Challenges and Opportunities for Career Progression of Academic Staff Undertaking Part-Time Research Doctorates

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Background

Currently, there is a growing expectation from staff and universities that research doctorates (such as a PhD or Ed.D) are a necessary qualification for promotion to senior posts. Given the time pressures many staff are faced with, those who have not pursued a PhD straight from leaving university are increasingly having to complete research doctorates part-time while in full- or part-time employment. There remains limited evidence on the realities of part-time study and of the impact on career development and progression in teaching and research staff roles. This study will be key to addressing these knowledge gaps and will feed into local Athena SWAN activities.

Methods

The study sample consists of academic staff in the Faculty of Health Sciences & Sport at the University of Stirling who are pursuing, or have previously completed, a part-time research doctorate while employed. This will be a qualitative study using focus groups to encourage discussion informed by the different experiences of participants. The topic guide was informed by a rapid review of the literature. Framework analysis will be used to structure, organise and compare and contrast the focus group data and develop themes.

Rapid Review

By searching relevant databases for the phrase ‘part time doctorate’ we identified more than 150 articles potentially relevant to the study. After sifting the article abstracts, six key articles were identified for inclusion in the review. Within these articles three key themes were identified, with a number of sub-themes.

- Issues / Costs – including higher risk of withdrawals or non-completion; difficulties with funding; work-life-study balance; perceived as ‘not normal’ route; less frequent contact with supervisors and peers; and fewer career development and planning opportunities
- Opportunities / Benefits – more developed skills and experiences; lower infrastructure costs; ‘impact ready’; complete quicker; and life-long learners
- Knowledge Gaps – motivations; skills outside and within HE; lived experiences; part-time is not a ‘variable’, rather a distinct group; and research focus on academic staff undertaking part-time doctorates lacking

Topic Guide

We used the rapid review to help inform the development of the topic guide above, structured under three key topics:

- Who are our study sample? – demographics and their relationship with part-time study
- Being employed within the HE sector – support, benefits and difficulties
- Life and career progression – aspirations past, present and future

We also plan to check how the aims of our study match with the expectations of the participants.

Next Steps

The focus groups will take place in May 2017 and the results written up as part of the Faculty of Health Sciences and Sport Athena SWAN award application in 2018. We will also produce a manuscript and aim to use the evidence generated to inform a grant application to look at academic institutions throughout the UK and consider different disciplines.