has helped me avoid the isolation felt by many part timers as I have been able to meet together with other students and build relationships.

Studies in the past have viewed the academic and social dimensions of doing a PhD as serving quite different purposes, defining 'social' as pertaining to '...daily life and personal needs...outside the formal academic domain' (Golde, 2000:201). It is our contention, however, that the formal requirement of research methods' training immerses the student in a different environment to that of the 'PhD only' route, and thus creates a sense of group identity and, therefore, inter-dependency between the academic and social dimensions.

There is ample evidence to suggest that participants in this study see members of their research method's cohort as providing stimulation and support in both academic and social spheres, and that there is considerable overlap between the two. Rose speaks about her peers quite passionately:

Being part of a cohort has supported me in the early stages of transition from full-time employment at a very responsible level in my own profession and field to one of academicity and researcher.

All members of the participant group echo this sentiment, albeit in different words.

Contrary to Golde's (2000) view, academic support can and does take place in a social setting, and vice versa. For students undertaking research methods programmes, academic integration goes on not just in the seminar or classroom, but also during coffee breaks, and at meal times, and with respect to other aspects of 'daily life and personal needs'. As Sarah, a full-timer put it:

Cohort contacts, especially the debriefing sessions over lunch, are invaluable and necessary.

Of course, all interactions within the group have an academic dimension by virtue of the 'hothouse' situation the members are in. Even functions that appear on the surface to be essentially 'social', are never just that. Three participants highlight group social events (the

Christmas party, Pancake lunch, end of term dinner) as enjoyable, and as a way of welcoming international students. Nevertheless, the discussion in these situations is often specifically about aspects of the course.

In the process of acquiring what Petersen (2007) refers to as ‘...the insidious and tacit knowledge of academicity (Peterson, 2007:478), she lists the ‘skill set’ which is essential for successful transition. The ‘would-be’ researcher must learn:

...how to talk, laugh, sit, and feel; how to express recognition of competence; and how to express...recognition that what someone does or says falls outside the domain of the appropriately academic. (Peterson, 2007:478)

Citing Green and Lee (1995), Petersen nominates the seminar as a ‘salient site to consider in this context’ (1995:478), but the meaning of ‘seminar’ here is the occasional and wholly more formal research presentation, rather than the more casual ‘tutorial’ format encountered in research methods’ training course. Sarah was less than complimentary about the seminars, but can still see their value,

A lot of time is wasted in the seminars, and some of the group tasks are a bit mindless, but I suppose they assist in the inter-student bonding process.

Carole was ‘...happy about [her] MA colleagues...as [she] enjoyed learning together, from one another, and sharing ideas’.

The participants appear to value highly their experience of relationships formed within the cohort. They also indicate their belief that these relationships will continue to provide support throughout their PhD journey

I think the training has enabled some great peer support both academically and emotionally. These experiences will certainly carry us through to the next stage. To work in total isolation which seems to be the ‘norm’ would be a nightmare for me. (Louise)

There is evidently something positive emerging from the analysis of our data. The special role of research methods training in enhancing peer support needs further exploration.

Cultural Mix

While support networks and peer support are major sub-themes emerging from the interviews, they are not discrete issues, but are inextricably related to the sub-theme of cultural mix. This could be pertinent only to this particular cohort, as over 73% have international fee status, but reflects commonality across many taught postgraduate courses in the UK. Postgraduate taught courses are often a melting pot of experiences, ages, cultures, and future academic desires. Deem & Brehony (2000) focused on investigating the range of research cultures and identified a gap in literature on research student cultures. They indicate that this related to a range of aspects including "...shared experience of being a research student ...shared networks....for academic support and friendships...as well as social networks and activities for both academic support and sociability" (Deem & Brehony, 2000:153). Carole, an international student, who participated in this study observed that "being part of a culturally diverse environment has helped me a lot" while Sarah comments about the cultural mix of the research group and sums up our participants' view of informal interaction

Apart from the social aspects, diversity is invaluable to the would-be researcher. Age, ethnic, and national differences all provide alternative perspectives, which boost one's knowledge and engender debate.

Bonding and ad hoc social gatherings

Bonding amongst members of the cohort has enabled students to form friendships and reduce isolation, develop a group identity, and support their transition into the world of academia.

Friendship was an unexpected bonus, of the research training seminars. Shared meals at the end of terms and on special English festivals (Pancake lunch and Christmas) enabled students of all cultural and religious traditions to chat and get to know each other and the

surprise of resulting friendships was summed up by one participant as “perhaps one of the least expected, but most rewarding aspects of the course” (Sarah). For part-time student Martha, these friendships have been the factor that has enabled her to “feel more at home in the department and [have] give[n] me a sense of belonging.” Of note was the opinion expressed by Rose of being able to give to those who had “more to worry about,” for example to those students who face huge linguistic and cultural challenges. In facilitating relationships with others and offering support, kindness, and hospitality, the cohort was able to reinforce personal, social, and academic identities.

Similarly, ad-hoc social gatherings gave the students the opportunity to ‘download’ the stresses of the course, and anxieties about the assignment deadlines and lack of clarity over expectations felt by the five participants. A common theme identified from the participant’s guided writing task was frustration. Informal sharing of frustrations over aspects of the course, and perceived inequities in workload expectations, enabled students to support each other in determining individual responses and action. Rose who likened the PhD journey to that of sailing across a lake summed this up

Having set sail towards the far shore, I have survived some rough weather, and when I fell overboard, my companions came to the rescue, pulling me back on board and wiping the rain off the compass so I can continue sailing ...

Conclusions

Participants in this study have started their doctoral journey as members of a research methods cohort, not as individuals on a ‘PhD only’ route. The findings highlight the importance of social and academic networks developed during research methods training, and indicate how these factors can mitigate the social and academic isolation, which appears to be the accepted norm in social sciences and humanities.

This study finds that collaborative groups help to develop the social and academic capital that the individual requires for continued success in academia. Despite the ubiquity of the one-to-one supervisor model for doctorate students, our study suggests that cohort networks, peer support, bonding, and a ‘shared’ experience are invaluable. Yeatman (1995) and McWilliam (2004) both argue that the individual student plus supervisor model may no longer suit a “mass education system”

(cited in Engebretson et al., 2008:3), and we would concur with this view.

James and Baldwin (1999) offer a clear and unequivocal solution by arguing that the responsibility firmly lies with supervisors, course co-ordinators and research departments to ensure that learning communities are formed which support, enhance, and develop learner confidence. Indeed in Heath's (2002) study of recognised successful supervisors, there was an acceptance that students should be part of a "supportive peer group", while O'Hanlon (2004) sees social capital as being produced by learners but organised by the institutions (cited in Engebretson et al., 2008). As Hargreaves (2001) has observed, social capital is a way of beginning to understand the outcomes as well as the processes involved in formal education (Hargreaves, 2001).

Our study has touched upon the importance placed on social capital. Louise points to this, saying,

having individuals [who] have shared the same experiences as well as [who] 'talk' the same language will be invaluable for the next 2/3 years.

It has been shown here that there is considerable advantage in the development of good peer relationships. This suggests that the role of doctoral research training, with its implications for research policy and practice, warrants further investigation. Additionally, it would be of great interest to follow our five participants as they progress through the subsequent stages of their academic journeys, to see if they remain supported by the cohort, and, indeed, if they perceive that this continued support has any bearing on the PhD outcomes of each individual.

References

Bryman, A. (2004). *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chiang, K.-H. (2003). Learning Experiences of Doctoral Students in UK Universities. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 23. Pg. 4-32.

Deem, R., & Brehony, K.J. (2000). Doctoral Students' Access to Research Cultures – are some more unequal than others? *Studies in Higher Education*, 25 (2), 149 – 165.

Engebretson, K., Smith, K., McLaughlin, D., Seibold, C., Terrett, G., & Ryan, E. (2008). The changing reality of research education in Australia and implications for supervision: a review of the literature. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13(1), 1-15.

Golde, C. M. (2000). Should I Stay or Should I Go? Student Descriptions of the Doctoral Attrition Process. *The Review of Higher Education*, 23 (2), 199-227.

Goode, J. (2007). Empowering or disempowering the international Ph.D. student? Constructions of the dependent and independent learner.

Heath, T. (2002). A quantitative analysis of PhD students' views of supervision. *Higher Education Research and Development* 21. No. 1 40 -53

Hillage, J., Pearson, R., Anderson, A., & Tamkin, P. (1998). *Excellence in research on schools*. Department for Education and Employment. Research Brief No 74, Report RR74. August. London.

Humes, W., & Bryce, T. (2001). Scholarship, research and the evidential basis of policy development in education. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 49(3), 329-352.

James, R. and Baldwin, G. (1999). *Eleven Practices of Effective Postgraduate Supervisors*, Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education and the School of Graduate Studies: University of Melbourne.

Kleiber, P.B. (2004). Focus group: more than a method of qualitative inquiry. In K. Bennet-de-Marraais & S. D. Lapan (eds.), *Foundations of research: methods of inquiry in education and the social sciences*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Li, S. & Seale, C. (2007). Managing criticism in Ph.D. supervision: a qualitative case study. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32(4) 511-526.

Mitchell, T., & Carroll, J. (2008). Academic and research misconduct in the PhD: Issues for students and supervisors. *Nurse Education Today*, 28(2), 218-226.

Nisbet, J. (2000). When the "Rot" Set In: education and research, 1960 – 1975. *British Educational Research Journal*, 26(3).409 – 421.

Peterson, E.B. (2007). Negotiating academicity: postgraduate research supervision as category boundary work. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32(4), 475 – 487.

Reay, D., Ball, S. & David, M. (2002). Taking Me a Long Time but I'll Get There in the End: mature students on access courses and higher education choice. *British Educational Research Journal*, 28(1), 5–19.

Reay, D. (2003). A Risky Business? Mature Working-class Women Students and Access to Higher Education. *Gender and Education*, 15(3), 301 – 317.

Steele, R., Lauder, W., Caperchione, C., & Anastasi, J. (2005). An exploratory study of the concerns of mature access to nursing students and the coping strategies used to manage these adverse experiences. *Nurse Education Today*, 25(7), 573-581.

Wellington, J. (2000). *Educational research: contemporary issues and practical approaches*. London: Continuum.

Wilkinson, S. (1998). Focus groups in feminist research: Power, Interaction, and the co-construction of meaning. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 21(1), 111-125.

Wright, Toni. (2003). Postgraduate Research Students: People in Context? *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 31(2), 209-227.