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# **Academics in pursuit of the part-time doctorate: pressures and support issues associated with the career development of business and management academics**

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## **Abstract**

This paper poses the question, how might the application of human resource development, career development and critical management studies perspectives cast light on the development of doctoral student? Nine part-time students took part in a longitudinal study that required them to complete monthly reflective reports or journals and participate in semi-structured interviews. Most of these part-time students are also in full-time employment as academics within 'Post 1992' university employment in the UK. Post 1992 UK universities, also classified as 'new' or 'modern' universities, are comprised of UK higher education institutions that were transformed from polytechnic institutions in or after 1992.

Those part-time students within this study that are also in full-time employment as academics complained the lack of time for study has proved to be a significant hindrance and even a threat to their doctoral progress. From a critical management stance it is proposed that power asymmetries exist between these students and the leaders of their employment

organisations. These students are considered to be working towards career development within the turbulence of 'new' universities, primarily in the strife for employment security. It is suggested that these concerns link with Grey's (1994) critical management perspective relating to 'self-management' as an example of labour process discipline. As such, this paper offers a new perspective within CMS discourse, that of critical career development (CCD).

**Keywords:** part-time doctorate; CD (career development); CMS (critical management studies); HRD (human resource development); post 1992 universities

## **Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to investigate challenges associated with the development of academics within their employment and/or study organisations. More specifically, the paper conducts an analysis of the issues claimed to be experienced by part-time business and management doctoral students in relation to their studies and employment as academics. How might the application of human resource development (HRD), career development (CD), and critical management studies (CMS) perspectives cast light on the development of academics as part-time doctoral students? The paper addresses this question by, first exploring the theoretical debates on the relationship between CD and HRD. We then consider some pertinent gaps and openings in debates on doctoral students' career development intentions and aspirations. We utilise Grey's (1994) work to the pursuit of career as a form of labour process discipline, identified as 'self-management', as a critical explanation for the apparent participant preparedness to place themselves and remain under excessive work and study pressures.

Drawing upon a longitudinal research study with nine participants, eight of whom are employed within UK higher education institutions that gained university status in 1992, the

so called 'new universities', the paper illuminates that many of the employed students consider a disparity exists between the support for their studies originally espoused by their employing organisations and the actuality of the support received from them. Based on these findings it is argued that, without exception, all participants identify career development/progression as an important factor in their decisions to embark on and continue with their doctoral study. However, the majority of these participants claim that they experience difficulties in relation to their balancing of employment and study commitments in pursuit of their own CD. Consequently, these issues are believed to have negatively impacted in one or more ways upon their work, family, social or recreational lives.

Through generating such findings the extent to which these part-time doctoral students are considered to be in control of their CD decision making, independent of the influence of others, is challenged, (Crozier 1999, Blustein et al 2004). Without exception, the part-time students that are also in full-time employment complained that the 'lack of time for study' provided by their employers has proved to be a significant hindrance and even a threat to their doctoral progress and other aspects of their lives. From a critical management stance it is proposed that power asymmetries exist between these students and the leaders of their employment organisations, who are seen to place excessive work and study pressures upon students, resulting in dissatisfaction and stress. It is therefore argued that these concerns link with Grey's (1994) critical management perspective relating to 'self-management' as an example of labour process discipline. As such, this paper offers a new perspective within CMS discourse, that of critical career development (CCD).

### **Human Resource Development, Career Development and CMS**

The overall aim of this paper is to examine issues associated with the development of academics within their employment and/or study organisations. As such, related HRD theory

is seen as an appropriate means of situating research analysis. Scrutiny of career development theory, as part of HRD, has been undertaken as a vehicle to uncover related themes associated with academic career advancement within this context. Finally, a critical management studies lens is adopted to help uncover potential sources of inequity associated with the issues articulated by research participants.

The focus of this study is specifically upon academic career development in a higher education context. Higher education is identified by Doloriert *et al* (2012) as a site of human resource development (HRD). This is though a contentious and contested argument. Stewart (2007) argues that education forms an important part of HRD, whether it features as a holistic approach to people development or one out of a range of HRD interventions available. It is then less controversial to argue that employees' pursuit of higher qualifications with sponsorship from their university employer is HRD in practice. Or, to put it another way, a university as an employer encouraging or requiring academic employees to pursue higher level qualifications is an element of the HRD practice and strategy. Thus, studying/researching for doctoral qualifications is encompassed in and by HRD.

According to Egan et al (2006) the study of HRD has long been associated with CD. They make reference to the work of McLagan to highlight this point, as she defines HRD as the "*integrated use of training and development, career development, and organization development to improve individual and organisational performance*" (1983:7 in Egan et al 2006:443). Having acknowledged this association, however, they also note the often apparent lack of focus upon CD within HRD literature. Egan et als' contribution then moves on to ponder the influence of CD on HRD, questioning its importance in terms of whether CD in reality appears as a 'load bearing wall', crucial to the support of HRD, or merely a case of 'window dressing' that creates a misleadingly impressive image for HRD. Egan's overview of the many definitions of CD can be split into the following four categories:

- CD that is owned, directed and influenced by individuals;
- CD that is owned, directed and influenced by employing organisations;
- CD that is shared between the individual and their organisation;
- CD that is influenced by a range of ‘relational’ factors.

The categories above represent a range of perspectives on, among other things, the process of CD, where responsibility lies for managing careers and most importantly for our purposes, the limits and boundaries of what constitutes a ‘career’ and relatedly how a career evolves and is developed. The perspective emphasising the relational nature of career is one most suitable for and congruent with our findings. The following definition of the ‘relational’ perspective of career development is offered by Wolfe & Kolb (1980):

*“Career development involves one’s whole life, not just occupation. As such, it concerns the whole person, needs and wants, capacities and potentials, excitements and anxieties, insights and blindspots, warts and all. More than that, it concerns him/her in the ever-changing contexts of his/her life. The environmental pressures and constraints, the bonds that tie him/her to significant others, responsibilities to children and aging parents, the total structure of one’s circumstances are also factors that must be understood and reckoned with. In these terms career development and personal development converge. Self and circumstance—evolving, changing, unfolding in mutual interaction— constitute the focus and the drama of career development”* (in Egan et al 2006:460-461).

Crozier (1999) takes a social constructivist philosophical stance as she pays attention to the relational nature of CD. She argues that individual CD decision making is influenced and guided by other aspects of work and home lives. Crozier observes that much criticism of traditional CD literature is concerned with its failure to consider the complexities involved in CD decision making.

Similarly, but taking a different philosophical perspective, Blustein et al (2004) recommend a social constructionist approach to the study of the relational nature of CD. They maintain that *'relational perspectives generally endorse the view that many aspects of interpersonal and indeed intrapersonal struggles reflect natural human strivings for connection, affirmation, support, and attachment'* (p426). The social constructionist and social constructivist theoretical perspectives are similar in that they both focus on the construction of meaning. However, Blunstein et al make reference to the work of constructivist, Neimeyer (1995) and constructionist (Gergen, 1999) to make the following clear distinction between the two. Social constructivist attention is on individual construction of meaning (e.g. self-conceiving), whereas social constructionists are interested in meaning construction through relationships.

The above researchers acknowledge the historical shortfalls that have existed in traditional psychological CD literature. They observe that much traditional CD research assumes individuals have full control over their career decision making, suggesting that they are making career choices independently of outside influences. In contrast, however, Blustein et al claim that their definition of CD is intentionally grounded in a social context, acknowledging a wide array of individual career orientations. They highlight the longitudinal and transient nature of CD. At two extremes they identify a difference between CD, on the one hand, as a means of seeking and achieving fulfilment and self-expression and, on the other, having more of a survival orientation. They define CD as *'encompassing working lives across the life span that reflect intentional volition with respect to one's work tasks as well as working that is motivated primarily by the need for survival'* (Blustein et al 2004:426). This perspective demonstrates the potential for individuals to feel pressured to develop within their work roles for reasons other than self-fulfilment or achievement.

Fenwick (2004) argues that major differences exist between perspectives of HRD (often associated with managerialist intentions) and critical perspectives (with largely emancipatory drivers). Fournier and Grey (2000) claim that the area of critical management studies includes a variety of intellectual perspectives that are *'unified by an anti-performative stance, and a commitment to (some form of) denaturalisation and reflexivity'* (p7). Therefore, according to Fenwick, the bringing together of these two areas within the study of CHRD should allow for breadth of conceptual contributions. These could be focussed on *'discursive, gendered, materialist, anti-racist or other lines of analysis'* (p197) so as not to silence the many voices and perspectives located across these disciplines. This paper applies Fenwick's contention by adopting the critical lens of labour process as advocated by Grey (1994) to the notion of careers.

### **Setting the Context; A post '92 university phenomenon?**

The organisational and employment context of the study is specific and particular. It is one sector of the UK higher education scene in the sense of one category of university types, commonly referred to as either 'new' or 'post 92' universities. One hundred and nineteen universities exist within the UK (The Guardian, 2014) thirty eight of which are so called post 1992 or new universities. There are sound reasons to believe that this organisational and employment context is of some significance.

A recent report released in the Times Higher Education revealed that UK universities have increased the percentage of their employees that hold a doctoral level qualification (Gibney 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2013). Almost 30% of the one hundred and thirteen higher education institutions that responded to Gibney's Freedom of Information invitation to take part in this study stated that they are actively working towards increasing the number of doctorate qualified staff within their institutions. This research observes a general trend that has seen a



significant rise in the percentage of university employees holding doctorates over the past 10 years. This rise has occurred through institutions changing their external recruitment specifications and also from offering development opportunities to existing academic employees.

One reason detailed within Gibney's study for this increase, according to Stephanie Marshall from the Higher Education Academy, is considered to be associated with a rise in the availability and achievement of professional doctoral qualifications, making this level of study more attainable within, for example, the areas of education, health and social care. Another reason, Marshall suggests, for universities' commitment to increasing the number of employees holding doctorates is to ensure higher education institutions are equipped with the best possible capabilities in order to provide students with the best possible learning experience.

Gewirtz and Cribb (2013), in their review of changes within UK higher education based upon Times Higher Education reports over a thirty year period state that there appears to have been a *'rise of various forms of instrumentalism and the incorporation of HE institutions and agencies into a common mindset characterised by a preoccupation with marketing and corporate success'* (p58). Arguably more than ever, universities are actively competing with each other to attract home, EU and overseas students, relying largely upon their rankings in the various and highly publicised university league tables to do so. They are also contending with increased pressures upon them to raise the profile of their research efforts and perform well within the Research Excellence Framework (see, for example Martin 2011). It could be argued that these factors provide a convincing explanation as to why particularly new universities (without the previously well-established research profile that is enjoyed by so called Russell Group institutions) are striving to raise the research capabilities of their academic staff members; hence their interest in the recruitment of academics with

PhDs or equivalent and making moves to increase the number of their existing members that hold doctoral qualifications.

A number of theorists paint a very bleak picture of the management of academia in modern times (Deem 1998; Johnstone et al 1998; Deem & Brehony 2005). Controversially, a short paper offered by a group of new academics referring to themselves as 'The SIGJ2 Writing Collective' accuse repeated reforms over recent years in relation to the operation of universities as resulting in the creation of 'neoliberalism' in the higher education system. *'The current onslaught of neoliberal restructurings in academia represents the culmination of years of insidious reforms. This has whittled away scholarly independence and made us complicit in the extension of neoliberal thinking. Our administrative duties (eg evaluating the impact of research), professional activities (eg defending the relevance of geography, as the 2012 RGS-IBG Conference theme seems to imply) and teaching (eg competing for students, domestic and overseas) force us to embody these neoliberal pressures'* (2012:1055). They argue that *'we must understand and challenge how we, as members of broader scholarly communities and diverse social relationships, have become the individualized site, strategy and mechanism for neoliberal ascendancy in the academy'* (p1055). It is suggested that the preceding discussion exemplifies UK higher education institutions' rising preoccupation with target setting and performance measurement, and the overall increase in panoptic approaches to micro-management surveillance of academic employee behaviour. Thus, this rise of neoliberalism within the broader UK HE sector and the 'new', 'post' 1992 part of it in particular, provides a fertile context for managerialism and attending approaches to managing career development of employees through extending qualifications held by individual academics.

### **Academics, doctoral study, careers and self-management**

The PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) remains the most popular form of doctorate (Park, 2007) and '*the research degree of choice*' (Park, 2005a:4) in the majority of countries. However, Fenge (2010) claims that for over a decade the professional doctorate has risen in popularity and participation. In his research of the professional doctorate, Fenge observes that they are differentiated from the traditional PhD in their discipline specificity, content and structure. It is worth noting at this point that eight of the nine research participants involved in the current study have chosen to follow PhD programmes of study and one has opted to work towards a professional doctorate.

According to a number of studies highlighted by Lahenius and Martinsuo (2011), less than half of the students that embark upon doctoral level study reach successful completion. The main influences upon doctoral completion rates, according to Lahenius and Martinsuo, include supervision (particularly evident within UK higher education, according to Park, 2007), financial support, their peers and employers. Their research, which predominantly focuses upon full-time doctoral students, recommends strategies for increasing levels of completion that include alternative means of peer-support and 'proactive risk management'. It is evident from the discussion above that it is within the interests of universities to optimise the levels of successful completion, both in terms of their student success rates and as a means of improving the research profile of their employees and as a consequence, their institutions.

Research undertaken by Bedeian et al in 2010 within the United States of America using quantitative data highlights the apparent influence of PhD attainment on academic careers within management, therefore helping to explain its perceived importance from the perspective of those striving for an academic career in the discipline. They observed:

- The positive association between doctoral origin and the 'prestige' of the academic's first appointment.
- Within the early stages of their careers, graduates of doctoral programmes with higher prestige received increased benefits, for example, in relation to the perceived quality of their publications.
- Those that commenced their academic careers within more prestigious appointments held more prestigious academic appointments in their later careers than those that commenced their careers in less prestigious appointments.

The above research, however, focuses on academics that have undertaken PhD study on a full-time basis prior to their academic careers. Almost all participants of the current study are already operating in some capacity as academics within new universities. Therefore, according to Bedeian et al's research, they might already be at a disadvantage in relation to their potential to reach more prestigious academic appointments. However, it is worth noting that from another perspective, they hold an advantage over their full-time equivalents as they have already gained employment and as such are already making attempts to ascend the academic career ladder. Deem and Brehony identified in 2000 that up to 63% of PhD students within the UK were at that time studying part-time. This percentage appears much higher than in the USA, where 12% of PhD students were reported as studying part-time (Nettles and Millett 2006), and in Australia where part-time PhD students are considered to make up 38% (Neumann & Rodwell 2009) of their overall number. The small percentage of part-time PhD students within the USA identified by Deem and Brehony might also help explain Bedeian et al's lack of consideration of part-time PhD student career advancement as detailed above.

Under the 'gaze' of their employers (who are pushing for employee take-up and completion of doctoral study), combined with employment ambiguity brought about by the

current state of the UK economy, it is little wonder that academic members of staff are seeking to secure their employment futures by up-skilling and developing their research capabilities through doctoral study. This, it is argued, demonstrates the asymmetrical power relations that exist between these academics and their employers. As a result of insecurities experienced by these university employees, they are working towards the attainment of doctoral qualifications in attempts to sustain and develop their academic profiles and careers. The development of their academic profiles in this fashion, according to Collinson (2003), is also of particular importance in terms of identity (especially, he argues, within Western societies); as success and achievement are sought after as a means of self-confirmation and the development of self-affirmation. Collinson refers to the work of Walter (1979) in maintaining that *'the validation of self through career success, material accumulation and the confirmation of 'significant others' can become a new and highly influential religion'* (2003:530).

Grey (1994), in his study of power relationships and 'career' within a large accountancy firm, argues that considerations of career can influence all aspects of an individual's life, extending from the workplace to social and even family relationships. He suggests that issues of career often influence decision making even before employment has commenced, for example, in terms of decision making around the type of first degree or where to study for the most desirable outcome. In his study of accountants and particularly those working their way 'up the career ladder' there appears to be a clear linkage between considerations of career and the social networks these individuals choose to associate with. Also, Grey notes that a few senior employees even identified their choice of partner/wife (the profile of his participant group was predominantly white and male; this, Grey considered, was characteristic of the profile of this category of employee at the time of his study) as important in terms of its potential influence on their careers. Grey maintains that

considerations of career and self-management, as a form of workforce regulation, appeals to employers in that '*...this self-disciplined project of self-management through career is a more productive and economical form of management control than disciplinary power, with its costs and unintended consequences, could ever be*' (1994:495).

As such, it is argued that academic employees following part-time doctoral studies are not only enduring panoptic forms of workplace surveillance (Thompson 2003) in terms of the micro-management of their productivity and work outputs (e.g. performance measurement relating to student numbers; student satisfaction; student success rates; student destinations; course administration; income generation and research outputs) they might also be creating their own pressures associated with self-management and drive toward successful academic careers. Collinson (2003) warns that with this apparent greater freedom and potential for self-management in relation to achieving preferred career options come greater insecurity and uncertainty.

Although Gardner and Gopaul's (2012) research relating to part-time doctoral experience is based within the USA, the appropriateness/applicability of their findings to other countries and more specifically, the UK are considered relevant within this paper. Gardner and Gopaul observe that from country to country and even institution to institution, part-time students are defined and categorised in different ways (this is part of their justification for conducting a study based within one academic institution; another explanation they offer is due to the scarcity of existing research available relating specifically to part-time doctoral students). They maintain that both part-time and full-time doctoral students face similar challenges in terms of their studies, namely around their need for support and being part of some form of student community. Also, issues of balance between their studies and other aspects of their lives are common challenges. However, Gardner and Gopaul argue that part-time students often experience these issues to a greater extent than

their full-time equivalents, as they are more likely to be juggling time for their studies around full-time employment and tend to be older with greater family commitments (also see Smith 2000).

Similarly, Gagnon and Packard (2011) in their research that focuses on eight adult learners in the USA sponsored by their full-time employment organisations to undertake degree level study, identify the duality that exists between their work and study roles. They make reference to the work of Butler (2007), Markel & Frone (1998) and Taniguchi & Kaufman (2005) in their argument that the more time and energy individuals spend on their employment responsibilities, the more likely their studies are to suffer as a result. Gagnon and Packard's concerns are not restricted to work-study duality, but include the occurrence of any other inter-role conflict (for example family commitments) that may negatively influence an individual's study performance. Without exception, each of their research participants expressed feelings of being overwhelmed by excessive and often conflicting demands. As a result, the range of coping strategies participants claimed to have adopted included: reduction in the number of courses onto which they enrolled each year and thus extending their periods of study; reduced effort with their studies; reduced leisure time and shortened sleeping patterns. They warn that sponsoring organisations face, at best, potential losses in terms of return on investment and at worst, increasing labour turnover from their failure to effectively support employees' academic study.

However, the above study does uncover examples of actions and interventions available to employers that go some way to reducing the burden felt by employees. These interventions include: flexible scheduling and a culture that is supportive of outside study; where congruence can be found between the individual's work role and area of study; flexibility offered from the study organisation; taking advantage of the individual support for study that is made available by the employer organisation.

Another challenge faced by part-time doctoral students is that of 'fitting the mould' of traditional doctoral students. For example, age (generally being older than full-time students) and lack of financial support (Choy and Cataldi 2006) are considered to add pressure to this group of students. It could be argued, however, that this particular aspect is likely to be more of an issue for part-time doctoral students within the US than the UK, particularly when considering this paper's participant group. UK institutions would be expected to be much more prepared for accommodating the facilitation of part-time doctoral study, as a much higher percentage of UK doctoral students are part time. Also, as a much larger proportion of UK doctoral students are part-time, and often mature students, there would be arguably less likelihood for age to cause stigmatisation. Moreover, as is discussed earlier, many UK higher education institutions have been proactive in developing infrastructures that actively encourage their employees to embark upon doctoral studies, often offering full financial support to cover fees etc.

It is widely held that doctoral students should be encouraged to think reflexively within their research in terms of the ways in which they might be influencing their research and vice versa, and also external influences that might be associated with their research (see, for example, Gilbert and Sliep 2008; Harding 1996; Lynch 2000; Merton 1938; Mouthner and Doucet 2003; Popper 1963 and Reay 1996). Green and Bowden (2012 ) maintain that '*[T]he opportunity for space for reflexivity where students engage in reflective practice is essential for the growth of ideas, the development of (or movement towards) theory, the emergence of an appropriate research design, transformation of plans into action, and praxis (where theory and practice transform into action)*' (p71). They argue that academic research that results in new knowledge takes time, therefore, highlighting the importance of creating time and space for useful research to be conducted. Accordingly, we explore the extent to which the employing organisations of the doctoral students involved within this research are



considered to be supporting them in creating time and space for the growth of ideas and the development of theory.

## **Research design**

As highlighted earlier, this paper poses the question, how might the application of human resource development, career development and critical management studies perspectives cast light on the development of part-time doctoral student? An interpretive research approach was adopted for this study, Creswell (2007) argues that interpretive perspectives '*provide a pervasive lens or perspective on all aspects of a qualitative research project*' (p24). He asserts that an interpretive research approach will enable the researcher to explore the issues or conditions that '*serve to disadvantage or exclude individuals or cultures, such as hierarchy, hegemony, racism, sexism, unequal power relations, identity or inequities in our society*' (p24). With this explanation in mind, it is argued that the current study takes a critical social theory or critical theory perspective (e.g. Morrow and Brown 1994) that involves uncovering historical issues of domination and alienation more specifically associated in this context with, for example:

hierarchy - in as much as its focus is on a group of what could be described as early career researchers in their interaction with their organisations in the strife to climb the organisational ladder in order to achieve career development

hegemony - the reinforcement by those at senior levels of higher education institutions of the importance of doctoral attainment for staff members' personal development, arguably made largely to serve the purpose of improving their institutional profiles and performance..

unequal power relations - between senior members with strategic decision making power and those at more junior positions within higher education institutions.

An interpretive approach is best suited to the study of the lived experience and issues experienced by part-time business and management doctoral students in relation to their studies and employment as academics which is, by its nature a messy, political and complex affair. Within this study, participants were encouraged to record monthly reflective reports or journals over a twelve month period. 50 reports were completed out of a possible 108 (8 participants x 12 months) as only one participant completed all twelve reports and the fewest number of reports to be completed by each of the other participants was just two.

A profile of each participant is detailed in the table below.

Place Table 1 around here

#### Data Collection

The researchers sought and gained full university and participant ethics approval before data collection commenced. As detailed above, data was collected using two techniques: (1) reflective reports / journals, and (2) semi-structured interviews. Combining these techniques has been an approach utilised by other scholars working under the umbrella of interpretive research. The monthly report or journal templates were loosely structured to enable participant's free reign to decide the areas upon which they wished to reflect. According to Billings and Kowalski (2006) journals are '*written documents that stimulate increased personal awareness regarding our own beliefs, values and practices, as well as, those of others with whom we interact*' (2006:24). This data collection process was supported with semi-structured 'scene setting and fact finding' interviews that took place with the research participants at the beginning of the research period. The questions that made up the monthly report template were designed to encourage participants to be reflexive in terms of their PhD experiences. Green and Bowden (2012) maintain that the creation of opportunities for students to be reflective and reflexive during their doctoral studies is important for their

work towards developing new theory. As such the researchers were able to encourage participants to involve themselves with the completion of the reflective reports as they could also serve the purpose of a useful means of their own tracking and recording of progress made, thus evidencing their own reflexivity. Research participants were asked to address the following loosely structured requests:

1. Please provide me with a reflective account of your PhD studies over the past month.
2. Tell me about the feelings (if any) you experienced in relation to any events or activities detailed in this account.
3. How do you feel about your PhD today?
4. Now that you have finished writing this month's account, tell me about the feelings you experienced while writing this.

A particular interest of the researchers was on the feelings and emotion associated with participant reflections. This is due to the particular doctoral research focus of the lead researcher which specifically concentrates on the relationship between emotion and reflexivity. The utilisation of journals as a means of data collection is argued by Smith and Hunt in 1997 to enable participants to provide emotional reflections of events and episodes. The use of journals in this way has arguably enabled the researchers to uncover issues and concerns that would not have been so easily revealed using other qualitative methods such as observations or interviews. Additionally, these journals have the adaptability to be used in association with other methods including, for example, qualitative interviews (Harvey 2011) and are being used as such in this research.

It is worth noting at this point that at no time were participants being asked to provide information of their negative feelings associated with doctoral study. Neither were they specifically asked for reflections of their relationships with employers or of considerations regarding the support, or more importantly, the lack of it they perceived they were receiving.

## **Analysing the Data**

The research questions draw upon reflective data which are best analysed inductively in order to explore emerging themes, inherent patterns, and differences. The data analysis consisted of several stages first; it involved a process of immersion as described by Marshall (1981). This involved analysing the reflective accounts through a process of content analysis. Second, re – reading each reflective diary and interview data in order to identify, sort and categorize the accounts. Third, the process involved engaging with the data to explore patterns, and differences. This approach to data analysis facilitated an interpretive framework, which was concerned with capturing people's experience.

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity has implications for the practice of social research too. Rather than engaging in futile attempts to eliminate the effects of the researcher, we should set about understanding them... (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, p.17)

Kleinmann and Copp (1993) highlight the importance of researchers acknowledging their feelings and emotions in doing field work. They argue that, as observers, researchers cannot detach themselves from the research situation. Even though there is a sensitive balance between showing empathy with research subjects and retaining some professional distance, they argue that it adds greater richness to the research accounts if emotions are acknowledged and explored in the written account. On the contrary, writing the self can form an integral part of the research, before, during and after the empirical data collection (Kanda 1990). It is no longer seen as a direct route to undermining the validity or objectivity of social research. Perriton (1999) argues that for many research communities reflexivity

represents a turn in the representation of research and researcher and is a fundamental part of why and how they research. A belief that research is socially constructed creates a tension between traditional textual practices of hiding the author in the research and the belief that it is dishonest to do so.

In this paper for example, one of the authors is representative of this participant group (part-time PhD student and employed as an academic). This created a sense of camaraderie between researcher and those being researched. The lead researcher forwarded to each participant monthly report/journal templates via email and included within them brief accounts of her own experiences or progress during each particular month. For example, the researcher would share with participants when an abstract had been accepted at a conference. The two main purposes of this were firstly to demonstrate that the time participants had taken on their contributions was worthwhile in terms of importance to her research and secondly, to develop a sense of common ground between researcher and participants. This is argued to have resulted with participants feeling more inclined to divulge information of their experiences, feelings and concerns with a sense of purpose, relevance and relative safety in doing so. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) discuss the benefits of researchers being 'insiders' versus 'outsiders' of the participant population. In their article they argue that if the researcher is considered an insider then there will automatically be an air of trust and openness between researcher and participants. This, they suggest, will encourage participants to more readily reveal their inner thoughts, feelings and concerns. . From the debates illuminated above, we would argue that reflexivity is an important part of the research process. It is essential for researchers to reveal their own hand in their investigations.

## **Findings**

The findings in this paper focus on data derived from monthly reflective journals research participants were asked record as a means of reflection on their doctoral studies. They were also asked to share their feelings about these experiences.

Common themes that emerge from the analysis of data include research participant discussion around:

1. The adoption of strategies for overcoming barriers and obstacles faced by what are perceived as excessive work demands particularly within the post '92 university environment;
2. The support, or lack of support provided by these so called 'new universities'; mixed messages received by participants in terms of the prioritisation of work and study;
3. The juggling of competing demands; and considerations of progress made in the face of adversity.

In seeking participants' perspectives on how they feel about their experiences, they have been encouraged to share their emotions regarding these experiences over the course of the twelve month study period. In response to these requests, it has emerged that many participant reflections highlight negative issues relating to perceptions of lack of support from students' employing organisations. It is worth noting, however, that at no point were participants asked specifically to share their negative experiences, or asked about the impact of outside influences upon their studies.

An initial round of semi-structured interviews with each participant focused on fact finding about the details of their studies (e.g. type of doctoral programme; stage; location; supervisory team; employment details). In answer to the question, '*Why did you take up doctoral study?*' it was noted that every participant mentioned an interest in developing their

academic career as a key motivating factor. This is suggested to link with Grey's (1994) perspective relating to the influence of 'career' upon individuals' attitudes and behaviours, that of self-management as a form of workforce regulation. The adoption of certain behaviours are considered by individuals to support the achievement of gains associated with career progression (in terms of enthusiasm for work; work patterns; networking; even personal relationships and interactions with family) through self-management as a form of labour process discipline. Other factors identified by participants included opportunities for self-development, encouragement from colleagues and to inform their teaching.

### **Overcoming obstacles and barriers**

Much participant reflection recorded within their reports appears to be associated with issues around the impact of increasing work pressures on their studies. However, what appears to also be evident within the reflections is participant determination to overcome these obstacles and to make at least some progress with their studies, as illustrated by the following examples:

*'I am well into my teaching now and it has been quite demanding (particularly the students), which has meant I have not really spent as much time as I would like on my PhD. I have a supervisory meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> December to discuss my latest chapter. I should have sent her about 5,000 words, but have actually only managed about 1,000'.*

This provides an example of the utilisation of one strategy available to part-time students, as identified earlier by Gagnon and Packard (2011), whereby they reduce study productivity and thus extend the overall duration of their programmes of study.

### **Organisational support; encouragement and discouragement**

Support is recorded to have been provided by one employer to the following research participant. He reflects upon a short sabbatical that was provided to him by his employer in order to enable him to make progress with his doctoral studies. At the point of writing his reflection, this participant was reaching the end of his sabbatical period. As he reflects upon this time away from his 'day job' to make progress with his studies, it is clear that he considers this time to have been of benefit and is grateful to his employer for this opportunity:

*'I'm massively grateful for the time I've had and feel that although I'm not 'back on track', I'm less behind than I was and I have had a real shot of momentum that means I'm keen to keep ticking over and doing bits. I'm yet to start teaching proper and so when that does start (7 hours this Thursday and 5 hours Friday) then perhaps I won't have the physical and mental resource to keep doing bits, but I realise I've got to 'make' the time'.*

However, concerns about lack of support are still evident within this reflective report:

*He continues '... It's made me realise no one is actively going to support me in doing this; the current HE employment climate and the type of management it results in means that, although people say they are supportive and understanding blah blah blah, in reality, they want teaching covered and with staff leaving in their droves and another round of voluntary severance on the go, they're just happy that students get taught, assessments get marked and then research gets done (of course to a magnificently high REF-contributing standard!) in that order!'*

This account demonstrates his appreciation of the ambiguity associated with careers in higher education within the current climate and the insecurity he feels as a result. These comments are argued to highlight the asymmetrical power relations that exist between academics and



their employers (who are also the sponsors of their studies). This participant's reflections relating to the difficulties that he has experienced and the perceived lack of support that he has received from his employer appear to have led to his questioning of his career choice as an academic:

*'It's also made me realise that post-PhD a career in academia long term may not be for me, although probably more likely a career in another institution working for good people, with good people, in a team environment, perhaps more research-based than teaching would be the direction I would want to go'.*

The above comment reflects Gagnon and Packard's (2011) warning to employers to take heed of behaviour that fails to effectively support employees, as this could result in increased labour turnover.

The following reflection from a different participant includes one of the very few positive comments relating to the support from line managers received:

*'I know I have a really busy few months coming up at work and planning interviews is proving a bit tough, my new boss is supportive of my PhD and allowing time. There are 3 out of 5 in the department doing PhD's so I am in a more supportive environment than before but we are having to be conscious of our availability'.*

This participant, therefore, is argued to believe that her manager is demonstrating support for her and her colleagues with their studies. However, the extent to which this comment could be attributed to the participant having recently taken on a new work role (the honeymoon period) is worth considering. Later contributions from this participant were not as positive in terms of her reflections relating to the limited space and time allowed by her managers for PhD study. The above comment also highlights clear management intention to encourage as

many employees as possible to embark on doctoral studies as a means of improving the organisation's profile and marketability, as noted earlier in this paper by Stephanie Marshall from the Higher Education Academy.

The following participant writes of the difference she has experienced between the support claimed to be provided by her institution for her development and the reality of gaining financial backing when needed:

*'I have had both my [UK conference] and [UK conference] abstracts accepted and this has boosted my confidence. However, I had to fight my corner in order to get funding to attend the [first] conference. Although my paper has been accepted, because I have not had anything published from previous conference papers they weren't going to fund it. I explained that I am a PhD student and new researcher and it is important for my development. I then had to make this case and resubmit my application – which was finally approved. It seems the university want us to get our PhDs and be excellent researchers, but in terms of material support we constantly have to fight'.*

The above highlights the disappointment felt by this participant as she felt she was forced to fight for support and funding from her employer to attend research conferences. It is argued that this example emphasises a disparity between the support espoused by employers and that expected and received by employees.

### **Juggling of competing demands – work versus PhD studies**

Accounts of tiredness and exhaustion also figure significantly within participant reflections. The following participant demonstrates resentment towards her employer in this regard:

*'I have begun to feel more resentful towards the University for placing so many demands on staff, whilst still expecting a very high standard of work. [...]. As I have been reflecting while writing these accounts I have come to realise that something has got to give and it is just not possible to devote as much time to my PhD as I would like whilst working full-time in a demanding job'.*

The above comment again suggests that often it is an academic's study that loses out when faced with competing work demands. Another participant records:

*'I'm pretty tired both mentally and physically from the competing demands and with 16 hours teaching last week and the same going forward for the next few, I'm precariously balancing all the various demands on my time. I'm frustrated by the lack of support, some of that perhaps self-inflicted, but at the moment I'm just trying to focus on little milestones, like the conference paper submission and not get too wrapped up in the bigger stuff'.*

Again, this comment highlights the pressure felt by the academic when attempting to juggle competing work and study demands.

The following reflection appears to demonstrate one participant's extreme resentment towards her employer. Again, this is argued to highlight the existence of asymmetrical power relationships (Grey 1994):

*'I am frustrated and tired. I feel like I am working for a fascist militia and that I should be trying to get out but I'm not sure how to get out and still earn a living. I'm disappointed by the behaviour of my managers. We are working in a time of recession and fear but middle-class academics should not be avoiding the gaze of their colleagues because they are frightened of being sacked or becoming redundant'.*

The above statement suggests that this participant is experiencing a sense of fear in relation to potential work insecurity associated with her work and study. Again, it provides evidence of power asymmetries between employer and employee.

The following participant's reflection demonstrates issues around perceptions of helplessness in relation to her sense of obligation towards her employer in terms of her study and the sponsorship she has received:

*'Overall I wish I had never started it. If it were a 'normal' job I could resign and find a new job but this commitment extending over years feels like a trap now that I have received the majority of the funding'*

This point arguably suggests that employer sponsorship of doctoral study could be considered to be a form of management control. The employer is 'seen' to have provided their employee with support, however, there appears to be an overwhelming sense of obligation felt by the employee as a result. This is in line with expectations of employers found by research undertaken by Story and Redman (1997).

### **Perceptions of progress in the face of adversity**

The following participant highlights the progress she has made in spite of the negative impact this might have had upon her family and well-being:

*'I handed in my first complete draft of my data presentation and data analysis chapters last week. This was after an exhausting 11 days with very much reduced sleep and not much contact with my family'.*

As is recognised here, a number of the preceding reflections highlight participant concerns around the competing demands of work and study. The latter statement also indicates that boundaries between study and family life are becoming blurred.

The following reflection suggests that even though progress is being made by this participant in relation to her doctoral study, the apparent overburdening of her university on its employees has far from gone unnoticed:

*'Because I feel as though I have actually achieved something this month, I did feel quite positive whilst writing this account. However, my negative feelings towards work have not gone away and I am feeling myself increasingly resentful of the way in which the university values (or rather does not value us). This was brought home last month when a colleague was taken seriously ill. Other colleagues are suffering from ill health as a result of intense working pressure and my impression is that the university does not really care at this individual level. The university has recently climbed several places in the Guardian rankings to [a higher level].... Obviously this has been well publicised and we have all been superficially congratulated, but the cynic in me can't help feeling this is all just one big PR exercise and has no bearing on what people are actually experiencing. I discussed as much with one of our visiting professors and came to the conclusion that it is all bollocks anyway!'*

There is a clear sense of cynicism evident within this reflection in relation to the extent to which this participant considers senior members of her post '92 university to concern themselves with the negative outcomes of their heavy drives for improvement.

## **Discussion**

It is clear from the data collected that all participants consider their doctoral studies to be a crucial factor in their academic career development. Without exception, and in accordance with the points made by Blustein et al (2004) and Wolfe & Kolb (1980) research participants' monthly reports highlight the relational nature of their reflective and reflexive accounts. They clearly demonstrate employee inclinations to ponder over the influences of

the various aspects of their lives and to make judgements in response to these personal, social and organisational conditions. Blunstein et al's discussion relating to the pursuit of career development as a means of survival seems particularly poignant within this research. It is argued that some evidence exists from reflective accounts that indicates support for Blunstein et al's other extreme, that of achievement or self-fulfilment. However a collective sense of frustration, resentment and even despair is far more prominent within these monthly reflections.

As highlighted earlier, it is argued that within their academic work roles these participants are subject to micro-management by their institutions that are preoccupied with performance measures largely influenced by external ratings and rankings. Compounding their problems, they are also argued to be experiencing Grey's 'self-management' (1994), a form of management discipline that subliminally obligates those seeking career development to push themselves towards the accomplishment of whatever challenges appear to offer them career security or success (this also reflects Blunstein et al's perspective of career development that focuses on survival or self-fulfilment).

Observations highlight significant areas for concern in relation to the difficulties experienced by these academics in their struggles to develop their researcher competence and profiles. Issues associated with the overburdening of work on academics operating within the new university environment have also been clearly highlighted within this paper. The extent to which these issues are likely to have a lasting influence on attitudes and the relationships between these academics and their employers is considered to be of concern. At worst, the competing pressures of work and study experienced by this participant group could ultimately result in withdrawal from PhD study, significant negative personal repercussions (such as family or work related problems), or even stress related illness. Therefore, it is argued as a result of this analysis that academic institutions sponsoring their employees to undertake

doctoral study could and should be offering more time and resources to their employees if they are to, firstly, see an increase in the number of successful doctoral completions, secondly, retain positive working relationships with these staff members and thirdly, so they are recognised as supporting the health and welfare of their employees.

### **Reflections and wider implications**

The aim of this study has been to examine the experiences of part-time business and management doctoral students in relation to their studies and employment through the application of human resource development (HRD), career development (CD), and critical management studies (CMS) perspectives. Drawing from the research we have argued that many of the employed students consider a disparity exists between the support for their studies originally espoused by their employing organisations and the actuality of the support received from them. The findings have revealed how complex social, political and institutional processes create pressure to conform to organizational ideologies and expectations. A number of wider implications transpire from the experience of this study. First, career development of business and management academics involves challenging the “self-conceptions” of what does it mean to be a “doctoral student”, inviting openness to alternative meanings, as central discussion point. This perspective represents a movement away from the pre-conceptualisations of rationality, offered through current HEI institutionalism to a method that embraces introspection of critical reflexivity as a means to enable and facilitate the exploration of alternative spaces for learning. Such a reflexive critique would draw focus to the learning experience, and learning spaces. A reflexive process would also enable both the institution and participant to create a space to be reflective and reflexive in their development. As Foucault (1986) infers, heterotopia act as reservoirs of the imagination which offer us space in which to imagine, to desire and act differently. All of which we believe important for HRD. Second, the study offers important insights into the

critical reflective practises of business and management academics and how they navigate around emotional and political barriers impeding on their career development. Third, we elucidate how the exploration of alternative spaces for career development expose differences or gaps between the individual manager's espoused expectations and commitments to the lived reality of the student which is inevitably full of hidden tensions of resistance and conflicts that are embedded in social discourse. Finally, the paper presents a number of challenges to the current traditional methods of career development adopted by University Business Schools, ranging from deeply rooted philosophical debates to beliefs about the nature of career development within Higher Education. This research, therefore, is purported to pave the way for further scrutiny of career from a critical management perspective and the adoption of a new term, Critical Career Development (CCD).

### **Limitations of this study**

The purpose of this study was to take a critical stance in uncovering issues associated with the academic career and particularly with academics that have undertaken part-time doctoral study as a means of career development. The degree to which findings can be generalised to other settings similar to the one in which the study occurred and the extent to which findings can be replicated, or reproduced, needs to be addressed. The aim of this research project is not to make statistical generalisations but instead make generalisations in relation to the analytical themes explored. Good theorising is enhanced by reflexive inquiry and by amalgamating concepts and language which have been inter-subjectively constructed and shaped in the research setting. This research project makes no claim to present the findings as a natural report. However we do attempt a degree of objectivity by allowing the reader to judge for themselves something of the way the researcher influenced the events and accounts that have been presented. The value of this approach does not rest on whether an alternative theory/explanation can account for the same data. But instead it rests on whether



the theoretical framework and explanation given accounts for the fieldwork data in a plausible and authentic manner.

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