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Part-time online PhD reflection: train of thoughts

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Abstract

Current literature presents a growing interest in doctoral programmes. However little is written about Part-Time Online PhD studies. This study explores the reflections of a Part-Time Online PhD student as he underwent the doctoral process in IMPDET (International Multidisciplinary PhD Studies in Educational Technology) online PhD degree programme. The paper employs reflective learning approach with two main objectives: a) the student to be actively involved in research and develop scientific writing skills; and b) effectively reflect upon the gained knowledge and experience as a part-time online PhD student. Findings identified a number of important issues for students and academics associated with the Part-Time Online PhD study mode and more specifically the IMPDET (International Multidisciplinary PhD Studies in Educational Technology) programme. The findings of this study can be also applied to improve the Part-time online PhD study mode also in other field

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been a rapid increase in the numbers of doctoral candidates studying at part-time basis and many times at distance. The current literature presents a growing interest in doctoral programmes due to the fact that there is a general consensus among academics that the numbers of doctoral students are likely to be increased in the next couple of years. The opportunity to study for a doctorate without relocating is considered the response to the emerging needs of the economy where students can access further education while continuing to work. Pearson [15] mentions that the rapid increase of students undertaking doctoral studies is proportional to the increase of diversity in their population. Additionally he identifies the need for more flexible study mode due to the commitments by more mature students to family and employment. A study by Sunderland [16] reports the trend towards part-time distance study in doctoral programs in the UK where the use of email was effectively used for support. Additionally Albion [1] argues that part-time distance doctoral studies even though designed to be undertaken by students continuing to practice in their profession, are different from an on-campus study mode experience. He focuses on the fact that the opportunities for doctoral students following the distance learning mode have limited to non existent physical interaction with colleagues or academics. However little is written about Part-Time Online PhD studies and more specifically from the student point of view. My reflection, Current Progress and Lessons Learned part of the paper are personal reflections of the author, Vasileios Paliktzoglou. This study explores the reflections of a Part-Time Online PhD student as he underwent the doctoral process in IMPDET (International Multidisciplinary PhD Studies in Educational Technology) online PhD degree programme and the findings of this study can be also applied to improve the Part-time online PhD study mode also in other field.

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2. Context of the IMPDET (International Multidisciplinary PhD Studies in Educational Technology) programme

IMPDET (International Multidisciplinary PhD Studies in Educational Technology) is an online PhD degree programme, which allows students to study a degree either in Computer Science or Education. The IMPDET is providing multidisciplinary PhD training where culture, education, and technology are actively interacting and the cooperation between the educational sciences and computer science is one of the key points of the IMPDET programme [10]. Furthermore the aim is to incorporate multidisciplinary approaches that are based on the different aspects cultural studies and education, and the contributions of computer science. The unique aspects of this training are the combinations of expertise, its distribution over the Internet, and the intensive periods of work expected from students and their supervisors [10]. The programme is administered by the University of Eastern Finland, where a number of leading scholars in the field of educational technology serve on the board of the IMPDET program. Extensive networks of experts from diverse fields supervise IMPDET students and give online courses. Moreover the doctoral candidates are required to arrange at least one trip to Finland during the studies. The pedagogical objectives adopted by IMPDET are aligned with the general outlines, which are listed below, in Eisenhart & DeHaan's [5] Doctoral Preparation of Scientifically-based Education Researchers:

- **Core Courses** - Courses in subjects traditional for education programs, as well as in relevant interdisciplinary area are required for all entering doctoral students; these courses are scholarly, rigorous, and intense enough to bear the burden of familiarizing students with the orienting concepts in each field, the culture of scientific inquiry, and the special demands of research in education. The student should collect 60 ECTS credits from these courses and according to the study plan.

- **Research experience** - Doctoral students have at least two kinds of training experience with a research project under a faculty member. First, with close monitoring and support, students are given the opportunity to engage in all phases of an investigation, from identifying a research problem to research design, to data collection and analysis, to communication of results. Second, students have the experience of pursuing a significant line of research on their own (under the supervision of one or more faculty members), and completing a series of articles published in peer-reviewed conference publications or scientific journals, a dissertation and a reviewed grant application [10].

In addition to interdisciplinary courses and seminars, opportunities are provided for doctoral students to build networks with students and researchers in other departments where studies relevant to education are being conducted. By adopting these guidelines it is hoped that each IMPDET student will come to posses the requisite research and development skills needed to make a significant contribution to the field of educational technology, and ultimately to social betterment. The current ICT solutions applied in the IMPDET studies are Moodle LMS system for implementing online courses, Adobe Connect Pro and Skype for online synchronous presentations and group work and IMPDET website (http://www.impdet.org) for distributing information related to the studies [10].

3. My Reflection

I am balancing in between part-time Online PhD study, my work as a Lecturer and family commitments. My paid work is my passion even though there is a demand for constant improvement in order to provide as much support as possible to students, who are themselves working under considerable stress. Working with postgraduates the pressure is big, mainly because that most of them, like me, are balancing in between family, classes and careers. Currently I am in my second year of study and have a long a way before completion my PhD. However, during this period of approaching this unique part-time online PhD study I have learned some lessons worth sharing. I have dedicated every Wednesday and the weekends working on my PhD as recommended in the literature [12] where time management is also very important in the PhD process, so I keep close contact with my supervisor, with clear timelines and milestones. Moreover this practice sets a comprehensible and transparent as possible expectations towards the PhD studies from both me and supervisors side. Additionally I am frequently participating in online meetings with my supervisor, IMPDET community, Conferences or some fellow students that I have managed to

keep as a support network. This way I have managed to establish a sense of belonging to the IMPDET and academic community and at the same time have a support group discussing issues related to my doctoral studies [17][4].

3.1. The basis

Before considering to undertake a PhD study, I had already completed a Master studies and worked in academia for several years fist as a researcher and then as a Lecturer. Having this background I considered I would have an advantage and my experience could be a foundation to my further studies. Moreover due to my previous experience my writing, reading and research skills were consider as assets to me there are still phases of the part-time online PhD study for which I was not ready. Doing a PhD is completely different from working through a taught degree programme and as I have already argued the problems are observed especially in the transition period when the student should move from the knowledge receiving mode to the knowledge producing mode where the student is expected to produce independent and unique research results, i.e. writing the thesis or research papers [14].

On the other hand the flexibility offered by the both aspects of the PhD study being part time and online can be advantageous. Being in the situation to combine family, career and study there are times when tension and difficulty must be immediately faced. An online Part-time student is offered the option to put the research 'on hold', returning at a later time. Moreover as reflected by Gatrell [7] student doing part-time higher degrees acknowledge a heavy personal cost and sacrifices. In addition to her statement I have sacrificed several family moments and especially hobbies and I am left with a little time to spend with friends.

3.2. First steps

My first six months as an online PhD student were spent reading everything and deciding on my research subject.

A lot of help was provided in a influential email discussion with a senior academic, currently my supervisor, who remind me that it is important to choose a subject that is of vast interested to me in order to be fully committed and interested in the field. This was not more different from what I am suggesting to my postgraduate students when supervising there dissertation. Evans et al., [6] mentions that the fruitful supervision relationship between a student and a supervisor is one of the most significant factors when supervising scientific work. These frequent interactions with my supervisor build the basis for an effective supervision relationship.

As we have already argued [14] Part-time Online PhD mode is challenging in many ways. Motivation, working independently and self-monitoring my own work are one of my major issues [2] [3]. Also the limited social interactions and the feeling of isolation are one of my main challenges that actually affect my progress as a doctoral researcher. The first experiences of IMPDET indicated that there is a need for building an online supervision community where supervisors and students will actively contribute towards the improvement of the learning environment [9]. At the beginning of my studies I was specifically concerned and alerted about the fact that both me and my supervisor were collaborating in English a language which is not our mother language. However considering that my previous studies and work were in UK Universities, as well as the fact that my supervisor is also working on daily basis in a multicultural background convince me that this matter cannot cause serious problems in our collaboration and interaction. On the other hand I have never experienced that cultural backgrounds could be a problem in our case as reported in the literature [13]. If the student and supervisor have different cultural background this can cause a certain challenges in their relationship varying for different world views, communication practices, expectations and technological skills and knowledge. One of the most important factors in the PhD process is establishing a productive student-supervision relationship [6]. As the literature suggests [8][11] the accessibility of the supervisor and the lack of prompt and structured responses are among the main factors affecting the motivation of online learners. Even though similar challenges have been identified also in the IMPDET (International Multidisciplinary PhD Studies in Educational Technology) online doctoral studies [14], I had never experience this kind of challenge especially working with my supervisor, nevertheless the challenges focus on understanding the exact message and instruction, that is closely related with understanding the background experience and cultural context and influences of my supervisor. Wisker [18] argues that if student-supervisor relationship can be build upon understanding the above mentioned factors. Additionally in online supervision context, the feeling of isolation is fact, as in my case this is overcome with frequently scheduled meeting and the help of the so called support group.

4. Current Progress

On reflection, I can't help but to wonder whether the challenges of starting out would have been less daunting if I had chosen to study full-time, even though in my case this would result in loosing my job and funds to finish my studies. Most of the "traditional" mode, full time doctoral students, has more personal relationship with the department and specifically with their supervisor. Usually their commitments are more straightforward and they have the privilege to gain the largely from being at the department and gaining from the practical observation on 'how to do research'.

Moreover so far, I have collected in overall 32 ECTS credits, some from the undertaken core courses relevant to my PhD research and some from my participation to an ICT4D seminar. This way I had the opportunity to be introduced with students and researchers working in the same field of studies. Additionally I have presented my work in public on two occasions. My first presentation consisted of a formal progress talk to a group of other interdisciplinary PhD students in one of the organised IMPDET PhD days, about my research and the feedback was positive. On the second occasion, I was participating in online seminar about Online PhD supervision and from the stimuli received from the audience my research is innovative and interesting. This way I was highly motivated to carry on with my work and commit more on the subject of my research.

Currently I am closely working with my supervisor and we are in the publishing process of articles and piloting of interviews for further research. My aim is also to publish this manuscript and trough reflective practice set the first milestone toward the doctorate. The aim of this task is to reflect upon my experience as a part-time online PhD student and comprehend better the gained knowledge from the undertaken journey. At the same time writing my experiences and communicate my message trough a paper aims towards my active involvement in research and developing enhanced scientific writing skills. In addition my active participation in a conference presenting my work aims toward my introduction in the research field and the possibility to discuss and exchange ideas with fellow researchers and academics, as one of the initial steps in becoming an active part of the academic community.

5. Lesson Learned

From the reflection upon my experience being a Part-time Online PhD student it might be worth outlining the main factors that have helped me being motivated and get me this far. From my point of view one of the crucial factors was choosing a subject for my doctoral thesis which mattered and which I believed to be important. So long as I get there in the end, it is possible that my work might make a contribution to improving the situation for my fellow colleagues in IMPDET, but also other students undertaking Part-time Online PhD studies and balancing between work, studies and family. A good working relationship, and regular meetings with supervisors is central to a part-time PhD student, as is establishing networks with other students who know how you feel and who are experiencing the same pressures as you. The feeling of isolation is common in undertaking doctoral studies and sometimes finding other students or academics interested in the same field is rather difficult, though a request for help to supervisors, or senior doctoral student might be fruitful. As part of this "lesson learned" exercise the most important points of my reflection as an Online Part-time PhD student, are:

- The various demands of my life and the separate roles (as a Lecturer, a student and a family man) are and remain the most difficult part of this doctoral journey.

- I sustained my enthusiasm and stimulus by selecting a highly interesting and imminent topic.

- My balanced relationship with my supervisor and the clearly defined expectation help me be determined and focus on the target and the milestones set for the research topic.

- The core courses that I have followed as part of the IMPDET training, maintained my interest and potential toward my dissertation topic.

- My active involvement in several seminars and conferences help me commence to the academic community.

- I maintain a close relation with fellow students in order to discuss research, but also issues faced being a doctoral student. The power of pair networks should not be underestimated in doctoral studies; it can be a valuable source and support mechanism for every student.

- Being a part-time Online PhD student is not something straightforward and there is no panacea route that one can follow, there are many "ups" and "down" in the process.

6. Conclusion

In this study we have outlined the challenged faced by Online Part-Time PhD student. as he underwent the doctoral process in IMPDET (International Multidisciplinary PhD Studies in Educational Technology) online PhD degree programme. Moreover reflecting on the gained knowledge as a part-time online PhD student and writing the present manuscript the doctoral student was actively introduced to the scientific community practices. The findings identified a number of important issues for students and academics associated with the Part-Time Online PhD study mode that were further discussed and outlined. Finally the findings of this study can be also applied to improve the Part-time online PhD study mode also in other fields.

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