A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF ONLINE PhD STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	This article investigates thirteen students' lived experiences on an online PhD programme, aiming to develop a better understanding of the nature of doing a PhD online.
Background	A large number of adult students with full-time professional roles and other social responsibilities have returned to universities to pursue their doctoral degree in order to advance their personal and professional lives. Online PhD programmes are now one of the viable choices for those who wish to combine their PhD study with other professional and personal roles. However, little has been known about students' lived experiences of doing a PhD online, which are seemingly different from those of other doctoral students who are doing their studies in more conventional doctoral education settings.
Methodology	The present qualitative study employs a phenomenological approach to develop an in-depth understanding of doctoral students' lived experiences in doing their PhD studies online. The present study was conducted in an online PhD programme at a Department of Education in a research-intensive university based in the United Kingdom (UK). Thirteen students voluntarily participated in a semi-structured interview. The interview transcripts were analysed following Van Manen's (2016) explanations for conducting a thematic analysis.
Contribution	The paper presents seven themes that illustrate the essential nature of doing a PhD online, answering the two questions: (1)What are the lived experiences of online PhD students? and (2) What are the particular aspects of the programme that structure the experiences?
Findings	The characteristics of online PhD studies are multifaceted, including different elements of PhD education, part-time education, and online education. Those aspects interact and create a unique mode of educational experiences. In a more specific sense, the journey of an online PhD – from the moment of choosing to do a PhD online to the moment of earning a PhD – is guided by multiple, often conflicting, aspects of different doctoral education models such as the professional doctorate, the research doctorate, and the taught doctorate. The present

study demonstrates that experiential meanings of doing a PhD online are constructed by the dynamic interplay between the following six elements: PhDness, onlineness, part-timeness, cohortness, practice-orientedness, and independence. Throughout the long journey, students become better practitioners and more independent researchers, engaging in multiple scholarly activities.

Recommendations for Practitioners	It is essential to understand the unique characteristics and experiences of PhD students who choose to pursue a PhD in online programmes. Based on the understanding, online doctoral educators can provide adequate academic supports suitable for this particular group. The study findings highlight the importance of supporting students' adjustment to a new learning environment at the beginning of the programme and their transition from Part 1 to Part 2.
Recommendations for Researchers	It is crucial to develop a separate set of narratives about online PhD education. Common assumptions drawn from our existing knowledge about more conventional doctoral education are not readily applicable in this newly emerging online education setting.
Impact on Society	It is important for online PhD students and potential ones in the planning stage to better understand the nature of doing a PhD online. Given the growing popularity of doctoral education, our findings based on the reflective narratives of thirteen online PhD students in this paper can support their informed decision and successful learning experiences.
Future Research	A comparative study can more closely examine similarities and differences among diverse models of doctoral education to capture the uniqueness of online PhD programmes. It is worthwhile to investigate students' experiences in online PhD programmes in disciplines other than education. A more longitudinal approach to following an entire journey of PhD students can be useful to develop a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of an online PhD. Some critical questions about students' scholarly identity that emerged from the present study remain unanswered. A follow-up phenomenological research can focus on the existential meanings of being a scholar to this group of students.
Keywords	online doctoral education, PhD programme, part-time doctoral student, cohort community, supervision, scholarly identity, phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

There has been a continuing growth of demand for doctoral education around the world in recent years. Many adults with full-time professional roles and other social responsibilities have returned to universities to pursue their doctoral degree in order to advance their personal and professional lives (Callejo-Pérez et al., 2011; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2020; Pearson et al., 2008). Subsequently, diverse formats of doctoral education have been set up in order to accommodate the increasing demand for part-time doctorates (Park, 2007). Online doctoral programmes, with a varying degree of taught elements, are now a viable and popular choice for those who wish to combine their doctoral studies with their professional and personal roles (M. Kung & Logan, 2014).

The nature of this online doctoral education is arguably different from that of more conventional doctoral education, especially in the European contexts. For example, conventional doctoral education is built around relatively private, often face-to-face, interactions between a supervisor and a supervisee. Such supervision tends to be given to support the development of specific research practice, in line with the expertise of supervisors and academic knowledge that contributes to specialist

disciplinary debates (A. Lee & Danby, 2012). Although there are research training and academic socialising opportunities offered to doctoral students at a department- and university-level, part-time doctoral students often find it inconvenient to participate in those voluntary, face-to-face day-time events. Thus, doctoral study, particularly for part-time students, is often considered a solitary process in conventional doctoral education contexts.

Online doctoral programmes usually employ a cohort system, offering social learning opportunities to an international cohort of twenty to thirty students. In order to accommodate the diverse needs of students from different countries and educational backgrounds, online programmes tend to focus on generic research skills and knowledge, which can be transferrable across various academic and professional contexts (Card et. al, 2016). The cohort completes a set of pre-selected learning activities and assignments with strict deadlines at the same pace. The learning activities in those programmes commonly promote group communications and collaborations among international cohort members (K. Lee, 2020). Thus, there are strong social and international elements in student learning. The cohort relationships are mediated by information and communication technologies, which makes online doctoral education uniquely different from other less conventional models of doctoral education with a cohort system; i.e., the taught doctorate in the European context or the two-phase doctorate (coursework-and-thesis) in the North American context that is built around face-to-face social interactions (Bao et al., 2018).

Online doctoral programmes are divided into ones that grant a traditional doctorate (i.e., Doctor of Philosophy) and those that offer a professional doctorate such as Doctor of Business Administration (DBA), Doctor of Education (EdD), and Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP). Previous studies discuss meaningful differences between PhD education and professional doctoral education. For example, the expected outcome of professional doctoral education is to contribute to the development of a professional domain by generating practical knowledge and improving professional practices (Bao et al., 2018). On the other hand, PhD education emphasises creating original knowledge, contribution to a research domain, and developing a scholarly identity among doctoral students (Golde & Walker, 2006). Although such nuanced differences have never been fully captured in the literature of online doctoral education, it is essential to distinguish one from the other.

While there has been a noticeable growth in their number, the voices of online PhD students are still underrepresented in doctoral education literature. Their experiences of doing a PhD online have been under-researched. The complex nature of the phenomenon of 'being an online PhD student', shaped and structured by unique pedagogical approaches and characteristics in those programmes, have neither been thoroughly investigated nor reported. As Erica McWilliam (2012, xvii) exquisitely expresses in the following passage, there are both increasing demand for doctoral qualifications and growing doubt about the quality of higher education provisions:

> For doctoral education, it is the best of times, it is the worst of times. It is the best of times, because a doctoral qualification is never more desirable than in an uncertain socio-economic climate, such as we are currently experiencing worldwide, when competition for well-paid, professional employment is fierce inside and outside academe, and when the habits of deep and sustained engagement in learning (and unlearning) are so crucial to full participation in a complex and fast-changing social world. Yet it is also the worst of times for doctoral education, with many higher and further education courses and programmes now suspect for over-promising and under-delivering on quality, rigour and relevance.

In this context, it is a crucial task of doctoral educators to closely and 'critically' investigate the essential structural aspects of the experiences of students in online PhD programmes – a relatively new, but increasingly popular, phenomenon. This paper is one of the first attempts of the present author to address this pressing need. I, as academic tutor teaching on an online PhD programme, will describe the unique characteristics of the programme – one of the most established and recognised online PhD programmes in the field of educational research, which has recruited and trained more

than 400 students since its establishment in 2006. I will also report the results of our interview-based qualitative study that collected and analysed thirteen student participants' lived experiences of being and becoming an online PhD student and educational researcher in the focused programme. The overarching question 'What is the nature of doing a PhD online?' consists of the following two sub-questions guided our inquiry:

1. What are the lived experiences of online PhD students?
2. What are the particular aspects of the programme that structure the experiences?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of studies have investigated the nature of students' experiences in online doctoral programmes. For example, F. W. Kung (2017) demonstrates that online doctoral students generally perceive their programme positively regarding its convenience and accessibility. They also appreciated the international nature of the programme fostering multiculturalism. Despite the positive features, students find it challenging to effectively manage their learning at a distance from their university and peers, experiencing a lack of time and resources to dedicate to their studies. Bolliger and Halupa (2012) discover that there is a significant negative correlation between student satisfaction and anxiety in online doctoral programmes; in particular, students who feel anxious at the beginning of their studies tend to retain a similar level of anxiety throughout the programme. Kennedy and Gray (2016) also report a complex interplay of three pedagogical and emotional factors (i.e., a sense of progression, community interaction, and assignment feedback) that influences students' experiences with doing a doctorate online.

There has also been an ongoing research effort to develop a predictive model of student persistence and retention to better understand the characteristics of student experiences in online doctoral programmes (e.g., Ames et al., 2018; Byrd, 2016; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016; Terrell et al., 2012). One of the key findings shared by those studies is the importance of the social aspect of online doctoral studies; that is, a sense of isolation and a lack of interaction or support have been identified as significant factors in students' negative reaction to their studies. Another stream of studies has examined pedagogical strategies to improve the social aspect of online doctoral studies: for example, researchers have looked into an online support group (Denman et al., 2018), writing groups (Kozar & Lum, 2015), and nested communities in one programme (Berry, 2017); integrated synchronous office hours in an asynchronous module (Gibbons-Kunka, 2017); and a community of inquiry model (Effken, 2008) applied into the programme design.

Other studies have exclusively investigated online supervision and mentoring strategies during the thesis stage of the programmes (Gray & Crosta, 2019). These studies have all reported the challenging nature of developing effective supervision practice at a distance – both from students' and supervisors' perspectives, whilst stressing the importance of setting up positive mentoring relationships for student completion (e.g., Andrew, 2012; Berg, 2016; Kumar & Coe, 2017; Roumell & Bolliger, 2017). Erichsen et al. (2014) and Maor et al. (2016) both suggest that setting up a regular synchronous meeting would reduce students' feeling of isolation. Providing more personal, sensitive, and humane feedback can also prevent students from feeling isolated and demotivated (Bengtsen & Jensen, 2015). On the other hand, Nasiri and Mafakheri (2015) argue that supervisors need to support the development of students' independence and autonomy; Goodfellow (2014) further suggests that supervisors need to provide students with more opportunities to be prepared for and engaged in scholarly activities in broader academic communities.

As indicated previously, existing studies have either focused on the effect of selected pedagogical practice in online doctoral programmes or described students' experiences at a single moment of the programmes (for examples, see Candela et al., 2009; Kumar, 2014; Snelson et al., 2017). Despite the usefulness of specific pedagogical suggestions and detailed descriptions of effective practice in the literature, what is known to us tends to be small fractions of the whole of students' experiences of

doing a PhD online. Furthermore, most of the previous publications have been written in the contexts of the professional doctorate (e.g., DBA, EdD, DNP). This is mainly due to a small number of online doctoral programmes that grant PhD degrees compared to those granting professional doctorates. However, given the continuous growth in online PhD programmes (or blended PhD programmes with both online and face-to-face components), it is worthwhile to examine the unique nature of doing a PhD online.

Doing a PhD online is an increasingly popular phenomenon that has been under-researched. Our current understanding of online PhD studies is peripherally informed by the existing claims about online education, part-time education, and doctoral education – all relevant but not the same. Thus, doctoral educators need to put focused research attention to online PhD education to capture its uniqueness better. On the other hand, doing a PhD itself is a long journey, involving multiple learning stages with distinctive characteristics and requirements (Salter, 2019). Thus, it is crucial to employ a holistic perspective rather than focusing on particular moments of the journey. The present article, therefore, aims to provide a comprehensive narrative of doing a PhD online that effectively captures the essential nature of online PhD students' learning experiences from the beginning to the end.

RESEARCH APPROACH, CONTEXT, AND METHODS

This qualitative study employs a phenomenological approach to develop an in-depth understanding of doctoral students' lived experiences in doing their PhD online. Phenomenology is an umbrella term referring to a theoretical perspective that focuses on the direct experiences of individuals rather than external and objective truth. Phenomenologists investigate a phenomenon from the subjective position of research participants who are 'there' in the phenomenon – who experience the phenomenon directly and make meanings out of their experiences consciously (Groenewald, 2004).

There are some differences among phenomenologists in terms of their conceptual and methodological approaches to grasping essential structures of human consciousness. For example, Husserl (1913) puts an exclusive emphasis on the first person's consciousness in terms of making meanings of one's experiences to the degree that he brackets the question of the existence of the natural world outside the first person's intentional consciousness. Heidegger (1962), on the other hand, argues that the essence of existence is being in the world and being with others; thus, the meaning of our lived experiences needs to be sought based on the 'thoughtfulness' to the relational existence. Merleau-Ponty (1945) further points out our consciousness is embodied in the natural world; thus, cannot be separated from our body and the world. Nevertheless, all phenomenologists agree with the social and cultural situatedness of human interactions and value the human consciousness as a source of interpretations of those actions (Cohen et al., 2017). All phenomenological research projects focus on understanding 'how' and 'why' participants' knowledge of a particular phenomenon and situation is constructed, which is primarily achieved by utilising qualitative research methods.

This study examines thirteen students' experiences in an online PhD programme, offered by a research-intensive university in the UK, in two academic phases. Part 1, the first two years of the programme, provides six pre-selected online modules, which are strategically designed to allow students to build on their professional experience to conduct educational research (see K. Lee, 2019, 2020, for more detail). An international cohort of around thirty students who are all experienced educators in diverse educational settings start the programme each January and take the six modules together in the same order. Part 1 also offers two annual residential meetings during which the cohort visits the university campus, meets each other, and participates in face-to-face research training sessions for a few days. Part 2 begins with each student submitting a research proposal (i.e., confirmation document) and seeking the institutional approval of their research ideas and plans. Once the proposal is approved, they conduct an independent thesis project with some support of an academic tutor assigned to them as a thesis supervisor. Students spend varying amounts of time to obtain a PhD; however, many complete this thesis phase in two to four years. Except for the two residentials organised

during the first two years, these PhD students study fully online at a distance from the university and each other.

The ultimate aim of this phenomenological study is to construct a deeper meaning of being an online PhD student and subsequently becoming a researcher through participating in a focused online programme. This study mainly utilises the qualitative interview data collected from students who were close to the completion of Part 2 or had recently graduated from the programme. Thirteen students voluntarily participated in a semi-structured interview (see Table 1). Given that all participants were mature adults and experienced educators who were at the end of their PhD studies, potential ethical issues were assessed minimal. However, two researchers engaged in the data collection process, including the present author, were tutors on the programme. We possessed our own preconceptions about different aspects of the programme and the students' experiences, which could shape and direct the interview conversations in a particular way (we were also supervisors of three of the interview participants). Thus, a conscious decision was made to employ a doctoral assistant from a different programme (who was familiar with the focused programme but never directly involved in it) to conduct interviews on our behalf to minimalise the direct influences of our presence on the data.

Table 1. Interview participants

#	Gender	Professional Roles	Disciplinary Background	Country of Residence
1	M	Lecturer	Business	Iraq
2	M	Lecturer	Teacher Education	UK
3	M	Vocational Trainer	English Language	Saudi Arabia
4	F	Lecturer	Law	UK
5	M	Lecturer	Human Resources Management	Ireland
6	F	Lecturer	Health Service Management	Ireland
7	F	Lecturer	Business Management	Germany
8	M	Lecturer	Engineering	Ireland
9	M	Associate Professor	Law	Hong Kong
10	M	Vocational Trainer	Sociology	Belgium
11	M	Professional Engineer	Engineering	Vietnam
12	M	Learning Technologist	Language and Music	UK
13	M	Lecturer	Psychology and English	Japan

Research outcomes can never be detached from researchers' taken-for-granted assumptions of the researched phenomenon since all researchers walk into their research with their presuppositions and bias (Hammersley, 2000). Nevertheless, we still hoped to follow Husserl's exhortation to "'put the world in brackets" or free ourselves from our usual ways of perceiving the world' (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2017, p. 21) by distancing ourselves from the moments of collecting stories. Seven open-ended questions were designed to help participants to recollect their memories and reflect on them in chronological order (from Part 1 to Part 2). The interview questions included the following: 'Can you please tell me about yourself, your academic background, and research interests?'; 'Can you please tell me about your experiences in Part 1?'; 'Can you please tell me about your experiences in Part 2 so far?'; 'Why and how did you choose to do your doctoral study online?'; and 'What does being an online doctoral student mean to you?'. When participants struggled to dive deeper into their reflective narratives, sub-questions that include specific prompts (e.g., the first week on the programmes, particular challenges in Part 2, communication methods with supervisor) were further provided.

Before the doctoral assistant embarked the first interviews, we ran two mock interviews with her to make sure that she became familiarised with the interview protocol and obtained the necessary interview skills. Once she completed the first two interviews, we listened to the recordings with her and provided her with further feedback so that she could improve the quality of subsequent interviews. Despite some shortcomings, we were generally satisfied with the quality of the collected data. We saw

greater openness in participants' utterances to our doctoral assistant (their fellow student) rather than to us (their supervisors), which also helped us to listen to them, not from our usual perspectives, but theirs. Due to the geographical distance of the participants from the programme, all interviews were conducted online using Skype (except for one face-to-face interview) and lasted about an hour.

All audio-recordings were transcribed and analysed following Van Manen's (2016, p. 79) explanations for conducting a thematic analysis. Van Manen defines phenomenological themes as "the structures of experiences … the experiential structures that make up the experience". After collecting a set of participants' experiential accounts of the focused phenomenon, he suggests mining meaning from them by reading over the collection. Phenomenologists can take three approaches toward uncovering thematic aspects of the phenomenon: the wholistic reading approach, the selective reading approach, and the detailed reading approach. Although the three approaches are not suggested as sequential steps, I, the present author, utilised them as steps in our analysis in parallel with Corbin and Strauss' (2015) three coding steps involving open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Firstly, each interview transcript was broken down into a series of meaningful units of analysis – paragraphs answering each of the seven interview questions. I did open coding on each broken-down unit, and initial codes were identified and named by highlighting meaningful phrases on the printed interview transcripts. I also made notes on margins of the transcripts about potential meanings emerging from those highlighted phrases. Here, I asked Van Manen's (2016) question for *the wholistic reading approach* of 'what sententious phrase may capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole.' The second round of reading (and axial coding) was undertaken, and the codes were more carefully examined, compared, and categorised at this stage to draw more concrete meanings from them. Another attempt was made to select and highlight statements that stand out in the interview transcripts by asking Van Manen's question for *the selective reading approach* of 'what statements(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?'. Initial themes were constructed as a result.

Finally, I conducted selective coding by applying Van Manen's *detailed reading approach* to re-reading those previously highlighted sentences. By asking 'what does this sentence or sentences cluster reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?', I tried to better organise and structure the meanings of the phenomenon. I reviewed the initial themes and determined essential themes (opposite to incidental themes in Van Manen, 2016, p. 106). In other words, particular effort has been made to capture the essence of online PhD studies by comparing and contrasting them with the relevant format of doctoral studies with the characteristics of being 'programmed', 'part-time', 'professional' and so on. I then composed our thematic statements and descriptions that answer our sub-questions: 'How do doctoral students make sense of their experiences in an online PhD programme?' and 'What are the essential aspects of the programme that structure and shape students' experiences?'. This writing was shared with the interview participants and colleagues in the programme for member-checking purposes (Creswell, 2014). I received useful comments and suggestions that contributed to enhancing the 'trustworthiness' of the research outcomes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS

This section presents seven themes that illustrate the essential nature of doing a PhD online, answering the two questions: 'What are the lived experiences of online PhD students? and 'What are the particular aspects of the programme that structure the experiences?'. In order to achieve Van Manen's (2016) well-articulated aim of phenomenological research, the themes are written using the reflective narratives of the research participants (i.e., voices of online doctoral students):

> to transform lived experiences into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experiences. (p. 36)

EARNING A PHD, NOT A PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE

As Participant 7 clearly puts it, 'it needed to be a PhD. [My] university wouldn't really appreciate [an] EdD'. Table 1 shows that nine participants have a career established in higher education contexts as an academic and that 'PhD' is one of the essential criteria for their choice of where and what to study. Participant 5 (Lecturer in Human Resources Management) explains his motivation for pursuing a PhD degree as follows:

> I have a master's degree and I'm employed in, it's not a university, it's an institute of technology. So, we're much more focused on practical teaching and preparing people for employment … [however,] the higher education landscape in Ireland is changing. And I felt that if I didn't have a PhD, any ambitions I might have to progress … I wouldn't be able to realise. I also felt that what the [institutional] system is trying to do for students, is becoming less employment-focused … So, in order to be fairer to students, I need to be PhD qualified, if that makes sense. So, I felt it was something I needed to do.

The necessity of earning a PhD, for enabling career advancement or being better qualified for the current job, is one of the shared themes presented in most interview transcripts. Such necessity tends to be closely linked to a strong sense of a deficit in their current qualification and a relatively weak sense of self-confidence as a proper academic. That is, the research participants chose the focused programme with a clear and rather instrumental goal to gain the PhD qualification required for their career progression and the increased sense of self-legitimacy as a qualified member of their current professional community. I can hear an instrumental value of a PhD from Participant 10 from a 'careers perspective' (Vocational Trainer from Belgium):

> I ended up working in the education sector, even though I didn't have any academic background in that. In 2009, I thought it might be better to deepen my profile in the education sector a little bit. Because in development corporation settings, competition is very high and the [stronger] background you have also academically is clearly helpful … [B]ecause it was mainly from a careers perspective so that stopping and then doing three or four years full-time study is really not an option. So that's when I came up with that programme.

SHAPING A PHD CONVENIENTLY AROUND EXISTING LIFE

As participant 10 hinted in the above excerpt, in order to satisfy their thirst for a PhD degree but without sacrificing their already-established professional roles and geographically-bounded personal lives, this group of students searched for a convenient path.

> I was looking for a convenient distance-based kind of programme which would not require me to enrol full-time. So that influenced my choice greatly. Besides that, I wanted a programme which would be easy for me to manage where data collection and everything would be easier for me, within my setting. And therefore, you know, research in higher education was appropriate. I found it appropriate because I work in higher education, and it would be easy to access data. (Participant 1, Lecturer in Business)

The participants conceptualised the convenience in two distinctive senses: (i) easy access to an educational opportunity, and (ii) easy access to a research opportunity. The participants in this study prioritise their professional identity as a full-time educator to their student identity as a part-time PhD student. In addition, none of them can be considered local in terms of their geographical distance from the university. In fact, nine of them are internationally located, but educational relocation (common in conventional PhD programmes with a growing number of incoming international students) is not at all their interest. That is, a PhD needs to be shaped conveniently around their more critical professional situations and physical boundaries.

The participants also pragmatically chose 'education' as the subject of their PhD studies. Participant 8's (Lecturer in Engineering) comment, 'no one can do a PhD in Engineering at a distance', suggests

that he chose to do a PhD in education because doing a PhD in Engineering (his original discipline) online was not a possible option. Moreover, he thought it would be convenient to conduct PhD research within his professional setting. As Participant 1 notes above, since they are already working in educational sectors, they can easily collect data for educational research from their classroom, for example. These convenience-focused narratives demonstrate the participants' pragmatic approach to their PhD studies, which corresponds to the entry requirement of the focused programme. To be accepted to the programme, all candidates need to have considerable experiences as an educational professional and currently engage with educational practice, which can inform their PhD research. Candidates need to have a Masters' level of research knowledge, regardless of the discipline of the study.

Most participants, despite their current engagement with the education PhD, indicate that they neither plan to become an educational researcher nor teach in the field of education. Instead, they seem to have an established sense of belonging to their original field in which they were initially trained as an undergraduate and they are currently teaching (e.g., Law, Business, Engineering). These convenience-oriented narratives about PhD studies sound somewhat alien to those who engage in conventional PhD education—at least to the present author who was trained in a traditional PhD programme as a full-time student. I earned a BA and MA in education before embarking our PhD study, and I chose education as the discipline of my genuine interest and permanent home. I even moved my entire life, from South Korea to Canada for my PhD study. Nevertheless, most participants successfully conceal the instrumental motivation of their study and construct a more convincing and acceptable narrative about their choice of education PhD by highlighting the relevance of their PhD study to their practice. Participant 4 (Lecturer in Law) mentions:

> I've come from practice; I've come very much from the focus of teaching and education. And so therefore for me, I probably have much more interest, and it's much more directly relevant to me in my current context, to be studying the education side of it.

COPING WITH A PhD LEVEL OF ACADEMIC CHALLENGES

Although the participants did not explicitly mention it, our interpretation suggests that they initially had a rather inaccurate perception or limited understanding of online PhD studies, which they assumed is less academic, and so easier than conventional PhD studies. Such perception is closely linked with their previous comments about the convenient and practice-oriented nature of online PhD studies. However, shortly after their study began, the participants were shocked by the 'incomprehensibility of PhD-level readings' (Participant 2, Lecturer in Teacher Education). In the focused programme, the first module introduces a philosophical foundation and debates in educational research (i.e., positivist-interpretive research paradigms in social sciences). The first few readings include research jargon, such as epistemology, ontology, and axiology, which can be quite difficult for those without relevant background knowledge.

For the module assignment, students plan and conduct an empirical research project and write a 5,500 word-long research report (throughout Part 1, students are required to conduct at least three empirical studies before planning their thesis project). Although the programme encourages students to research their professional practice and context, it also emphasises a critical engagement with educational theories and an original contribution to knowledge in the field. Final module assignments are expected to be publishable quality, following the university's PhD examination regulation:

> A successful candidate for a doctoral degree shall show convincing evidence of the capacity to pursue scholarly research or scholarship in his or her field of study ... The results of this research shall then be embodied in a thesis which makes an original contribution to knowledge, and the completed thesis must contain material of a standard appropriate for scholarly publication.

After the realisation of the expected high standard, the participants re-examined their previous expectation toward the programme and themselves. Subsequently, many felt uncertain about their capability to pursue a PhD. This is also a moment for many to realise that they do not have a masters' level of knowledge in education and related disciplines in social sciences. Negative emotions caused by this initial shock are evident across all interview transcripts. For example, Participant 6 (Lecturer in Health Service Management) says she felt intimidated:

> You're not sure about your level; you're not sure what the level of other people is … I did not have a background in education, and I didn't have a background in sociology or philosophy. I'd never done art or humanities before … there were quite intense discussions about epistemology and ontology and for me, this was just incredibly intimidating … you just have to read and learn, you know, all that. And also, just I suppose to learn to not be intimidated by some of those people online.

Participant 9 (Associate Profession in Law) similarly says he had a sense of insecurity:

> I think we all had this sense of insecurity about whether we'd be able to get to grips with what … you know, I'm a lawyer so this is an entirely new discipline, and whether we'd be able to reach the standard. And so, I think really the main feeling, the negative feeling was the feeling of insecurity … that's the major question on our mind: 'would I be able to complete the assignment to a satisfactory standard?' … So those were the major challenges.

A stark contrast between the high confidence in their professional roles and a lack of confidence in their academic capability is observed in most participants' narratives. This situation is rather ironic given how certain they were about choosing to do a PhD rather than EdD, for example. The perceived difficulty of PhD-level studies is not at all surprising. What is actually surprising is, however, that many of them were not ready for it (or did not fully expect it). It further confirms that the choice of online PhD was, to a large extent, driven by their instrumental or extrinsic motivation rather than genuine scholarly interests in educational research. Thus, this initial shock seems like a necessary process that students need to go through to re-examine and re-adjust their original attitudes toward doing a PhD online, and consequently, to better cope with the PhD level of academic challenges. In retrospect, the realisation of the PhD-ness was useful to make students 'wake up from a dream' and 'become alert' (Participant 9, Learning Technologist).

DOING A PHD TOGETHER AS A COHORT

The participants found it challenging to familiarise themselves not only with PhD-level of learning content but with the networked learning ethos of the programme. The focused programme is designed based on principles of networked learning and collaborative learning, putting a strong emphasis on the cohort as a learning community. Throughout Part 1, there are multiple social learning activities that students as a cohort are required to engage with—including cohort discussion, group presentations, and peer reviews. Such cohortness is one of the essential characteristics and is often referred to as the best strength of the programme. Some students genuinely enjoyed the social side of their learning experiences and were excited about meeting new people from different countries and supporting each other's academic success as a cohort community. Participant 12 (Learning Technologist) stated such feelings as follows:

> Certainly, in Part 1, the sense of community aspect was great. I think we all benefited from learning as a group, and we had a lot of conversations around the value of learning together in a group because it really helped to keep you focused, keep you engaged. That's one of the key aspects of what I was looking for in a doctoral programme.

That strong sense of community seems to be the key for most students to overcome the initial shock and uncertainty. Especially when they start sharing their emotions, they realise that they are not alone feeling in that way (see K. Lee, 2020, for more detail). Although there is general consent about the

benefit of having a strong cohort community, it does not necessarily mean that students find it easy to engage with networked learning activities. Although students are all experienced educators with a multi-year history of teaching and learning, the idea of networked learning seems to be relatively new to most of them. Even though the networked learning approach is relatively common across different online learning contexts (K. Lee, 2018), most participants in this study did not have any previous experience of online or distance learning (except for two who had done their master's online). They find establishing the social connections and performing the collaborative tasks challenging and burdening at the beginning of the programme. Participant 13 (Lecturer in Psychology and English) explains as follows:

> The first module was evil, mainly because you had no real idea of what to do with these forums, and you don't know anybody. So it was a very, very strange experience … Personally for me, as much as I like using technology, yet I'm not a social media type person … I'm aware of all these technologies, and I know about them; but I just, I don't like to use them. I'm a more analogue person when it comes to social interactions. So that aspect of it was really, really difficult for me.

Familiarising themselves with the new ways of learning while testing out their own ability to pursue a PhD level study is a stressful task to these part-time students who returned to the university after a long study break with a full-time job and other social responsibilities. A lack of time in a more physical sense has exacerbated the perceived difficulty and unfamiliarity of the new way of living, according to Participant 4 (Lecturer in Law):

> Keeping on top of those, like reading, keeping on top of those deadlines, and with the assessments as well … That's where you felt the pressure. Especially when you were encountering things that were new, unfamiliar, difficult … there were some articles that we read where I think the reaction was like, 'what?' And we had to read it several times to get there. I mean really it was only just about balancing PhD work and work-work. Because I get, you know, I get very little time formally at work that recognises this … So really just balancing all of that.

BECOMING A BETTER PRACTITIONER

While the participants moved through the taught part of the programme, the initial shock and uncertainty toward the overwhelming idea of the PhD level were gradually dissolved. This PhD programme, structured around six modules with a series of carefully designed learning activities and supported by tutors and peers, allows students to focus on one small task, with a manageable size, at a time. By the time they completed the first three modules (at the end of the first year), most students became confident and comfortable with the new ways of studying, working, and living as an online PhD student. And subsequently, they have found pleasure in learning, researching, and engaging in academic discussion. Participant 5 (Lecturer in Human Resources Management) explains as follows:

> I got to use parts of my brain that I hadn't used in decades. I loved it. I loved reading something and wondering … It made me a lot more curious. So Part 1 is great for that. I did like the group of modules we were asked to do as well. I looked forward, this will sound crazy, but I looked forward to coming to my office after the children had gone to bed, for two or three hours. I used to get up early in the morning at five o'clock and six o'clock to do a few hours. I've never done that before, and it wasn't because I had a deadline. I was actually really enjoying this.

During Part 1, each student conducts five different research projects that investigate various aspects of their educational practice and institutional context as module assignments. These research experiences naturally lead to meaningful reflection on and change in their long-established pedagogical be-

lief and practice. Linking back to the practice-oriented research agenda shared by this group of students, many argue that doing a PhD has made them a better educator after all. Participant 4 (Lecturer in Law) notes this feeling as follows:

> You will have those little moments where you read something … And you think, that is really stimulating and challenging. And I'm so glad I'm doing this because otherwise I'd be a drudge, you know doing my job day in day out … I think I'm much better at supervising undergraduate and postgraduate students. I'm so much more used to them than I was before that. I think that gives me a lot of pleasure as well. This is making me do my job better.

Although a cohort takes the same modules in the same order, students' research topics and their methodological and theoretical choices made to examine the topics are widely varied. This is mainly because the programme encourages students to conduct practice-oriented research in their own pedagogical context, creating new knowledge relevant to themselves. The fact that students are simultaneously working and studying makes such a practice-and-research nexus possible. In addition, those six modules are taught by different academics with a range of scholarly interests, approaches, and expertise, which further supports each student's authentic learning experience situated in their real-life context. In doing so, students improve both academic knowledge and professional practice and ultimately find 'real pleasure in it' (Participant 4).

> Part 1 really gave you a good opportunity to explore different methodologies. That was also really important because I didn't really know anything about that at the start. So the opportunity to use different methodologies in different modules was really helpful. That gave me a really good grounding for Part 2 and helped me make a much more informed choice of methodology for Part 2 … having spoken to PhD students at other universities where you don't have that modular approach, they just don't get anywhere that sort of choice. (Participant 12, Learning Technologist)

BECOMING AN INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER

In Part 1, different aspects of the taught part of the programme interact with each other, creating unique learning and research experiences. The participants enjoyed receiving structured support not only from module tutors but from peers:

> One of the bits that has been particularly valuable has been the peer assignment marking, where you give one another feedback. So being engaged in the assessment process and feeling empowered to give feedback to peers. It's a very good experience. (Participant 2, Lecturer Teacher Education)

While progressing their Part 1 study, based on the 'repetitive' modular activities as a cohort (Participant 2), the participants developed a shared meaning of doing an online PhD, which can be summarised as being social and structured. When they moved into Part 2, however, they once again experienced a radical shift in their PhD practice – from cohort-based learning to individual learning. The programme-wide taught structure and standardised support disappeared, and instead, they were assigned a single academic as their thesis supervisor. Part 2 study is shaped around that 1:1 supervisory relationship. In general, they found it challenging to re-adjust to this new model of study. Participant 4 (Lecturer in Law) reflects on her transitional experiences from Part 1 to Part 2:

> The thing I find hard going into Part 2 is that scaffolding comes away, all of that structure … and lots of small deadlines you need to build towards. And then obviously, it's much more the deadlines that you agree with your supervisor. And that is challenging when you don't have that pressure. Because then, all the work stuff comes back in … also family commitments as well … The constant of failing to meet your own deadlines and expectations gets you down.

Participant 12 (Learning Technologist) also recalls:

> As soon as you get into Part 2, it's really difficult to maintain those community ties. We set up a little sort of learning group … we tried to keep it going and it just died really as everyone gets immersed in their Part 2. When you get into Part 2, you become suddenly very focused on your own project.

Inevitably, the participants' transitional experiences tended to be primarily influenced by how their relationship with the assigned supervisor was established. How each supervisor interacts and communicates with their supervisees varies. For example, some supervisors set up a monthly one-to-one online meeting, some speak with their students mostly via email and organise an appointment only when required, and some supervisors periodically organise online group meetings inviting all of their supervisees. Regardless of the formats of interactions, establishing a supportive supervisory relationship is a core element of the Part 2 study, through which students overcome a sense of being disoriented and left alone. Participant 6 (Lecturer in Health Service Management) explains the feeling of moving into Part 2:

> Part 2 is just absolutely where you discover if you have the ability to independently research. Because you know, it's up to you to maintain the contact [with your supervisor] … You know, [my supervisor] always read everything that I sent, she gave me very good feedback always, and we had great conversations. But ultimately, you know, it's up to me … in Part 2, I find just that journey is a lonely, lonely, lonely journey. And that's where having even just a good rapport, even a friendly supervisor, does help.

The supervisory rules are, however, often imposed by supervisors who have developed and executed the rules for many years. In most cases, it is rather difficult for individual students to challenge the rules – thus, when students do not 'get along with' their supervisors (Participant 3, Vocational Trainer), they can feel even more lonely in Part 2. While the participants attempted to set up a good relationship with their supervisor, they also strived to become self-disciplined, setting up a new PhD work and professional work balance. Gradually, each participant developed a personally suitable approach to their Part 2 study and became an independent PhD researcher. Over the following two or three years, while conducting a thesis project, writing up a thesis, and defending it, students have become more and more independent.

The meaning of independence is unique in the online PhD programme. In Part 1, students are introduced to the diversity of methodological and theoretical ideas and encouraged to bring their professional interests into the centre of their thesis project. As a result, each student develops a thesis project that reflects their own academic and professional interests. In many cases, assigned supervisors and supervisees do not share the same research interests or methodological and theoretical approaches. Simply put, allocating twenty students to six academics every year (since a new cohort always comes into Part 1) is a daunting task, and it is impossible to grant power to students (or even to academics) to choose their preferred supervisors (supervisees). Despite the considerable matching effort, therefore, the result is frequently unsatisfactory and even disappointing to students. In this situation, students develop their own research profile, which is disconnected to their supervisors' scholarship. Thus, the role of supervisors is somewhat limiting – being someone 'I can go to if I have any questions or concerns related to my PhD' (Participant 5, Lecturer in Human Resources Management), and who tells 'whether I am on the right track of not' (Participant 9, Associate Professor in Law). At the end of the day, however, the PhD is 'up to me' (Participant 6).

BECOMING SCHOLARLY VS BECOMING A SCHOLAR

At the end of their PhD, most participants are still at the same place where they began their PhD journey from in terms of their professional space, working with the same group of colleagues and students. Some have moved to a different workplace (e.g., from university A to university B); how-

ever, the nature of their professional practice has remained the same (e.g., teaching subject C). As discussed earlier, many participants in this study were already experienced lecturers in their own disciplinary field, and the purpose of earning a PhD was not necessary to cross the disciplinary boundaries and become a lecturer in education. Nevertheless, they have experienced some meaningful changes in their everyday practice and scholarly identity as a result of the PhD, as Participant 2 (Lecturer in Teacher Education) explains:

> I think I'm more scholarly now than I was before. I read more now than I did before. [However,] the college I work in doesn't, we don't have a huge postgraduate cohort at the moment … So my daily work does not require me to be very scholarly … And in fact, amongst our group, there would be very few people who are actively publishing. I see the PhD as being something sensible to achieve. I managed to get something published last year and there was a great sense of achievement in it. But I have no real desire to get published again, which sounds awful because to many people, it's their thing. It's not my thing.

As shown, there is a rather interesting tension in the participants' narratives that draws a line between 'becoming scholarly' and 'becoming a scholar'. When they were asked to talk about their scholarly identity formed through their engagement with PhD studies, they were all willing to say that they have done some meaningful scholarly works (i.e., thesis, academic presentations, and publications). However, many were noticeably hesitant to answer 'Yes' to the follow-up question, 'Do you think you are a scholar?'. Nine of them answered, 'No'. The three who answered, 'Yes', also tried to distinguish their scholarly identity from more traditional scholars' by adding a phrase like 'I know I may not be as a scholar as you know those who have been in academia for ages' (Participant 3, Vocational Trainer). They seem to identify themselves more comfortably as an educational researcher – an educator researching their practice.

Regardless of their acceptance of the identity of a scholar, the participants have engaged in academic discussion in education and developed a methodological and theoretical underpinning of educational research. They have completed a thesis project concerning an educational problem with a clear sense of independence. In essence, the very fact that they earn a PhD indicates that they successfully make an original contribution to the field of education, and this is demonstrated in their thesis and during their oral defense. Many have become a more active member of an educational research community through presenting and publishing their coursework (e.g., module assignments). Whether they are fully aware of it or not, therefore, their PhD has changed not only their own perception and practice but their institutional and social positions:

> I talk like a scholar in front of my colleagues. Whenever I do this, they say, ah now you're Dr. [surname]. Little by little, this has happened I believe. I know I may not be as a scholar as you know those who have been in academia for ages. But now, I could see the difference in myself when I was giving a presentation last month at an international conference and when I was giving a kind of in-service local training, presentations, workshops at the institute I work for. (Participant 3)

DISCUSSION

This study confirms many of the previous claims about online doctoral studies. As F. W. Kung (2017) suggests, online PhD students appreciate the convenience and accessibility of their programmes. Some participants also mentioned multiculturism, having an international cohort, as one of the strengths of the programme as ten out of thirteen interview participants are international students themselves. Such *onlineness* of their study enables them to study in this UK-based programme without leaving their home countries and to continue their professional and social responsibilities, which is one of the fundamental reasons for them to choose the particular programme. However, this study also reveals that the *PhDness* of their study is a prior requirement for their programme choice.

Similar to Bolliger and Halupa's (2012) findings, online PhD students experience a high level of anxiety especially at the beginning of their study, and this strongly influences each student's perceived satisfaction with their programme. Our study further explains where such a high level of anxiety comes from—the idea of the convenience of online education seems to generate a false perception towards online PhD studies being easy and less academic. In addition, most students find the academic field of education highly relevant to their current educational practice; however, they do not have an academic background in education. The PhDness, therefore, attracts those students to the programme in the first place but make them question their ability to pursue the PhD level study without appropriate prior learning. Unlike Bolliger and Halupa (2012), however, our research participants demonstrate that they feel less anxious but more confident at the end of the first year as they become familiarised with a new learning environment.

The *cohortness* and networked learning approaches in the programme give students a strong sense of community and social presence, which effectively supports their adjustment to the programme. This finding is also supported by previous studies (Ames et al., 2018; Denman et al., 2018; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016). Our findings, however, provide counter-evidence that this social aspect of the programme can be an additional source of anxiety to those students who have never engaged in networked learning activities. Especially when part-time students are struggling to find time and resources to dedicate to their studies (F. W. Kung, 2017), these social components of the programme can be perceived as a burden. Thus, we need effective strategies to better orient students at the beginning of the programme and scaffold their social learning experiences – taking the *part-timeness* into account – rather than assuming their ability to communicate and collaborate online.

The present study also highlights the difficulty of losing the sense of cohortness when moving into Part 2, which has not been identified by previous studies. Developing a strong cohort community in Part 1 is not an automatic process. It requires mutual effort from its members. However, sustaining the cohort relationships in Part 2, where structured social learning activities are absent, requires even more serious effort, which can be a huge challenge to part-time students. Thus, online PhD programmes need to better support students' Part 2 transition. In the same vein, the programmes can also rethink about how to help students and supervisors to establish an effective supervisory practice. As previous studies suggest (Berg, 2016; Kumar & Coe, 2017; Roumell & Bolliger, 2017), many students find it challenging to develop a positive relationship with their supervisors without face-to-face interactions. It is even more challenging when the academic interests of students and supervisors do not match at all.

This situation is caused by the interplay of different aspects of online PhD studies. Online PhD students, studying online part-time while working full-time, simultaneously exist in their academic space and professional space. Naturally, they develop a practice-oriented research agenda aiming for their research outcomes to inform their own practice. This *practice-orientedness* of online PhD studies enable students to become a better practitioner. Subsequently, most of them become a PhD researcher with their own research profile that is rather separated and distant from their supervisors'. Students still seek supervisory support to a minimum level necessary for thesis completion; however, they tend to have an ultimate sense of academic *independence* from their supervisors. In this context, it is a standard norm that students publish and present their research as a sole author. That is, it is rather challenging to realise Goodfellow's (2014) suggestion that supervisors provide opportunities to be engaged in scholarly activities in academic communities

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored and captured meaningful aspects of the lived experiences of thirteen doctoral students in an online PhD programme. Our research shows that the essence of their lived experiences is multifaceted, including different characteristics of PhD education, part-time education, and online education. Those aspects interact and create a unique mode of educational experiences. In a more specific sense, their PhD journey – from the moment of choosing to do a PhD online to the

moment of earning a PhD – has been guided by multiple, often conflicting, aspects of different doctoral education models such as the professional doctorate, the research doctorate, and the taught doctorate. Throughout the long journey, the participants have become a better practitioner and independent research, being engaged in multiple scholarly activities. However, many do not obtain a robust scholarly identity – as many would say, 'I become scholarly but not a scholar.' This may not necessarily be a problem, but an opportunity embedded in this new form of doctoral education, which may create and foster a vital research and practice nexus. However, it certainly challenges a taken-for-granted assumption on PhD education that is to develop a scholarly identity among doctoral students (Golde & Walker, 2006).

Given the growing popularity of online PhD education, it is essential to better understand the unique characteristics and experiences of students who choose to pursue a PhD in online programmes. Based on the understanding, online doctoral educators can provide adequate academic support suitable for this particular group. Different assumptions drawn from the existing knowledge set regarding conventional doctoral education are not readily applicable in emerging online education settings. Even the common divide between the research and professional doctorate may not be useful in today's doctoral education landscape with a growing diversity in student populations and doctoral education provisions (A. Lee et al., 2009). The small sample size in this single-sited study presents an obvious challenge in terms of the explanatory power and the generalisability of its findings. Future research can revisit the claims made in this article by including a larger sample size and employing different methodological approaches.

Some important questions that emerged from this study remain unanswered. For example, questions such as 'what does it mean by being a scholar to this group of PhD students?', 'how does being scholarly different from being a scholar?', and 'why do students in the program think they are not a scholar', can open up more meaningful and constructive discussion among all doctoral educators. A comparative study can be conducted to better capture the uniqueness of online PhD education and similarities and differences among diverse models of doctoral education. It can also be worthwhile to examine students' experiences in different online PhD programmes offered in other disciplines. Online PhD education scholarship can benefit from a more longitudinal approach to following the long journey of PhD students to develop a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of online PhD studies. Future research could perhaps follow an entire journey of a cohort, regularly collecting multiple datasets constructing their reflective narratives.

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BIOGRAPHY

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