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# Introduction

Discussions about the direction of doctoral programmes and alarmingly high attrition rates in universities throughout the world often seem to presuppose that doctoral students are not only similar to one another, but also that they generally pursue a doctorate in the same discipline and country throughout their academic careers, and that this academic career is uninterrupted. However, internationalisation and globalisation are ensuring that growing numbers of students undertake a doctorate across national boundaries. Likewise, a sharp increase in distance-mode learning that is likely to endure in the post-COVID-19 era, along with the widening of the university to be more accessible to all, have meant that greater numbers of mature and part-time students are returning to the university after developing as professionals. In a university setting that is built primarily for full-time, physically present students, these international, part-time and mature students can thus be seen as being on the periphery of higher education. Does that make their doctoral journey different from that of other students?

The purpose of this book is to look more closely at how the personal, professional and academic dimensions of the doctoral journey come together to bring about identity transformation. By situating the personal narratives of international, part-time and mature doctoral students within various academic discourses, this book aims to give a 'human face' to the process of academic identity development for this growing demographic. Each narrative provides a window into how academic identity develops over time and as a result of varied external and internal factors. To place these individual narratives more firmly in the context of larger discourses in academic research, they are framed by a theory chapter that outlines the key concepts, mechanisms and assumptions we draw from, and an analysis chapter that pulls together the main findings across chapters. Readers will find that many of the narratives support popular findings in academic research, while a few counter and challenge long-held assumptions. Still others expose gaps in

research that would benefit from further study. All the narratives, however, coalesce to foreground the complexity and nuances of the doctoral journey – and together give a voice to students who typically operate on the periphery of higher education.

## Coming together as a cohort

Our story begins in a part-time Doctor in Education (EdD) programme offered at the UCL Institute of Education. It is the beginning of the academic year and a cohort of about 20 students has assembled in a classroom. The students, however, are not from London nor do they live anywhere in the United Kingdom. Instead, they have travelled to the opening session of a doctorate programme designed specifically for students living outside the United Kingdom. Combining mandatory week-long, in-person modules with distance work, the programme allows students to continue living in their home countries while they work on obtaining a doctorate in the United Kingdom. The students hail from countries as diverse as Cyprus, Ethiopia, Hungary, Pakistan, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Myanmar, Norway, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and New Zealand. They are also visibly older, many of them in their 40s or 50s, and as they go around the room introducing themselves it becomes evident that these are already well-established education professionals with many years of experience in their fields. Among the group are teachers (general, special education and English as an additional language), principals, research managers, education technology specialists, an academic writing coach, a nursery school owner and even a training director in an oil company.

This is the scenario that marked the beginning of our doctoral journey. For the next year and a half, as part-time doctoral students, we would meet each term in London to receive training in mandatory week-long modules. The lectures covered a wide range of research-related topics and were intensive, often running from nine in the morning until six in the evening. The intensive nature of the week-long modules meant that we spent a significant amount of time together. Not knowing anyone besides each other while in London, it was not uncommon for some of us to spend time together outside the classroom exploring the city. In time, we became familiar not only with each other's professional and academic interests, but also the personal circumstances that inspired each of us to enrol in the programme.

When we were not attending modules in London, many of us continued to provide support to one another through group chats and email correspondence. Indeed, the peer support and networks developed in those first years contributed positively towards our sense of belonging and general well-being. This remained the case even as some of our paths diverged later on. Some of us, for example, eventually decided to shift to a conventional PhD, while others took a formal break from studies for various personal reasons. Despite this divergence, the cohesiveness among many in the cohort remained strong, and close contact was maintained.

## Milestones in the EdD

Once the mandatory taught modules were complete, we began what was called an Institution Focused Study (IFS). The IFS was a research assignment of approximately 20,000 words that involved the study of an institution or organisation that each student was professionally affiliated with. Its completion was followed by an upgrade interview, where the quality of each student's portfolio up until that point was evaluated. With supervisors looking on as observers, the upgrade interview was conducted by two readers (other faculty members, experienced in the subject matter), who not only evaluated the student's portfolio, but also approved the research proposal for the doctoral thesis. Approval at the upgrade interview was an important milestone for us because it meant that we could enter the final stage of our doctoral journey where, with the oversight of our supervisor(s), we could begin the planning of field research, the collection and analysis of data and the write-up of our final 45,000 word thesis.

This latter part of the EdD journey at UCL involved several important people and processes. Prior to submission, each thesis was reviewed by an internal reader, who in many instances was selected by the supervisor and student together. Although the role of the internal reader was non-binding (students were free to accept or reject the specific feedback provided), it was typically someone selected for their expertise in the area of research. For this reason, recommendations from the internal reader quite often involved some form of revision on the part of the student. Once submitted for examination, each doctoral thesis was then reviewed by two examiners, one who was internal and another who was external to the institution. Unlike the case with the internal reviewer,

examiner decisions were binding: they decided whether the Doctor in Education (EdD) degree would be awarded and under what conditions.

The culminating event, of course, was the viva itself. The viva process for the EdD allowed the candidate to make a short initial presentation of their research to the examiners, followed by a question and answer session (the defence). A moderator managed the technical aspects of the meeting, and while one student supervisor could be present, they could only serve as an observer. Examiner decisions could range from an outright fail to a pass with no corrections. In reality, an outright fail was highly unlikely due to the multiple people and screening processes in place (such as the supervisor, internal reader, the Institution Focused Study and upgrade interview). In most instances, decisions involved a pass with minor or major corrections/amendments. Doctoral candidates were also given a timeline within which changes were to be completed. This was yet another hurdle for students to overcome since a doctoral degree could not be formally conferred until corrections were submitted and deemed sufficient by the examiners.

## Reflecting on the journey

It was shortly after the first few of us passed our viva examinations and received our degrees that we began to engage in discussions about the personal journey that inevitably paralleled our academic one. We noted that while our thesis provided evidence of our academic contribution, there was no equivalent artefact that documented the internal journey that intersected with our academic one. Nor was there anything that adequately addressed the relationship between our personal struggles and the further development of our scholarly or professional identities.

It was from these observations that the idea for this book first materialised. We used our new-found knowledge about scholarship to lift our casual conversations over email to more purposeful inquiry: What was it like for us as established professionals to find ourselves back in the role of novice students? How did members of the cohort cope with distance and dislocation? What were the challenges associated with culture, language and identity? How did the professional and personal aspects of our doctoral journey overlap and interact with academia? And how did the doctoral journey fundamentally change the way we came to see ourselves and the world around us? These were some of the questions we grappled with as we prepared to tell our stories. The result is this book you see before you. The stories are unique to each author and do not

necessarily represent the experiences and views of the editors or other authors. In combination with an introductory theory chapter and a concluding analysis chapter that lift these narratives from the anecdotal to frame them in a larger context, these narratives together represent a wide array of both well-known and lesser-known phenomena in academia. An overview of the individual chapters is provided below.

### **Chapter 1:** Belonging and becoming in academia: a conceptual framework (Lynn P. Nygaard and Maria Savva)

Establishing the conceptual framework for this book as a whole, this chapter looks at the process of developing an academic identity through the lens of ‘becoming’ a scholar, with particular emphasis on the challenges facing international, part-time EdD students. This process involves not only an intellectual breakthrough, but also an emerging sense of belonging. The inner journey – which intersects with and shapes academic progress – comprises a complex set of interactions between the social groups to which we belong, our beliefs about ourselves that come about through experience, the various contexts in which we operate, the position we hold within those contexts, and the agency we exercise in responding to various pressures. In addition to exploring the relevance of this inner journey, the chapter also situates author experiences within broader educational trends facing universities and key elements of doctoral programmes.

### **Chapter 2:** A tale of two languages: first-language attrition and second-language immersion (Barbora Necas and Susi Poli)

Necas and Poli explore how their linguistic background shaped their identities throughout their development as scholars, including how it allowed them, or kept them from, interacting with their peers and each other. Necas, a native English speaker who relocated to Italy where she lived for almost 30 years, returned to the UK only to face unexpected struggles with first-language attrition. Poli, a native Italian speaker who temporarily relocated to the UK, dealt with a variety of challenges when she immersed herself in, and tried to adapt to, the idiosyncrasies of the English culture. Their stories mirror each other in unexpected ways, highlighting how identifying as a native speaker – or not – changed the ‘stories’ they told to themselves and others, and ultimately shaped the way they saw themselves as students, professionals and scholars.

**Chapter 3:** I found my tribe online: belonging in the context of precarity (Muireann O’Keeffe)

As an e-learning specialist and academic developer, O’Keeffe’s chapter illustrates how her professional identity shaped her growing academic identity, and how this was enabled by reaching beyond the confines of the classroom to find a virtual community of like-minded scholars. O’Keeffe reflects on how she embarked on a doctoral programme partly to secure future employment in a casualised higher education environment. When funding for her position ended, she entered a crisis period where she could no longer carry out research in her institution. Turning to an online community for support, she found a new direction for her research that was no longer dependent on her place of employment.

**Chapter 4:** A view of the Western university through the eyes of a non-Western student (Mohammad Abdrabboh)

As a seasoned professional in training and development in industrial settings in Saudi Arabia, Abdrabboh faced multiple unforeseen challenges throughout his doctoral journey. In this chapter, he describes how unprepared he was for the limited knowledge other students and faculty had about his region of the world, and how this translated into obstacles related to student–faculty relationships. One of the most problematic challenges he faced was applying Western-style ethical guidelines to a non-Western research context. He explains how university guidelines did not sufficiently account for important cultural differences in Saudi Arabia, and he offers strategies that can help increase cultural awareness and sensitivity among students and faculty.

**Chapter 5:** Navigating the pass: distance, dislocation and the viva (David Channon, with Maria Savva and Lynn P. Nygaard)

Channon examines the challenges of completing a doctoral degree across different geographical locations and changing job roles. His experience illustrates how logistical challenges involved in carrying out research far removed from the research site, political turmoil and changes in employment status can all necessitate changes in the planned research trajectory. He reflects on an emotional journey, including a particularly challenging viva experience, where he struggled to maintain ownership of his work as a result of distance, dislocation and attempting to heed

conflicting sources of advice. Importantly, Channon's story brings to light a less-studied phenomenon: the role of faculty feedback, beyond the supervisor, and the effect of such feedback on the research trajectories of doctoral students.

### **Chapter 6:** Understanding the personal significance of academic choices (Maria Savva)

Savva maps the intrapersonal journey that paralleled her academic journey as an international doctoral student based in Cyprus. She describes changes in her research question and how she used the solitude often associated with the doctoral journey to create a space whereby she looked inwards to better understand her academic choices and her relationship to those choices. Through critical examination, she was able to gain a deeper understanding of the extrinsic and intrinsic factors behind her decision to pursue a doctorate and her selection of research topic. This, in turn, allowed her to harness the qualities of agency and resilience that are so critical to completing the doctoral journey. Finally, she also describes the factors she considered when, midway through the EdD, she decided to switch to a PhD. Her narrative reveals how the research process is not merely an intellectual exercise but is one that both shapes and is shaped by personal life experiences and future aspirations.

### **Chapter 7:** Academic identity interrupted: reconciling issues of culture, discipline and profession (Rab Paterson)

Paterson looks at how a seemingly random series of jobs and educational choices came together and shaped his professional and academic trajectory. From the shipyards in Scotland to a university setting in Japan, his journey crosses cultures, disciplines and professions. He reflects on how important lessons learned as a tradesman, and later in the fields of language instruction and political science, challenged his ideas about his own professional identity and areas of expertise. Paterson also shares the effects of casualised employment conditions in Japan on both his decision to pursue a doctorate and his ability to see it through to completion.

### **Chapter 8:** Into the fray: becoming an academic in my own right (Lynn P. Nygaard)

As an academic writing specialist, Nygaard examines how the transition from expert (helping researchers write and publish in academic



journals) to novice (becoming a researcher and writer in her own right) was a difficult one. She reflects on how the skills she needed as a professional – familiarity with different kinds of academic writing, disciplines and methods – made it more confusing for her to find her own voice as an academic. While much of the academic literature measures doctoral success in terms of how quickly students complete a programme, Nygaard argues that her choice to publish in academic journals and books alongside completing her doctoral thesis was both deliberate and designed to help her develop her own academic identity. Finally, she reflects on how both her budding academic identity and experience as a professional helped her overcome a personal crisis and complete the programme.

### **Chapter 9:** The cultural encounters of women on the periphery (Safa Bukhatir and Susi Poli)

As women from non-English speaking countries and with different cultural backgrounds, Bukhatir and Poli reflect on what intercultural competence has meant for them in their doctoral journeys. Bukhatir shares her experiences as an Arab-Muslim woman in the UK, including how she manoeuvred herself around the various microaggressions she faced. Poli, an Italian woman who later temporarily relocated to England, describes her struggle in finding a balance between her native Italian culture and her adopted English culture. The two authors reflect on how their friendship served as an important social support mechanism and how the challenges they faced ultimately served to help them identify inconsistencies between theory and practice in both their personal and professional lives. They argue that intercultural interaction involves far more than language competence and requires critical reflection on bias, as well as a critical examination of the gendered landscape that exists across cultural contexts.

### **Chapter 10:** The ‘peripheral’ student in academia: an analysis (Maria Savva and Lynn P. Nygaard)

Pulling together the various themes that emerged within and across the narratives, this chapter explores four broad categories of challenges and opportunities:

1. Demands associated with being a ‘peripheral’ student and the function of social networks in developing a sense of belonging.
2. Issues related to supervisory and other faculty relationships.

3. Struggles related to identity, language and/or culture.
4. The role of expert, novice and 'impostor' labels in internalising a scholarly identity.

Each category is unpacked, while also examining the personal characteristics and institutional features that helped the authors along the journey to becoming scholars. After each section, implications for institutional policy and planning are also discussed.