

A LETTER TO MY FORMER SELF: THE ONLINE PHD AS A TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY

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Abstract

Online doctoral programmes have become increasingly popular, allowing adult professionals to pursue their academic goals while carrying on with their lives. This research inquired into a seldom-explored aspect of the online PhD experience: its transformative nature. Through in-depth interviews, we investigated the impact of online doctorates on candidates' lives and perspectives, as well as the retrospective advice they would give to their past selves at the beginning of the programme. Findings indicate that a sense of empowerment and agency is frequently rekindled in online graduate students as they rediscover their own unique voices and perspectives. The PhD also opens them up to new networks and worldviews, promoting personal and professional growth. Students' advice emphasises the importance of having a support network to turn to in times of need, cultivating grit and time-management skills, and learning to cope with constant rejection. This paper offers insights into the lived experience of online graduate students that might interest both prospective students and programme administrators.

Keywords:

Online PhD programmes, non-traditional students, mature doctoral students, students' voices, lived experiences.

Introduction

Online doctoral degrees are gaining traction worldwide, particularly in the wake of the pandemic (Seyri & Rezaee, 2022). The non-traditional profile of students is now dominant in these research degrees (Lee, 2022b). These doctoral candidates are mostly mature-aged, working professionals juggling part-time academic life with paid work and family responsibilities (Lee, 2022b). They choose to do a PhD online for its flexibility and convenience, but at the probable cost of compromised supervision, increased loneliness, and strained personal lives (Melián et al., 2023). Compared to traditional face-to-face PhD programmes, online delivery also places greater demands on students' self-regulation, self-motivation, and time management skills (Xavier & Meneses, 2021). While stubbornly high dropout rates have been a concern in this educational stage for decades (Baltes, 2018; Marston, 2019), recent literature has also raised concerns about unprecedented low well-being (Boone et al., 2022) and mental health vulnerabilities (Naumann et al., 2022) among this student population.

Beyond this situation, pursuing a PhD can also be regarded as an intimate journey that is closely tied to life goals, professional expectations, and personal aspirations (Lee, 2022a; Stanley, 2015). The online doctoral journey is far from a homogeneous experience with predictable outcomes, however. The vast range of experiences among the students correlates with their diverse professional, financial, familial, and cultural backgrounds. In addition, the diverse life circumstances that are expected of an adult during an academic journey that lasts several years are blended into this. As a consequence, embarking on such academic pursuits might necessarily bring about personal transformations and identity transitions (Savva & Nygaard, 2021; Seyri & Rezaee, 2022).

Altogether, non-traditional doctoral students live in an in-between space (Bhabha, 1994), with their often long professional expertise in one particular field on one side and their novice status as academics on the other. This position often results in a changed self-image and identity upon completing the doctorate, compared to when they first entered the program (Nygaard & Savva, 2021). The transformative aspect of belonging and becoming in academia (Nygaard & Savva, 2021), as well as the interplay between candidates' lives and the process of doing a PhD from an experiential point of view, have received scarce attention in the literature (Stanley, 2015). This is even more so for the online modality, which is the focus of our study.

Therefore, this research examines the effects of pursuing a doctoral degree at the Open University of Catalonia on students' lives. This fully online university offers several PhD programs in fields such as social sciences, humanities, and technical subjects. Most students in these doctoral programs are enrolled in the distance and part-time mode, which is expected to last for five years (Open University of Catalonia, 2018).

Methods

This study is qualitative and exploratory following a single case study approach (Yin, 2002). We collected data through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 24 online, part-time doctoral students at the Open University of Catalonia. The interviews lasted around one hour and were held either online or face-to-face. Participants came from various PhD programmes (from both the social sciences and technical fields); stages in the programmes (first year, mid-phase, thesis deposited or recently graduated); countries (from Europe, Latin America, North America, and Africa); ages (27 to 63 years old); and backgrounds (working either in the public or private sector, outside or inside academia). Half of the participants were female.

Transcription and coding of the interviews were assisted by the qualitative analysis software atlas.ti. The researchers then employed thematic analysis to develop the codes and themes, following the stages described in Braun and Clark (2006). The coding process was primarily inductive, listening to the participants' narratives, and pragmatic, developing themes as domain summaries (see Tables 1 and 2). We then used the observed patterns of meaning across the dataset (Clarke & Braun, 2021) to structure the textual analysis.

Preliminary Results

Next, we present the research questions (RQ) of the study and its preliminary findings.

RQ1: How does pursuing a PhD program online affect students' life?

The students' narratives revealed impacts in three different domains of their lives, such as internal and relational changes, as well as in the professional sphere. Table 1 displays the primary effects in each of these areas.

Table 1: Perceived impacts of the online PhD experience on students' lives.

| Domain | Perceived effect |
|--------------|--|
| Internal | I am more critical and open-minded. |
| | I have found my voice: I speak up more and feel heard. |
| | I have improved my time-management skills. |
| | I am more conscientious and patient. |
| | I have experienced self-growth. |
| Relational | It has changed the way I interact with people. |
| | It has opened me up to whole different types of connections. |
| Professional | It has enriched and facilitated my work. |

Overall, most students felt the doctoral program exerted remarkable effects on their lives. On the one hand, the very process of training to become an independent researcher, with its constant evaluation and emphasis on critical thinking and academic writing, positively impacts candidates' self-regulation, persistence, and time-management skills. Most importantly, as the candidates advance in the programme from the initial courses to the dissertation stage, a sense of discovering one's voice becomes apparent. This often newfound voice grows gradually in both

quality and quantity, uniqueness and strength. Most students note how they have gained along the way a type of confidence in their judgement and authority in how their messages are received in their personal, work, or academic environments. As an illustration, one participant observed how the PhD had “shaped how I engage and I do speak up more because I feel like I've got the credentials” and she now feels she is able to present arguments “in a way that's a bit more thoughtful, that is kinder”.

On the other hand, immersion for several years in the particular topic of the dissertation often affects doctoral students' points of view and worldviews. Some find nuances and contradictions in their most previously well-established takes, while others —particularly in the social sciences— find a new sense of empathy and compassion towards the persons or groups they have studied.

Lastly, PhD students also noted how the doctoral training had enriched their professional lives and future job prospects. Both by allowing them to perform at a higher level, which, interestingly, is often noticed by their coworkers, and by allowing them to access a whole new network of people in their academic fields.

Notwithstanding, few students felt unchanged by the online doctoral experience. The most identifiable reasons were either being in the early stages of the programme, usually in their first year, or having previous or current experience working in academic settings. Indeed, being already familiar with the academic environment and the skills involved, generally having collaborated as a research assistant in group projects, lessens the PhD programme impact in both the positive and negative aspects.

RQ2: Considering the experience undergone, what advice would students give to their past selves beginning the doctorate?

After reviewing their entire doctoral journey, we asked students to provide a piece of advice to their inexperienced, beginner selves. Although the question was directed at the individual level and rooted in personal experiences, our goal was to extract a lived piece of advice that could be transferable and beneficial for all doctoral students given the common challenges they typically face. In this regard, online graduate students' advice (Table 2) ranged from relational and internal aspects to practicalities.

Table 2: Advice given by students to their past selves beginning the doctorate.

| Domain | Piece of advice |
|----------------|--|
| Relational | Reach out for support when in need, do not postpone it. |
| | You are not responsible for your supervisor's feelings and behaviours. |
| Internal | When a crisis hits, rely on your passion, and trust your gut. |
| | Work on your time-management skills and be persistent. |
| | Get used to dealing with rejection, that's a big part of academia. |
| | Do not let your guard down, online is (also) tough. |
| Practicalities | Secure funding first so that you can enjoy the journey. |
| | Get informed about regulations and be prepared for bureaucracy. |

The most recurrent topic concerned the importance of having a support network to rely on during such a long and often lonely pursuit. As one of our participants noted, “the enthusiasm with which you start is great, but a PhD can affect your mental health”. Seeking assistance from friends, family, or mental health services helps alleviate the hardships of the journey.

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Another frequent source of concern for online doctoral students is the relationship with the supervisors. In this respect, a participant experiencing erratic and neglectful supervision lucidly advised to take responsibility for your own behaviours and emotions, but not for those of your supervisor. Indeed, instances of blurred boundaries and self-blame arising from the internalization of others' shortcomings are common in power-imbalanced relationships such as the supervisory one (Tröster & Van Quaquebeke, 2021).

Separately, online doctoral candidates must restore to internal qualities such as passion, grit, and self-organization to navigate the hardships of the programme. Their advice stressed the importance of self-reliance when everything else in the programme, particularly supervision and institutional support, seems to be falling apart.

Finally, PhD students also noted the importance of being financially secure. For many, having a permanent job contract is a necessary means of financing their parallel academic endeavours, making a stable income a prerequisite for success. Furthermore, they pointed out that one simple method to avoid unpleasant surprises related to academic bureaucracy is to carefully read the regulations that are in effect.

Conclusions and Implications

According to our participants' narratives, pursuing a PhD online is just as daunting as it is transformative. Most students perceived significant changes in various domains, including shifts in worldview, self-value, and skill development. The most prominent self-reported effect, however, had to do with the discovery and growth of their own voices. Drawing on their experiences, participants engaged in a retrospective revision of the doctoral journey and offered advice emphasising the significance of having a varied support network, cultivating internal strengths like passion and grit, and being financially secured.

Non-traditional doctoral students face unique challenges related to distance, being mature-aged, coming from diverse cultural backgrounds, combining academic life with personal and professional duties, and navigating unexpected life circumstances. Nevertheless, they are valuable assets bringing a wealth of professional skills and outsider perspectives to doctoral programmes and universities. For this reason, both programme administrators and faculty must take into account online doctoral candidates' unique challenges in the design and development of online PhD programmes. As has been shown, promoting the integration and success of online doctoral students can result in significant transformative effects on their personal and professional trajectories. Furthermore, future online doctoral students can derive valuable insights from this ongoing line of research, especially in terms of adjusting their expectations of what undertaking such an endeavour entails. It is important to note that pursuing an online doctoral degree while managing an already complex adult life can result in blurred boundaries between studying and personal life, and can lead to personal strain.

The subjective, first-hand experiences of non-traditional doctoral candidates pursuing distance research doctorates are an underexplored topic. Therefore, future research must aim to deepen our understanding of the experiential changes and identity transformations brought about by the online PhD, with a focus on how gender, age, and cultural background influence these changes.

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