

Chapter 23

Connectedness Needs of External Doctoral Students

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ABSTRACT

Institutional concern about attrition rates of doctoral students raises the question of whether these students withdraw from a program due to perceptions of a lack of connectedness to supervisors, peers or for other reasons. The Doctoral Student Connectedness Scale was incorporated into a study of communication challenges faced by 41 external doctoral students in two faculties of an Australian university. A three-factor structure of connectedness needs emerged, namely a student-to-student connectedness, a student-to-faculty connectedness, and a student-to-supervisor connectedness. Although the scale has a high reliability, the factor structure in this Australian study is more complex than in the American study from which the scale derives. The results indicate that there may be less than desirable levels of connectedness between students, their supervisors and peers. Interventions may be developed to offer external doctoral students a more complete learning experience through enhancing the teaching and supervision strategies of supervisors.

INTRODUCTION

The progression and attrition rates of part time or external doctoral students (Terrell, Snyder, & Dringus, 2009; Neumann & Goldstein, 2002) suggest that there are numerous issues that can

impact negatively on their progress and completion. The higher attrition rate of these external doctoral students can be ascribed to personal reasons such as illness (Terrell et al., 2009) or change of work, relationship issues such as lack of support from family, employers or supervisors

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or systemic issues such as lack of integration into the program (Thomson & Allan, 2010), failure to meet progression targets or quality standards or deficiencies in program structure and development (Rovia & Downey, 2010).

Terrell et al., (2009) argue that doctoral students have a need to belong to an academic community and that such community membership relates to continuation in a doctoral program. Their cohort of external doctoral students experienced lesser levels of connectedness to each other and faculty than they would have preferred and the researchers proposed that various initiatives could be launched to create a sense of connectedness and thereby increasing program completions and diminishing attrition.

Doctoral students enrolled externally at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) represent a significant student load and associated commitment of staff for supervision. Although there were almost 100 students enrolled in doctoral programs—Doctor of Education (EdD) and PhD—within the Faculty of Education in 2009, fewer than ten were studying full-time, on-campus. The majority of doctoral students in education are studying while working in locations as diverse as Australia, Brunei, Canada, Dubai, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and Thailand. In the Faculty of Business in 2009 there were fifty-nine mostly full-time on-campus PhDs, but also 25 external Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) students residing in Australia, Canada, Africa, Germany or Switzerland and the USA. Many studies have explored the way in which effective communications can support contact between external or online students and the university systems, but very few studies have explored the actual need to be connected to peers and a wider university community.

One of the factors that might counter attrition could be networking opportunities in doctoral programs. The assumption is that doctoral students have specific needs, both for a close relationship

with their supervisors, and to be connected to wider networks of peers or learning communities within the university. Connectedness is defined as the “feeling of belonging and acceptance... the creation of bonding relationships...feelings of safety and trust...” (Terrell et al., 2009, p. 113). Doctoral students studying on campus may choose a full time program, not only for its perceived continuous access to supervisors, but also its potential for them to become integrated into the larger university community. The dilemma often is how to create a sense of community and connectedness for doctoral students studying part time or externally.

As part of an investigation into the communication challenges experienced by external doctoral students, the need of doctoral students to connect to their supervisory team and peers is explored in this study. The aim of the paper is to investigate the needs of part time doctoral students in the Faculties of Business and Education for connectedness to their peers and supervisors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication and Connectedness

As connectedness is partially defined as the “feeling of belonging and acceptance” (Terrell et al., 2009, p. 113), the ways in which different types of communication, whether they were synchronous or asynchronous, is explored in this section. The traditional on-campus doctoral program has a focus on high interaction between the supervisor and their student with limited reliance on interaction with support materials or peers (Kemp 2004; Kerhwald, 2007; Love, 2001). Although some supervisors of external doctoral students may structure periodic discussions among groups of doctoral students in face-to-face or online workshops, other supervisors may believe that only individual contact is necessary, with no need to

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