

Alone in the Academic Ultraperiphery: Online Doctoral Candidates' Quest to Belong, Thrive, and Succeed

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Article abstract

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Alone in the Academic Ultraperiphery: Online Doctoral Candidates' Quest to Belong, Thrive, and Succeed

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Abstract

Despite the increasing number of non-traditional doctoral researchers, this population's experiences remain largely understudied and their voices unheard. Through in-depth interviews with 24 part-time online doctoral candidates, we explored the perceived facilitators and barriers to academic integration and sense of belonging, as well as how online delivery influences the doctoral journey. Reflexive thematic analysis revealed a strong drive for participation, sometimes matched by the supervisor but rarely supported by the institution, which in the end does not sufficiently promote community building. Online delivery was viewed as both a blessing for the accessibility it enabled and a curse due to pervasive feelings of isolation and virtually non-existent peer networks. Online doctoral researchers coped by breaking free from the fully online model whenever possible to seek in-person and synchronous interactions and guidance. We conclude that online doctoral candidates constitute an ultraperipheral population in the academic landscape. Support provided by online PhD programmes should be modelled after the actual needs of their non-traditional students.

Keywords: online PhD studies, part-time online doctoral student, thematic analysis, lived experience, ultraperiphery

Alone in the Academic Ultraperiphery: Online Doctoral Candidates' Quest to Belong, Thrive, and Succeed

Doctoral education continues its global expansion trend of the last few decades (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022). Hybrid and fully online programmes are now commonplace (Lee, 2022), particularly in a post-pandemic world where online work and study have become increasingly entrenched. Concurrently, doctoral candidates are now much more diverse than in previous decades in terms of gender, age, socioeconomic background, and ethnicity (UK Council for Graduate Education, 2023). The non-traditional profile of doctoral candidate is rapidly challenging the traditional young, on-site, and full-time candidate as the norm in this educational stage (Palmer-Pratt, 2023). However, despite its growing dominance in numbers, individuals within this demographic remain underrepresented, with their voices underheard, and their experiences understudied. PhD programmes continue to be primarily tailored to the needs of traditional, full-time students (Fawns et al., 2021). Furthermore, institutional and governmental policies, as well as grant schemes, frequently overlook or outright exclude the non-traditional student body (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009).

Part-time online doctoral researchers share many challenges with the general doctoral population. Recent research has raised concern over the pervasive low well-being of the whole doctoral student body (Boone et al., 2022), and how early-career researchers are an at-risk group in academia plagued by feelings of isolation and mental health concerns (Naumann et al., 2022; Woolston, 2022). All these factors can compound in the case of mature doctoral researchers studying online and leading complex lives with multiple responsibilities. These candidates face additional challenges in building a community of peers or establishing fulfilling supervisory relationships (Melián et al., 2023), which in turn can affect their satisfaction and engagement (Byrnes et al., 2019), thus putting them at an increased risk of dropout (Studebaker & Curtis, 2021).

Profiles of Non-Traditional Doctoral Candidates

The use of the term non-traditional has grown in the literature, coinciding with the rising numbers of this student demographic. Offerman (2011) characterised these doctoral candidates as older than 30, with professional and family obligations, self-funded, increasingly female, and diverse. More recent definitions (Savva & Nygaard, 2021) described a “peripheral” doctoral candidate pointing at “the on-campus international student, the distance student, the more mature and returning student, the part-time student, and the student pursuing a professional doctorate” (p. 155). This geographical analogy of peripherality originated in Lave and Wenger’s (1991) communities of practice and has been employed in doctoral literature to highlight the distinct challenges experienced by non-traditional students. These challenges include overcoming the absence of face-to-face interaction (Cronshaw et al., 2022), sustaining connection and well-being (Elliot et al., 2022), and fostering a sense of belonging to academia (Savva & Nygaard, 2021).

On the other hand, scholarship on part-time doctoral researchers has been particularly poignant in describing this group’s predicament. Despite being a significant part of the doctoral population globally and the outright majority in the social sciences (Zahl, 2015), part-time candidates remain invisibilised, with neglectful institutions not supporting them in the same way as full-time candidates (Evans, 2002; Fawns et al., 2021). Likewise, little information about them is available in institutional or public policy reports,

where their needs are rarely discussed. Evans (2002) suggested that universities primarily view part-time doctoral researchers as a reserve army of cheap research labour, simultaneously providing substantial enrolment fees at a marginal maintenance cost. Notably, despite having slightly earlier completion rates and research output adjusted for dedication time (Neumann & Rodwell, 2009), part-time doctoral researchers exhibit lower satisfaction and higher dropout rates compared to their full-time counterparts (Zahl, 2015).

Belonging and Community in Online Doctoral Studies

The inherent flexibility of online studies is a crucial driver of their perceived value among prospective non-traditional doctoral researchers (Pollard & Kumar, 2021). Thus, the classical “anywhere, anytime” motto of online education remains alluring. However, coordinators of doctoral programmes must strike a delicate balance, since too much structural flexibility might end up widening the psychological gap typical of online doctoral candidates, leaving them feeling disconnected (Lee, 2022). This bears significance because disengagement, dissatisfaction, or demotivation in doctoral studies have all been linked to poor academic progress and higher dropout risk (Studebaker & Curtis, 2021). Therefore, “it is critical to ensure that distance students feel that there is a strong academic community in their programme and that they also belong to the community” (Lee, 2022, p. 12).

Doctoral candidates express overwhelmingly positive opinions about their peer community (Pollard & Kumar, 2021). Peer networks provide learners with emotional support and validation, benchmarking of academic progress, and the informal exchange of crucial information (Wang et al., 2023). When crises hit, having a supportive community of peers can compensate for the effects of inadequate supervision and even tilt the balance towards persisting in the PhD when faced with thoughts of discontinuing (Zahl, 2015). Although building such communities is more challenging in the absence of physical interaction, institutions fostering cohort-based structures and facilitating synchronous interactions can successfully contribute to community building among their online learners (Lee, 2022; Savva & Nygaard, 2021).

Although research into online doctoral candidates is growing, it remains relatively scarce, with most studies still focused on young, face-to-face, and full-time doctoral candidates. Considering this gap and willing to contribute to the understanding of online doctoral researchers' experiences, this study posed the following questions:

- What factors support or hinder online candidates' participation in the academic community?
- How does the online environment impact the experiences of doctoral researchers?
- What coping strategies do online doctoral researchers employ when facing challenges?

Methodology

Context of the Study

This research was conducted at a Spanish open online university. The doctoral school coordinates and organises nine PhD programmes in both the social sciences and technical domains. The doctorates are taught in English and generally consist of an initial stage (2 or 3 semesters) with a few compulsory courses, followed by an unstructured stage of supervised research and autonomous work towards the writing of journal articles and/or a dissertation. There are no compulsory residential or other in-person activities, but some seminars throughout the PhD are held online and synchronously. A minority of the enrolled PhD candidates in these studies (21%) complete their PhDs full-time in a hybrid format and receive a grant/salary as regular university staff. In contrast, the vast majority (79%) pursue their degrees on a part-time basis, fully online, and without funding (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, 2023).

Design and Participants

This research was a qualitative, interview-based, single-case study. We employed a maximum variation sampling approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009) to ensure we captured the widest range of experiences from online doctoral researchers across various programmes, stages, and backgrounds.

The sample consisted of 24 part-time online doctoral candidates. Table 1 provides demographic information about each participant. They came from six different programmes, with most participants enrolled in education and information and communication technology (ICT; $n = 10$), and information and knowledge society ($n = 8$). There were also participants from the fields of psychology ($n = 3$), business ($n = 1$), tourism ($n = 1$), and information technology (IT; $n = 1$). Participants were at different stages of their studies: from the first year ($n = 7$), to mid-phase ($n = 9$), to the final stage or graduated in the last five years ($n = 8$). Their average age was 43 years, ranging from 27 to 63. Half of the participants were female. Of the 24 participants, 15 originated from Spain, with representation from other countries in Europe ($n = 4$), Latin America ($n = 2$), North America ($n = 2$), and Africa ($n = 1$). All participants balanced paid work alongside their doctoral studies, with eight holding positions at various universities.

Table 1

Participant Demographics (n = 24)

Pseudonym	Country	Gender	Age	PhD programme
Josep	Spain	M	63	Information and Knowledge Society
Anya	Russia	F	50	Business Management
Obi	Nigeria	M	40	Society, Technology, and Culture
Andreu	Spain	M	57	Education and ICT
Maria	Spain	F	55	Information and Knowledge Society

Pedro	Spain	M	41	Network and Information Technologies
Marta	Spain	F	48	Education and ICT
Ana	Spain	F	32	Education and ICT
Sarah	Canada	F	43	Education and ICT
Oriol	Spain	M	53	Society, Technology, and Culture
Manel	Spain	M	40	Information and Knowledge Society
Pau	Spain	M	59	Education and ICT
Federica	Italy	F	31	Health and Psychology
Juan	Spain	M	33	Information and Knowledge Society
Sandra	Spain	F	28	Education and ICT
Carles	Spain	M	27	Education and ICT
Emma	UK	F	55	Education and ICT
Matteo	Italy	M	48	Education and ICT
Laura	US	F	48	Tourism
Aroa	Spain	F	27	Health and Psychology
Héctor	Spain	M	31	Health and Psychology
Paola	Colombia	F	36	Education and ICT
Vicent	Spain	M	37	Information and Knowledge Society
Sofía	Argentina	F	46	Information and Knowledge Society

Data Collection

After receiving approval from the university's ethics committee, and with the help of the doctoral school, we sent out invitations to participate in the study to all individuals currently enrolled part-time in a Universitat Oberta de Catalunya PhD programme, along with recent graduates. Initially, 32 candidates expressed interest, but eight, being unresponsive, did not proceed. Ultimately, 24 participants advanced to the interview stage. We provided them with information about the interview process, including its procedure, duration, and subject matter, as well as details about confidentiality and their rights. All participants signed an informed consent form. We piloted the interview to get feedback and make the necessary adjustments. The interview guide covered the following topics: (a) the candidate's background and context; (b) initial expectations regarding the PhD and future career prospects; (c) barriers and

facilitators to doctoral study; (d) crises and critical moments; (e) interactions between personal life, work, and study; and (f) identity and sense of competence.

We carried out the interviews from June to November 2022. Most of the interviews were held via videoconference, but two were conducted face-to-face at the request of the participants, who preferred to meet the researcher at the university premises. The interviews typically lasted around one hour, with some being as short as 50 minutes and others extending to 75 minutes. We recorded the conversations with the participants' consent. The interviews were semi-structured, prioritising building rapport with participants over strictly following a predetermined question order. As interviews progressed, we allowed for greater flexibility by excluding questions that didn't align with the participant's current narrative or introducing unscripted questions when necessary to gain deeper insights into their most salient experiences. In several cases, we sent follow-up questions via e-mail a few days after the live interview to clarify some key aspects that were discussed. In one case, a participant reached out to us to share relevant afterthoughts stemming from our previous conversation.

Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews and reviewing them for accuracy against the recorded audio, we utilised Atlas.ti 23 software to assist us during the coding process. The analysis followed the six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis described in Braun and Clarke (2021). These phases comprised (a) familiarising oneself with the data, (b) generating codes, (c) developing themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report. In practice, these stages were not linear and involved an iterative exercise of refining codes and themes. The first author took notes from the outset of the fieldwork and conducted an initial trial coding that was then discussed with the second author in successive meetings. These meetings served to build a shared understanding of the research focus, discard codes deemed irrelevant, and agree on the themes that would articulate the findings. Some of the topics discussed had been emphasising the impacts of the online modality, avoiding the psychologisation of students' struggles, or considering the close position of the first author and the participants. Our objective during the analysis was to capture participants' experiences as lived and described by them, in their own way. Therefore, we leaned towards a critical realist theoretical framework in which coding is primarily inductive, and theme development focuses on the semantic level of the participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 10).

Findings and Discussion

We will now present the study's results and analysis, organised into three themes. First, we cover general factors that affect the integration of online candidates. Next, we delve into the perceived influence of the online medium on participants' doctoral journeys. Finally, we explore the coping efforts that candidates deploy when facing challenges.

Ways of (Not) Belonging—Or the Search for Inclusion

One of the most prominent patterns crossing the dataset was the participants' strong desire for inclusion and participation within the academic community. They consistently emphasised the importance of not equating their part-time status as a PhD candidate with a somehow diminished or part-time commitment

to their doctoral journey. In the following excerpt, Manel exemplified the tensions of balancing a part-time status with a wholehearted dedication:

I have always been clear that I would pursue a doctorate; it is a personal priority, though not a financial one. . . . It's always on my mind, like a worm crawling through my head, saying "I am here." It's a lifelong project that I love, but I cannot dedicate more hours, I simply can't.

This theme, therefore, encapsulates the participants' shared desire for inclusion and belonging within the academic community. It also highlights the factors that either facilitate or impede their sense of belonging.

Supervision has been identified in the general doctoral literature as the most crucial of the said factors, greatly affecting the overall doctoral researchers' journey (Palmer-Pratt, 2023) and, particularly, their assessment of whether the PhD was worth the time and effort invested (Rainford & Guccione, 2023). Accordingly, it was the most frequently discussed topic in our participants' accounts. Broadly, most candidates in our study expressed satisfaction with their supervisors, aligning with recent literature regarding both on-campus (Woolston, 2022) and online doctoral programmes (Jameson & Torres, 2019). However, some of these positive evaluations may have been influenced by the lack of references regarding what to expect from supervisors, as we will discuss in more detail later. Meanwhile, some participants had critical views of their supervision experience so far, and only in two cases were the assessments exceptionally positive or negative.

Supervision can "make or break a PhD student" (Lee, 2008, p. 267). Supervisors are key in keeping doctoral researchers engaged and motivated, while a perceived lack of support has been linked to increased cynicism and burnout (Boone et al., 2022). According to our participants, the supervisor was, at its best, a figure that was present, reachable, and supportive. Participants valued having regular meetings, particularly in the early stages of the online doctorate. This support was crucial to prevent a frequently reported problem for those unsatisfied with their supervisors: the loss of time, often weeks or even months, pursuing research paths that eventually led nowhere. Ana illustrated this point by noting, "I don't want to bother asking too much. So, I go ahead on my own and then we meet up and they tell me, 'Not this, not that.' I've stumbled a lot because of this." Indeed, supervisors who were available through various means (e.g., WhatsApp, e-mail, videoconferencing) and provided timely and specific feedback on the written work were highly appreciated. A proactive stance was generally preferred but accompanied by the supervisor's ability to adapt to the candidates' changing life conditions, leaving them more space when needed.

Accounts of satisfactory supervision always had an emotional side to them. Many participants considered emotional support just as important as academic support. Words of reassurance at the right moment had dramatic effects on the doctoral researcher, even tipping the balance towards continuing with the doctorate. This was the case with Sandra, who, after changing supervisors, recalled the impact of a conversation with her new supervisor that completely changed her mindset. From initially feeling inadequate and thinking she would be "one of those who quit in the first year," to eventually experiencing great encouragement and motivation, thinking "oh, well, this can actually work!" Indeed, the doctoral pursuit has been characterised as emotional labour in the literature; most doctoral researchers experience a roller coaster of emotions during their doctoral studies (Wang et al., 2023) and some even report existential crises at some point due to heavy pressure and competition (Skakni, 2018).

Our dissatisfied participants mostly shared experiences of a hands-off approach by their supervisors. General unavailability was compounded by the inherent power imbalance within the supervisory relationship and the doctoral researchers' hesitation to bother their allegedly extremely busy professors with what they considered petty doubts and concerns.

Among the dissatisfied participants, we encountered a case of toxic supervision. Sarah initially dealt with the typical hard-to-reach supervisor, who gradually escalated into an angry one when she grew tired of waiting for feedback that never seemed to arrive, and started fending for herself by looking for connections and help beyond her supervisor, in her home country. The fear of negative repercussions on her reputation stemming from an actively antagonising prestigious academic in the field, coupled with internalised guilt, was paralysing. Paradoxically, these challenges eventually led Sarah to find a new opportunity as a research assistant, where she received the guidance she lacked, allowing her to complete her doctorate and ultimately build a research career. It is important to note that this case was an exception, both in terms of the extreme negativity of the relationship and the ultimately positive outcome for the doctoral researcher career-wise. Typically, though, even the more common hands-off supervision is detrimental to candidates' mental health, networking opportunities, and degree completion (Wang et al., 2023; White et al., 2022).

Research analysing the roles of supervision and community has found that serving distinct functions, the latter complements rather than compensates for the former (Wang et al., 2023). Concurrently, other authors have emphasised the pivotal role of peers in providing support to online candidates when supervision falls short (Rainford & Guccione, 2023). Along these lines, Sarah exemplified how peers can act as a lever for change in times of crisis:

I wouldn't say that communication [with the supervisor] improved, but I developed a strong friendship with my peers, I found more people whom I could connect with, who could answer my questions, and in the end, I just did my own work.

In this regard, our participants demonstrated resilience despite the widely held perception that the institution does little to actively promote community building among part-time online candidates. Josep observed that "there's a lack of an online doctoral student community that connects people. . . . In the end, I set up the WhatsApp group myself with people I've met." In the early stages of the programme, online doctoral researchers have some opportunities to meet and work with each other through mandatory courses. A few participants then established some friendships, but they generally proved transitory, fading gradually.

Indeed, referring to on-campus doctoral candidates, Pilbeam et al. (2013) remarked that it was common for peer networks formed in the initial stage of the doctorate to decline due to increased specialisation and different rates of progress among the candidates. Therefore, it is crucial to design a programme, especially within the constraints of online delivery, that promotes ongoing shared experiences and a common purpose, facilitating lasting peer connections.

Following the early stages, several training sessions or evaluation seminars were held synchronously throughout the online doctorate under study. These seminars proved valuable to many of our participants, helping them learn about their peers' work and discover strategies that could be useful to them. For

instance, Paola remembered how watching a presentation from a colleague who was further along in their research both overwhelmed and encouraged her to conduct her own systematic review. This case exemplified one of the primary benefits offered by a peer network, which is the ability to measure your progress and receive validation that you can achieve your objectives (Pilbeam et al., 2013). More rarely, online candidates had interactions with other learners under the same supervisor or within their supervisor's research group.

Despite these instances of connection, almost all our participants felt the acute effects of the lack of regular socialisation. This proved a major contributing factor to not feeling they belonged to the academic community and, for some, their main challenge in the doctorate. For Aroa, it was draining and demotivating not to have fellow researchers with whom she could share her frustrations and experiences. Other participants explicitly reported feeling “very lonely” (Héctor, Sofía, Anya, Josep, Obi, Marta, Ana), “immense loneliness” (Pau), “abandoned” (Paola), “disconnected” (Sarah), or “lost” (Carles, Oriol). These data aligned with research stressing how isolating PhD programmes are (Naumann et al., 2022), particularly in the distance mode (Melián et al., 2023). Crucially, a sense of belonging to the community is a protective factor against poor mental health and intentions to drop out (Boone et al., 2022).

Besides the mentioned factors typically emphasized in the literature, our participants highlighted additional barriers to inclusion and belongingness related to their socio-demographic backgrounds and life events. First, international students from the Global South disproportionately struggled with material issues, ranging from currency devaluations and social crises (Sofía) to unreliable electricity grids or Internet connections (Obi), that seriously hampered their progress. These stark differences in concerns compared to doctoral candidates from the North were already highlighted in Woolston's large PhD survey (2022). Gender also proved to be a significant factor. For several female participants, recent parenthood had seriously disruptive effects, whereas no such challenges were reported by any of our male participants. In this regard, emergent research has been exploring the inhospitable terrain doctoral degrees often present to mothers (Mason et al., 2023) and the ways they may alleviate isolation through fostering online communities (Cronshaw et al., 2022). Finally, the global pandemic further impacted the doctoral journeys of all participants. While some reported experiencing reduced income, job dismissals, and unforeseen family responsibilities, others found they unexpectedly had more time to dedicate to their thesis.

Online Delivery is a Double-Edged Sword

The participants' relationship with online delivery was characterised by ambivalence, which stemmed from the fact that choosing the online mode came with trade-offs. The same characteristics of the programme that allowed students to access a doctorate that would be impossible otherwise were to blame for some of its more relevant drawbacks. Andreu illustrated the tensions between convenience and isolation:

The advantage of this university is the flexibility, otherwise, I would not have been able to pursue the doctorate. But, on the other hand, it implies that informal exchanges and creating a community of peers simply are not possible.

This ambivalence has been reported in Melián et al.'s review (2023), which highlighted an apparent paradox in which online PhD researchers were both grateful for the opportunity that the online modality allowed

and, simultaneously, yearned for physical presence and interaction. Relatedly, some participants pondered whether some of the challenges they were experiencing—such as inadequate supervision, limited institutional support, or a lack of socialisation—were attributable to the nature of online delivery or the particular features of either the overall doctoral educational stage or the specific doctoral programme they were enrolled in.

Our participants expressed two main perspectives on this issue. On the one hand, a more fatalistic stance assumed that “the institution can do little more [as this situation is] normal in all distance universities” (Pedro), and ultimately “the price you pay for accessibility” (Andreu).

Conversely, other participants adopted a more possibilist stance. They compared their current experience with other postgraduate online education they had received in the past and aimed to prove that online delivery did not inevitably imply high levels of disengagement. For example, Paola recalled building an “active community with continuous exchanges in an environment that cared” during her online master’s degree, something she only glimpsed in the initial year of her current PhD. Other participants, in the same vein, pondered that their struggles in the doctorate were not necessarily determined by online delivery and that there was ample room for improvement in their PhD programme if there was a willingness on the part of the coordinators. In this regard, Vicent opined:

This university might feel cold because it is an online university. But if, on top of that, no effort is made to humanise it a little—to make the professor, supervisor, and administration more approachable—then we are in trouble.

In alignment with Fawns et al. (2021), we argue that online learning is not inherently predisposed in any particular way; its nature is shaped by our actions. As the singer Björk has said, “if there is no soul in computer music, then it’s because nobody put it there” (as cited in Fawns et al., 2021, p. xvi), and the same applies here. Therefore, the discourse should primarily focus on institutional and faculty commitment, along with the allocation of resources that cultivate online environments conducive to promoting socialisation and community building. This becomes even more crucial when we consider the transformative effects many candidates experience in their lives and personalities because of pursuing a doctorate online (Savva & Nygaard, 2021). Advocating for programme adaptation to the needs of non-traditional PhD researchers is therefore essential to avoid wasting this potential.

On a final note, our participants’ narratives revealed that the division between online and face-to-face programmes does not operate categorically but rather exists along a spectrum. Even in an allegedly fully online programme such as theirs, many doctoral candidates actively sought face-to-face interactions to bypass the constrictions of the format and enhance their sense of belonging. They achieved this by seeking face-to-face contact with supervisors, attending conferences, doing short-term stays, or networking through social media. Andreu only felt that he somehow belonged to the academic community when he went to a conference, “not so much when presenting the paper, but afterwards at lunch, being surrounded by professors from the university.” Even participating in this study was seen by several online candidates as a way to feel included, accessing the university premises for the first time. Oriol expressed this sentiment during the face-to-face interview, repeating, “in this doctorate, I’m missing out on making contact.”

Our participants were, thus, particularly active in trying to move away from rigid categories such as fully online. When this approach to learning did not serve their purposes, usually because they felt they needed some face-to-face interaction to progress, they found ways to break free from it. Ultimately, online and face-to-face learning always exist on a continuum (Veletsianos, 2020), and if the programme structure fails to meet the needs of doctoral researchers, they find ways to adapt it themselves. In line with this perspective, Lee (2022) called for reflection on the designs of online PhD programmes, emphasising that sometimes sacrificing some flexibility and accessibility to provide opportunities for physical and synchronous interaction can be extremely beneficial. This is because these types of interactions, even in small doses, can alleviate isolation and boost the formation of peer networks (Conrad, 2005).

Nobody Knows What to Expect (But Candidates Cope)

Our participants began their PhD journeys with high hopes and excitement. However, many found themselves lacking direct knowledge of the broader doctoral stage, particularly when it came to pursuing a PhD online. Their prior educational experiences were often limited to on-campus education during their younger years. Consequently, online candidates frequently held unrealistic expectations, especially concerning aspects such as the feasibility of the program and the expected workload. For example, both Anya and Obi were told prior to beginning the programme that “the online PhD is easier than face-to-face and has a flexible schedule that you can adapt to your life.”

It is a recurrent finding in the literature that doctoral researchers entering online PhD programmes lack familiarity with the doctoral processes and have unadjusted expectations regarding issues such as difficulty, workload, or isolation (Jameson et al., 2023). This adds uncertainty to the adaptation process and hinders satisfaction and persistence (Skakni, 2018). Therefore, online universities should proactively manage students' expectations, ideally before enrolment (Fawns et al., 2021), by providing clear guidelines on what is expected, the challenges they typically encounter, and the available support resources.

Soon into the doctoral journey, our participants realised that the online PhD programme was more demanding and isolating than anticipated. Laura was expecting a “more systematic experience,” Vicent missed more “personal support and for the programme not to be so e-mail-based,” while Pedro initially expected it “to be like the master’s [only to discover that] it’s not, neither in terms of demands nor in structure. When you pass the first year, you hit a wall, and that can make you burn out.”

Previous research confirms Pedro’s observation. Jameson and Torres (2019) noted that the transition from first year, or coursework stage of the online PhD, to a more unstructured dissertation stage, is often experienced as a shock and a crisis. During this period, candidates must adjust their expectations and build confidence in their ability to carry out the research. Therefore, it is especially important for them to have external support from supervisors, peers, or the institution to minimise the risk of frustration and dropout.

During the interviews, we frequently encountered expressions of perplexity and bewilderment regarding insufficient supervision or institutional support, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

The doubts are immense. I don’t know where the limit is for what I can ask or not. What happens? I don’t know if it’s normal. I honestly have no idea, but in the end, I’ve gotten used to it. (Josep)

I feel that I'm not only alone, but I'm also struggling at an official level. If everyone feels the same, I don't know. (Anya)

Indeed, candidates did not anticipate experiencing such high levels of loneliness and isolation during their part-time online doctoral journey. When contact with the supervisor is sporadic, there is no interaction with peers or research groups, and communication with the institution is primarily e-mail-based, a realisation of being on your own becomes apparent. As Josep put it, "what you wonder is: Is there anyone else? No, there's no one else. It's just what it is." Moreover, isolation only intensified as candidates progressed in the programme, moving from the relatively structured first three semesters to the unstructured remainder of the degree.

A slightly different issue arose around autonomy. Several participants felt the autonomous work that was expected from them sometimes served as an excuse for low accompaniment by supervisors. Juan, in his second year, was expecting to work on his own, "but not to this extent!" The bar was so low that he fondly remembered when in his first year he had three or four videoconference meetings with his supervisor. Ana, beginning her third year, opined that the very phrase "autonomous work" was used as a euphemism for a supervisor adopting a hands-off approach. She felt that this, combined with the "vague resources provided by the courses" generated uncertainty and a sense of having to fend for yourself.

Jameson et al. (2023) also found concern among their on-campus doctoral participants about navigating what they perceived as excessive autonomy. However, their participants were in the later stages of the PhD, while we found the same concern from our participants, even at the beginning. Indeed, one of the distinctive features of doctoral studies is the expectation of increasing autonomy aimed at training for independent research. However, this autonomy should be scaffolded and supported by the supervisor in a way that nurtures the candidate's sense of competence and intrinsic motivation (Jameson et al., 2023). Under no circumstances should alleged autonomy mask neglect by the supervisor or the institution, particularly if we consider the distance factor our participants dealt with.

Part-time online doctoral researchers employed various strategies to address the challenges described. At the most basic level, faced with the absence of institutional funding opportunities, they had to self-fund everything, from essential tools such as analysis software to attending conferences or research stays. Attending these events, however, proved highly beneficial. Sofia, for instance, took a flight from Argentina to Barcelona to spend several weeks with her supervisor and research team. "It was like you felt a part of it. . . . Then I came back with a lot of energy to write. That visit served as a push for my thesis, and I said, 'Now, yes!'" Conversely, Matteo turned to an academic social media platform to try to establish a peer network and enhance his visibility, "I've understood that while you study, you have to learn how to build connections. You have to, in a good way, create networks and collaborate with other authors who may have more opportunities than you." Finally, several participants sought external guidance as a substitute for inadequate supervision. A few, such as Sarah mentioned earlier, Pau, or Maria, actively sought support from scholars from other universities to fill the gap left by inadequate supervision, particularly concerning methodological matters.

Limitations and Future Research

This study shares some of the typical limitations of a single case study qualitative research. While we cannot claim generalisability, our results are consistent with previous literature on the subject (Lee, 2022; Melián et al., 2023; Rainford & Guccione, 2023). Some form of transferability (Braun & Clarke, 2021, pp. 143) of our findings to similar contexts and populations is, therefore, probable. Additionally, our sample of 24 participants is quite substantial by the standards of interview-based qualitative investigations.

Another limitation is that our participants were all currently enrolled online doctoral researchers. This can cause our results to be skewed by survivor bias. We lacked the perspectives of candidates who discontinued their studies, which would certainly offer valuable insights to complement the experiences shared by their persisting colleagues. Given the striking scarcity of research on online PhD dropouts, future studies should collect their testimonies. We also obtained intriguing, albeit limited, results from specific demographic groups, such as international students from the Global South. Similarly, we observed gender differences regarding the impact of parenthood on online PhD experiences. Both populations warrant further exploration.

Conclusions

“You feel like a satellite, a loose thing out there. . . . It’s like, ‘What on earth is this university?’” (Sofia).

Our participants’ experiences extended beyond Savva and Nygaard’s (2021) depiction of a peripheral doctoral candidate in terms of remoteness and heightened barriers to resource access. Participants in our study pursue their PhDs part-time, online, and often from their native countries, aligning them more closely with an ultraperipheral group in the academic landscape. We draw a parallel with ultraperipherality—a term used in the European Union to describe remote, isolated regions facing persistent obstacles regarding representation, participation, and access to funding and resources. This emphasises the need for specific measures to facilitate their integration (Kochenov, 2011).

The doctoral journey is a bumpy road for everyone. However, pursuing a doctorate part-time and online introduces additional challenges that stack the odds against these research learners. For online candidates, everything becomes distant. They often feel invisible and neglected by the institution. While most are generally satisfied with supervision, a significant part is not, and we found one case of a toxic experience. Peers are a faraway reality too, with most online doctoral candidates unable to form lasting alliances with peers. Despite these challenges, part-time online candidates proved resilient. Their main coping strategy involved breaking the mould, not only of the purely online format but also of the exclusive online supervisory relationship. They incorporated occasional forms of synchronous and face-to-face interaction to seek guidance and participation. Additionally, some compensated for insufficient supervision by seeking external scholarly support.

This study offered a rare look into the lived experiences of part-time online candidates leading complex lives while carrying out their PhD research. As a result, we derive several recommendations. Online PhD programmes can do more to support these research learners. First, they need to provide a welcoming and

supportive environment for non-traditional doctoral candidates, who represent most of their student population. This means tailoring the design of the programme to these candidates' needs. In this regard, it is crucial to continually provide opportunities for them to connect with their cohorts and build peer networks throughout the PhD journey. Gathering proposals, while primarily online and synchronous, should also consider incorporating occasional face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, the transition from the coursework stage to the dissertation stage is critical and needs particular attention. Regarding the supervisory relationship, candidates need to have clear expectations, ideally even before enrolling, about what it entails and what their respective rights and obligations are. Supervisors also require guidelines, training, and accountability. Finally, we must not underestimate the importance of supporting well-being among online doctoral researchers. As our study participants have shown, pursuing a doctorate is not only an intellectual endeavour but also an emotional one.

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