Distilling policy into practice:

Learners' stories of navigating the doctoral process across time, space and place.

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Existing situation doctoral education (PhD) Policy/practice
Structure, stages and timeline based on f/t PhD (3-4 years) on campus

What about the solitary (e.g., p/t or non-traditional) PhD learner?

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Approach to understanding PhD learner's experiences

Questionnaire:

Experiences of accessing academic resources, information and support (f2f/online) from the HEI during the PhD to completion?

Semi-structured interview:

Any enablers or barriers (e.g. personal/academic/institutional) to progressing with the PhD?

Did you seek help or take action to progress with the PhD?

44 Participants: 36 PhD learners + 8 other stakeholders

Preliminary stage (to develop research instruments)

11 f/t (including 4 international) and **7 p/t** PhDs from a single HEI (Irl)

Main stage of the research

18 completed part-time PhD learners

5 universities in Ireland

13 female and 5 male

Findings

Each learner's PhD experience was as individual as a finger print.

The PhD journey was navigated in the context (or lack of) of

- **personal agency and help-seeking and**

- **interaction with people, documents and online sources of support**

- **both inside and outside the HEI.**

Recommendations

We need to design educational systems and supports **(f2f and online)**

which meet the unique needs of different learners, many with **barriers**

to accessing campus based resources and communities,

(physical, geographical and time-based)

which has been many of us during the Covid-19 pandemic (O' Regan, 2020;2021).

Recommendations for doctoral policy and practice

1) Seek feedback on PhD process & experiences (f/t, international & p/t)

2) Seek feedback from completers (non-completers) and academic staff

3) Look at supporting learners F2F and online:

- Open Educational Resources (OER)

- F2F & Virtual communities & research groups
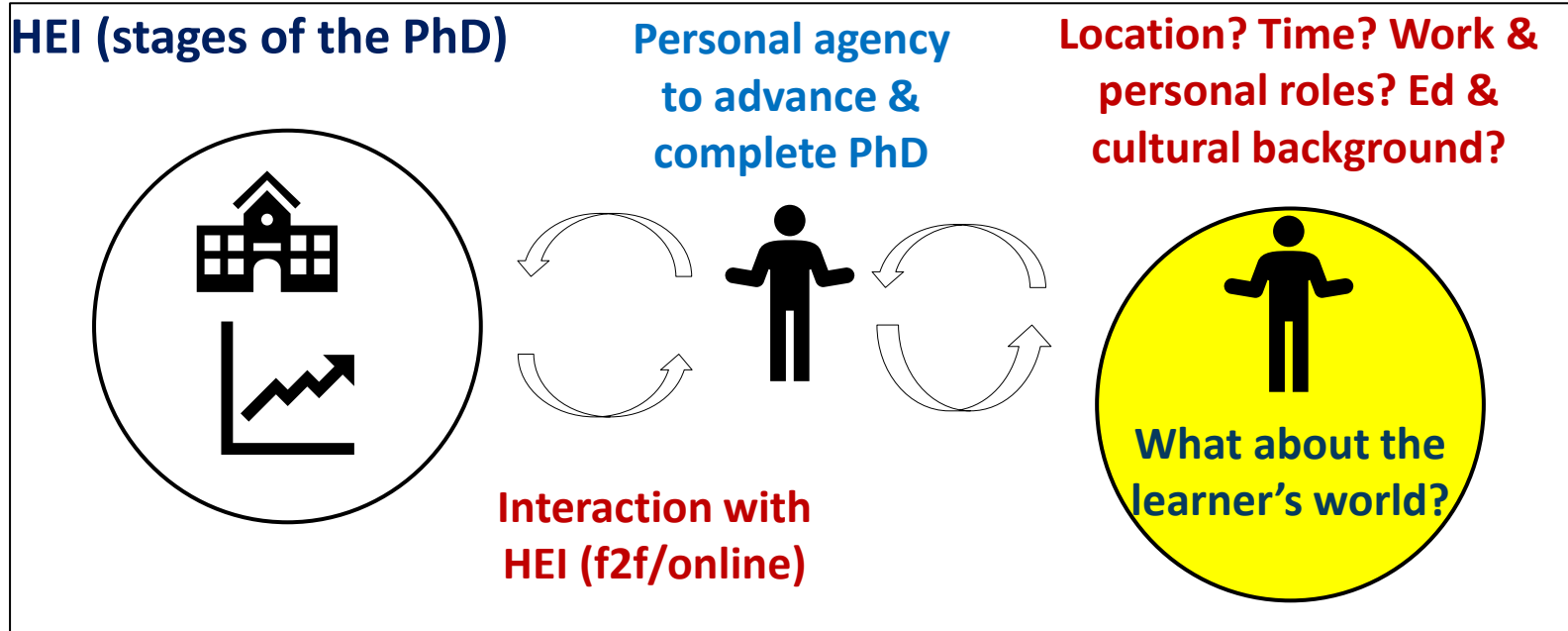
4) Make stages of the process, timelines and modes of

Assessment (e.g., mid-stage and Viva) visible & accessible

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New approach to exploring PhD learners' experiences

Beyond assumption of learner as situated on campus during 9am-5pm

HEI (stages of the PhD)

Personal agency to advance & complete PhD

Location? Time? Work & personal roles? Ed & cultural background?

Interaction with HEI (f2f/online)

What about the learner's world?

First in family to go to college (then do a PhD)

(*Pseudonyms)-

"My adult children helped me to navigate the HEI systems and process." (Tara* non-traditional f/t PhD learner)

"I didn't know anyone who had done a PhD! I was very naïve, in a way I am glad. I might have run away if I knew what a PhD involved!" (Matthew* p/t PhD)

Working full-time and studying (PhD) part-time

Working 9am – 5pm = barrier to accessing PhD support

"What got me through was the kindness of strangers. Online PhD support networks. Professors and students from around the world who just wanted to help PhD students. I never met any of them in person." (Elaine*)

"I work and also have a long commute to college and family/caring responsibilities at home. I need access to online support and PhD networks & resources (24/7) to help me connect with others and progress my PhD research." (Mike*)

The socially distanced learner

Cultural and social isolation

"I am physically located on campus but I contact my friends who are fellow researchers and academics in my home country when I have a query re the PhD for example on Endnote or Referencing. I wouldn't put my hand up to ask a question in a class or session (e.g., Library course)."
Maria* (F/t International PhD)

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"I have the baby alarm on. Hopefully I can get an hour of analysis done on my PhD, after I finish correcting my final year undergraduates' assignments!"
(Nina* New mum; academic and p/t PhD)

All these stories are from **completed** PhD learners!
Factors which facilitated (or impeded PhD progression and completion)

– **Personal agency, resilience, time management skills and self-generated PhD networks (f2f/online).**

– **Access to the physical campus setting and PhD supports**

– **Social and academic communities within and outside the university (f2f/online) e.g. work colleagues.**

– **Support from academic staff (e.g. supervisor) and peers**

– **Familiarity with the PhD process and ease of navigating academic/administrative and system-based procedures**

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Conclusion

Look at the world of the individual learner (f/t; p/t and international)

Design systems & networks f2f/online to support diverse PhD learners

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Recommendations for doctoral policy and practice

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Thank You

Please contact me if you would to discuss this project further at gallam23@tcd.ie