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Researching from home. Doctoral research in a pandemic

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Innovative impact

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions have faced the challenge of a rapid rethinking of the training provided in their doctoral programmes as well as the social support offered to doctoral researchers. Doctoral researchers need different skills to do research under lockdown conditions as well as to reconsider the design of their research projects. In this context, we have not only seen internal adjustments by individual universities, but also a rapid raise of sharing of online reflective narratives, conferences, social media conversations and curated content on researching during a pandemic.

The following are examples of efforts made in the UK to help transitioning research activity to an online setting.

[Doing qualitative research on inequalities during Covid](#) by the University of Sheffield.

[Digital Ethnography Collective](#) by London School of Economics.

[Methods LAB](#) by Goldsmiths, University of London.

[Research during the pandemic](#) by the University of Edinburgh

In the future, examples like these of curated research advice could be promoted not only at an institutional level but also among doctoral supervisors and students around the world.

Researching from home. Doctoral research in a pandemic

Introduction

Mid-March 2020 saw the closure of the majority universities across Europe in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Council of Europe, 2020), whilst social distancing and travel restrictions in a large number of countries have had a continued impact on research activities. The impact of COVID-19 on doctoral researchers is complex, depending on individual circumstances, stage and nature of research projects as well as discipline.

In the United Kingdom (UK), the public body UK Research and Innovation advised all funded doctoral students "to adapt and adjust research projects to mitigate the delays caused by COVID-19" (UKRI, 2020). Suddenly researchers found themselves rethinking data collection methods, research questions and participants. More recently, the UK Council of Graduate Education indicated that this situation has raised questions about meeting the required standard for an award (UKCGE, 2021). Indeed, this reframing activity has caused concerns amongst postgraduate researchers about the time lost, the shift of the research focus to a new area, and the ethical impact on studies in certain disciplines, for instance, those with participants working in sectors heavily impacted by the pandemic such as health and education. The unexpected shift to researching from home is a unique opportunity for rethinking research in digital spaces and at a distance, growth of reflexivity as well as the use of innovative research practices.

This article focuses on how the research plans of doctoral researchers have been disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic. We examine, in particular, how the restrictions have affected postgraduate researchers in the UK with respect to their study-life balance, the shaping of their project designs, and their evolving research communities. We also discuss how institutions can support these novice researchers right now but also in future with the use of available technologies.

Disrupting the researcher and the research

Doctoral researchers' study-life balance

Researching from home, almost inevitably, means blurring boundaries between the professional and the personal; with research studies family life and, for many, work responsibilities all occupying the same physical space. For some doctoral students, changing work and family contexts, for example home-schooling, increased employment strains or hours, and increased care needs of family members shielding, has had significant consequences for both their time availability for academic study and an unavoidable impact on their individual wellbeing.

In the UK 43% of those enrolled in postgraduate research degrees in

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Goldstein, R. S., Vasques, R. A., Cecilia, M., & dos Santos, L. (2020). Doing design research with youth at/from the margins in pandemic times. *Researching in the Age of COVID-19, Volume III: Creativity and Ethics*, 112.

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Stachl, C.N. & Baranger, A.M. (2020). Sense of belonging within the graduate community of a research-focused STEM department: Quantitative assessment using a visual narrative and item response theory. *PLoS ONE*, 15(5).

2019/20 were aged thirty years or older (HESA, 2020) and are more likely than those at other stages of their higher education studies to have a range of personal commitments and responsibilities that are on-going during the course of their studies such as parenthood, employment and unpaid care roles (Offerman, 2011). Difficulties or stress resulting from balancing academic studies with work, family and personal lives are frequently cited as a contributory factor for poor wellbeing or intentions to withdraw (e.g. Castello et al. 2017; Sverdlik et al. 2018). The circumstances described during the pandemic intensify what was an already challenging context.

Higher education institutions are having to acknowledge more explicitly these pressures and provide support to minimise impact on doctoral studies. For example, at The Open University in the UK, previously, doctoral students were only permitted study breaks on the grounds of certified ill health, employment related difficulties (intensification of workload) and maternity, paternity and adoption leave. However, domestic commitments are now being recognised as valued reasons for disruption of study or extension requests during the pandemic. Moreover, if the need for a study break is directly attributable to COVID-19, it is not counted as part of the regulatory entitlement and students may take as much time off their study as their circumstances require. In our institution, there has also been an ethical change in a previous restriction to part-time students accessing counselling services – any doctoral researcher can now make use of this valuable online support when struggling for their competing demands.

Redesigning the research

Universities have advised doctoral researchers to revise their research plans with social distancing restrictions in mind. The shift from doing face-to-face fieldwork to researching remotely from home has required greater reflexivity from doctoral researchers. Reflexivity “constitutes a process of meta-learning – not only reflection in but on action” (May & Perry, 2017), and this is exactly what postgraduate students have been forced to do. For instance, in her notebook entry for the *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, Bea Gardner (2020) reflects on the process of reframing, adapting and introducing new methods in her PhD research. Her considerations from the initial postponement of researcher data collection to the reframing the focus of her research to increase its relevance in covid-19, and to adapting her methods to be remote and introducing new ones represent the uncomfortable “reflexive messes” (May & Perry, 2017) arising for researchers from the current social reality.

In the past year, digital environments have helped redefine postgraduate research practices. In addition to data generating technologies – conferencing software for synchronous interviews or focus group discussions, digital (audio or visual) diary for researcher reflections (Gardner, 2020), or research participants self-reporting (Goldstein et al., 2020) instant messaging, online surveys – doctoral researchers are making use of data already digitally available such as blogs, websites, social media discussions and other open access resources and available secondary datasets. A wealth of resources has

Sverdlik, A., Hall, N.C., McAlphine, L. & Hubbard, K. (2018). The PhD experience: A review of the factors influencing doctoral students' completion, achievement, and wellbeing. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 13, 361-388.

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Wang, L. & DeLaquil, T. (2020). The isolation of doctoral education in the times of COVID-19: recommendations for building relationships within person-environment theory, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 39(7), 1346-1350.

been developed to support researchers successfully adapt and design remote research, such as the [COVID-19 resource collection](#) by the National Centre of Research Methods. In fact, it could be argued that one of the implications of researching in a digital world could be the emergence, institutionalisation and stabilization of more researcher-centred technologies which may facilitate more inclusive research. Already in 2015 the OU in the UK launched [OpenSTEM Labs](#), an internet-based laboratory, including on-screen interactions, for science research at a distance. This kind of initiative led by a distance education university could inspire digital innovation for research and could revolutionised the training of doctoral researchers around the world.

Sense of belonging to a research community

Social distancing has not only affected fieldwork of doctoral studies, but also their study experience through closure of universities. Wang and DeLaquil (2020) have highlighted through the lens of person-environment theory, that researching from home has displaced the 'indispensable' interpersonal relationships of the doctoral student experience to the virtual environment. This interpersonal dimension is key for our sense of belonging and lack of it can affect our wellbeing, but there has been little research on the sense of belonging in graduate communities (Stachl and Barager, 2020).

The closure of the OU's Milton Keynes campus as a result of the pandemic moved all regular research-related activities online. Mindful of the importance of interpersonal relationships, in addition to running online research training the Graduate School at the OU has adapted previous social opportunities such as the 'Bake Your Research', 'Take Away Tuesdays', weekly 'Coffee Mornings' and an annual residential to take place remotely, as well as creating new opportunities for social interaction such as a dedicated Microsoft Teams spaces, Wellbeing (mindfulness) sessions, and Student led Saturday seminars. Faculties across the university have created other digital events, such as the *Research re(imagined): (Post)pandemic perspective* conference for and organised by doctoral researchers in the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies.

Conclusion

The disruption in doctoral research arising from the COVID-19 pandemic discussed in this paper has had a direct impact on doctoral researchers' wellbeing, fieldwork mobility and universities' management of the doctoral programmes. We see a long-term change in postgraduate research education occurring, including one that supports hybrid interaction, both online and face-to-face, in both training provision and research. Successful change not only depends on adaptation by individual institutions but also on shared knowledge and resources among them. Furthermore, in post-pandemic times, some of the new configurations of personal/study/work life will remain, therefore, institutional measures for doctoral researchers' general wellbeing under these conditions may need to become a permanent feature, including increased flexibility in study arrangements and enhanced online services.