

OUTLINE

Doctoral labour and work-life balance: the who, where and how of the academic labour of doctoral students in the social sciences

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Context

For doctoral students who desire an academic career, what might they draw from their doctoral experience that would help prepare them for academic life? How might doctoral labour - work and effort that ultimately contributes to a doctorate - and work-life balance be relevant to life as an academic? By considering the 'who, where and how' of doctoral experience, this paper begins to explore the nature of doctoral labour and work-life balance and some implications of the doctoral experience for aspiring academics.

Life in academia is perceived to be demanding and stressful (Kinman and Court, 2010), with academics typically working widely and extensively, working long hours, in multiple places and compulsively (Gornall and Salisbury, 2012). This has led to academic labour (work and effort) being increasingly invisible as well as visible, with a strong blurring of work-life boundaries. Consequently, some doctoral students are rejecting an academic career as being unrelenting and offering a poor work-life balance (Mason et al, 2009).

But how does doctoral experience compare with this view of academic life? Recent articles from the Next Generation of Social Scientists (NGSS) project portray doctoral experience as complex in terms of working hours and academic and personal relationships (Hopwood et al, 2011), working and living spaces (Hopwood and Paulson, 2011), and activities (Turner and McAlpine, 2012). Other literature shows that work-life balance is an issue for some, for instance, a 'reasonable balance' eluded mid-life doctoral students as they grappled with competing priorities of study, major life events (e.g. health issues, divorce), family issues (children and parents) and outside work responsibilities (Riddle, 2000); and female doctoral students asserted that being a mother profoundly affected when they could study, the balance of academic and home life, and their role as a student (Brown and Watson, 2012). Together, this literature suggests a number of parallels between doctoral and academic experience.

This paper begins to characterise doctoral labour and work-life balance in terms of the 'who, where and how' of doctoral experience and starts to consider how these may be relevant to those aspiring to an academic career.

Study

The NGSS and associated studies explored the nature of academic work and careers. Participants numbered 42, mostly full-time, doctoral students from 13 social science disciplines: 16 male and 26 female students, from three universities, representing 13 nationalities, with ages ranging from 23 to 44. At least one-third were in long-term relationships and at least one-fifth acted as caregivers. Various methods were used - some participants completed activity logs to capture everyday experiences and perceptions of a particular week in a month over several months; some completed in-depth interviews to gain more detailed understanding of issues arising from the logs or challenges faced during the doctorate; some completed both logs and interviews.

This paper has drawn on earlier NGSS findings (mentioned above) alongside a fresh analysis of all of the data to create a more holistic picture of doctoral labour (work and effort that ultimately contributes to a doctorate) and work-life balance during the doctorate.

Findings

The findings will be presented in more detail during the presentation, probably through specific case studies, and will make reference to the following.

Who is involved in doctoral labour?

Along with the expected academic relationships (e.g. supervisor, other academics, fellow students) several 'non-academics' feature in the doctoral labour e.g. family, friends, research participants. By performing various tasks (e.g. childcare and household duties, writing buddies, providing accommodation) the participation of these individuals was often initiated by the doctoral student and benefitted the student's doctoral progress.

Where does this doctoral labour take place?

In addition to the usual university premises, academic libraries, conferences and seminars doctoral labour occurs in a number of other locations. This variation is observed both between students and with respect to individual students over time, as they move from one location to another or back and forth during their studies. These locations include dangerous situations, less than ideal living conditions, the family home, and leisure spaces.

How does doctoral labour take place?

Doctoral labour is not necessarily 'full-time' work and takes place amidst various demands, events, transitions etc. which often happen or compete at the same time. This labour occurred sometimes over excessively long hours and sometimes over minimal hours, around other obligations, during leisure time, at night, whilst experiencing ill-health or bereavement, whilst job searching, during numerous relocations.

Conclusions

These findings, from a modest-sized, diverse group of doctoral candidates, show a varied and challenging picture of doctoral labour and doctoral work-life balance. Whilst no one individual has the same narrative as another, (owing to differing combinations of the 'who, where and how'), inferences can be drawn about the characteristics of doctoral labour.

Firstly, these findings comprise qualities of the labour noted among established academics by Gornall and Salisbury (2012) - long working hours, night-time working and multiple working places are noticeable, yet often invisible, features of the labour of a number of doctoral students.

Secondly, the findings reflect many of Riddle's (2000) and Brown and Watson's (2012) assertions. This suggests that issues such as finding balance, competing priorities, life events, family issues, work responsibilities, being a parent – previously highlighted in relation to specific sub-groups (e.g. mid-life or female doctoral students) – resonate with, and impact the progress of, a much broader spectrum of the doctoral population.

Thirdly, the blurring of work-life boundaries identified by Gornall and Salisbury, (2012) is also found here. Family, friends, leisure time and space, and home, are specifically evident in this doctoral labour as the personal and academic intersect, to the benefit as well as detriment of doctoral progress and work-life balance.

To conclude, if the academic life perceived in Kinman and Court (2010), Mason et al (2009) and Gornall and Salisbury (2012) is more the norm than the exception then the experience of some doctoral students who wish to become academics could either be good preparation for their future career or put them off.

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