

Practitioner researchers:
A phenomenological study exploring
the experiences of PhD students
researching their field of professional
practice.

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Abstract

This study explores the lived experience of PhD students who are researching their field of professional practice. Traditionally PhD programmes were shaped around a normative understanding of what a PhD student is - someone who is young, professionally inexperienced, and studying full-time. Broader societal and academic trends have caused a massification of doctoral education, bringing many new types of people to study at doctoral level. To ensure the PhD programmes can support them, it is vital to understand the experience of non-traditional PhD students. While existing literature has looked at the student experience of doctoral study, there is little empirical research which explores the experience of professional practitioners studying for a PhD. Current research focused on professionals is primarily focused on professional doctorate students, which has a different structure to the traditional PhD. To explore the experience of PhD students who are researching their field of professional practice, this study used a descriptive phenomenological methodology to conduct and analyse the research data. The methodology used in this study employs the framework of analysis from Giorgi (2009) to bring forth the general structure of the phenomenon. This study has shown that there are five invariant constituents which are vital to the general structure. The first – Understanding what a PhD is – finds students are conceptually unprepared in their understanding of what the degree is when they begin. This becomes a conceptual threshold which the student must cross before they can move on with their study. The second – Learning and support during the PhD are not limited to what is provided formally by the university – shows the importance of informal support, primarily the importance of peer support. Forming strong peer bonds is an essential form of support for PhD students learning and wellbeing. The third - Supervisor relationship is the primary source of interaction between student and the university – finds practitioner students are unable or reluctant to interact with other parts of the university ecosystem. There is often a mismatch in expectations between student and their supervisors related to their professional status. The fourth - The PhD is only one part of the students' lives and must be managed alongside other parts – explores further the ways these external demands impact the PhD experience. The final invariant constituent - Doing a PhD irreversibly changes the way students view their practice and themselves – reveals the ontological shift undertaking a PhD has on the student and the way this impacts their relationship with their practice. This study addresses a gap in the literature by focusing on an under-researched group of PhD students and furthers our understanding of the experience of this group of students. It could be used in informing developments of PhD programmes to address some of the needs of the changing body of students.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Joseph Waghorne

1st October 2020

Chapter 1 - Introduction

"At the beginning I had absolutely no idea what kind of an undertaking it would be." – P 3 – Teacher

The above quote sums up the feelings of many doctoral students at the beginning of the process. It is common for students not to understand what they are committing to as a doctorate is unlike any form of education they will have done before. In their popular instructional book 'How to get a PhD' Phillips and Pugh describe moving through the doctorate as "the progressive reduction of uncertainty" (Phillips & Pugh, 2012, p. 97). The experience of undertaking a doctorate is a transformational journey.

Amongst the wealth of publications on the doctoral experience, there has been little empirical research into the experience of PhD students who are researching their field of professional practice. This thesis addresses this gap in the doctoral literature. The following phenomenological study explores the lived experience of these PhD students.

The research question for this study is "*What is the experience of PhD students who are researching their field of professional practice?*". This research question intends to explore practitioner researcher perspectives on the process of doing a PhD, as well as the challenges and barriers they may face when studying for a PhD in their field of practice. This study highlights the experience of a particular type of PhD student. While no single PhD experience is the same, the descriptive phenomenological methodology aims to reveal the essential essence of the phenomenon, the constituents which link their experiences.

In many fields, there are now doctoral degrees tailored for professional practitioners – professional doctorates – but they remain a niche product. Consequently, there has been much research into these new forms of degrees (Drake & Heath, 2011; Scott et al., 2004) which has come at the expense of better understanding the practitioner research experience specifically for the traditional form of the PhD. While the professional doctorate has been designed with practitioners in mind, many practising professionals who choose to do a higher research degree still opt for the traditional PhD. The fact practising professionals are still choosing to undertake a PhD, even with the option of a more tailored programme, leads one to wonder if the current design of PhD programmes can meet the needs of this

cohort of students. This study will shine a light on the experience of these PhD students and the forms of support they use.

The purpose of this chapter is to outline how the thesis is organised and introduce some of the key ideas, including why this study is important. It will also touch on the methodological approach used in the research project.

1.1 - Why this research is important

As mentioned above, there are doctoral degrees specifically tailored for practitioner researchers, however many still choose to embark on a traditional PhD instead. We do not know enough about the experience of PhD students who are researching their field of professional practice. Although there are no figures on how many PhD students are professional practitioner researchers, the latest figures suggest that around 23% of PhD students are studying part-time (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2020). While not all of these will fall under the practitioner researcher bracket (and indeed not all practitioner researchers study part-time), it gives the impression that the number of non-traditional PhD students is significant enough to warrant further investigation into their experience of undertaking a PhD. A better understanding of this experience can help to determine whether currently the degree is structured in a way to meet their support needs.

Over the past two decades, research and researchers have become a key part of the economic performance of western nations (Lee & Boud, 2009). Consequently, the training and development of researchers have moved into the political and policy spotlight. The result has been a move away from the PhD being solely an academic apprenticeship where the thesis is itself a product of knowledge. Rather the doctorate has been moving to a programme primarily focused on training advanced knowledge workers (Lee & Boud, 2009). The professional doctorate was developed in response to calls from businesses that the PhD did not fit the needs of professions and was too distant from practice (Rolfe & Davies, 2009). The implication of this is to view the PhD as not the correct choice for professional practitioners, but many still choose it for various personal or professional reasons. Examples of why include a perception in academia that the PhD is the ‘gold-standard’ doctoral degree, there are more funding streams for PhD students, and professional doctorates are not as professionally recognised globally as the PhD (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016).

One of the consequences of the development of the professional doctorate has been a lot of research into the experience of those studying it. This has resulted in a vacuum of research into this type of student who chooses *not* to study for a professional doctorate but rather decided on the PhD. So, while the PhD may not fit the needs of business and the professions, little is known about the experience and needs of the students who choose to study it over the professional doctorate. This study shines a light on the student experience and better understand the support mechanism required by this group of students.

This study is focusing on the experience of professional practitioners who are researching their field of practice, and many of these students are studying part-time. Although not always the case, practitioner researchers tend to continue practising during their study. While this might enable them to keep up to date with their field of practice, this limits their ability to interact with research training, as well as other learning and support provisions put in place by the PhD programme. There is a minimum threshold of participation required to achieve a doctorate, being a tourist in the academic community of practice is insufficient (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2015). This can lead students to rely further on their supervisors for learning and support than intended. It can also lead students to turn towards the hidden curriculum of less recognised - and unsanctioned support – learning and support methods (Wisker et al., 2017; Elliot et al., 2020).

Students from professional fields tend to enrol part-time, whereas those studying in the natural sciences are typically full-time students without professional backgrounds (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). This naturally created a divide in the disciplines the participants were studying. Existing research on the PhD experience has been biased towards the humanities and social sciences, there is less known about the natural science PhD experience (Leonard & Becker, 2009). This is also reflected in this study which does not include any professional practitioners studying in the sciences. Although no restrictions were placed on the possible fields of study during participant recruitment, the participants who took part in this study are mainly from education and health disciplines.

1.2 - Practitioner Research

This thesis focuses on practitioner researchers. As this term is used throughout this work it deserves to be conceptualised and defined. Broadly practitioner research is research

conducted by individuals who also have experience working in the professional field under study. McLeod defined it as “research carried out by practitioners for the purpose of advancing their own practice” (McLeod, 1999, p. 8). This definition has been challenged for setting out criteria for assessing the quality of practitioner research and for explicitly defining the usefulness of this research for practice purposes, rather than academic or policy purposes (Shaw, 2005).

Fox et al. (2007) argue practitioner research should be no different from other forms of research, the goal is still to produce new knowledge and the methods of achieving this are the same. The distinction comes “as a result of their unique position in the research process” (Fox et al., 2007, p. 1). Although Shaw and Lunt contend there are two different forms of practitioner research, academic-partnership research and practitioner-led research (Shaw & Lunt, 2018), they maintain there are clear distinctions between methodologies, the writing style, focus of study, and the extent to which the benefit of the research is utilised in the practice. Practitioner-led research is typically led by a practitioner who is working alone on a smaller scale. These studies are more likely to pay explicit attention to how their research can be utilised. They focus on understanding, developing, assessing, or evaluating practice - and the role of academics (supervisors) in these studies is to provide support and resources. This form of practitioner research, that of the lone researcher, is more aligned with the experience of participants in this study. Shaw & Lunt (2018) offer five characteristics of practitioner research:

“1. direct data collection and management, or reflection on, existing data; 2. professionals are substantially involved in setting its aims and outcomes; 3. it has intended practical benefits for professionals, service organisations and/or service users; these hoped-for benefits are often expected to be immediate and ‘instrumental’; 4. practitioners conduct a substantial proportion of the inquiry; 5. the research focuses on the professionals’ own practice and/or that of their immediate peers.” (Shaw & Lunt, 2018, p. 142)

The participants in this study meet these characteristics and this is the definition of practitioner research adopted by this study.

The distinction Fox et al. make above is that practitioner researchers are engaging in insider research, whereby they have some experience of the world they are researching. This does not necessarily mean they have to be directly researching their site of employment, merely they must have “intimate knowledge of the community and its members” (Hellawell, 2006, p. 484). This insider position is a unique situation for practitioner research doctoral students which does not relate to other doctoral students or academic researchers. Drake and Heath argue that for insider doctoral researchers the new knowledge they are required to create does not come from a single research domain, but rather from “combining understandings from professional practice, higher education practice and the researcher’s individual reflexive project” (Drake & Heath, 2011, p. 2).

1.3 - Context of the research

This section will give some background and context to the study. It will explain the purpose of the PhD, its background, who undertakes the degree, and the contemporary and cultural context of the British PhD.

1.3.1 - *The purpose of the PhD*

A Doctor of Philosophy, more commonly referred to as a PhD, is a post-graduate research degree. It is the main doctoral qualification in the UK and worldwide and is widely regarded as the “pinnacle of university scholarship” (Gilbert, 2004, p. 299). Students who undertake a PhD are required to undertake a piece of independent research which is then presented in a written thesis. The PhD has commonly been viewed as a gateway to a job in academia (Vitae, 2013; Wisker, 2012) and is considered an academic apprenticeship (QAA, 2015).

In a PhD, the doctoral candidate will undertake an independent research project with guided supervision from established academics. The candidate is required to produce an output, such as a written thesis, which must make an original contribution to knowledge (QAA, 2015). The latest version of the QAs framework for Higher Education Qualifications in the UK states doctoral degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication.

- A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice.
- The general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems.
- A detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry. (QAA, 2014, p. 30)

The final assessment comes from independent examination on the quality of the thesis, followed by the candidate defending the thesis in an oral examination, commonly referred to as *viva voce*.

The requirement for the final product of the PhD – the thesis – to make an original contribution to knowledge has always been a core part of the PhD and has shaped the degree. However, due to subjectivity in how the PhD is examined, the requirement of what counts as an original contribution is not clear or standardised (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000; Tinkler & Jackson, 2004). Tinkler & Jackson refer to originality as “a slippery and potentially all-embracing term and one that academics interpret in diverse ways” (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004, p. 117) and how “it is usually left to examiners to derive their own interpretations” (*ibid*, p. 117). This seems to match with what examiners themselves report, in their piece on ‘What examiners do’ Golding, et al. say “original research does not have to be groundbreaking, unprecedented or paradigm shifting. Examiners expect a thesis to add something to a field, but they do not require the definitive contribution that transforms the field, the equivalent of the next theory of relativity” (Golding et al., 2014, p. 571). Much research has reported on what examiners look for in a thesis (Mullins & Kiley, 2002; Trafford & Leshem, 2002). However, due to confidentiality rules, there is little to no quality control on the reports of PhD examiners (Johnston, 1997).

The QAA criteria listed above highlights how, in wider national policy terms, the PhD is meant to produce both new knowledge and to develop the researcher. This marks a historic shift, previously the thesis was the purpose of the PhD and the production of the researcher was a tacit outcome. The QAA criteria embedded the production of the researcher into the requirement to achieve the degree. This policy shift is part of a long trend which has moved

the thesis being the purpose of the PhD, to a model where the PhD is intended to produce advanced knowledge workers (Lee & Boud, 2009). In 1993 the Office of Science and Technology stated: “the traditional PhD is not well-matched to the needs of careers outside research in academia or an industrial research laboratory”(Office of Science and Technology, 1993, p. 3) and determined a change was needed. In 2009 Lee & Boud highlighted the issuing of ‘doctoral descriptors’ which emphasised a focus not only the output produced through the PhD but also the type of doctoral graduate produced.

Doctoral students are no longer cocooned in their disciplinary field but receive training in transferable ‘soft skills’ (Usher, 2002). The QAA now explicitly highlights the need for doctoral graduates to transfer their skills to jobs outside of academia as one of the purposes of the PhD: “Whereas until the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries the primary purpose of acquiring a doctorate in the UK was for entry to the academic profession, now this is just one of many options for doctoral graduates, who enter diverse jobs across all sectors, bringing their research skills to bear in their own professional context” (QAA, 2015, p. 4). Knowledge is multifaceted and the type of knowledge generated in the PhD has shifted as a result in the shift to a research training programme. Traditionally the PhD was generating what Gibbons et al. (1994) described as Mode 1 knowledge – homogenous research methods, knowledge generated in an academic environment separate from practical settings, singular in discipline, autonomous from the research subjects, and knowledge which approved by academic gatekeepers. The increase in the numbers studying for doctoral degrees and the desire to produce advanced knowledge workers has changed this - knowledge is often generated at the site of context and modern doctoral work is often encouraged to be transdisciplinary. However, the traditional method of examination remains, whereby the gatekeepers are stewards of the disciplines. The first part of chapter 2 discusses these points in detail.

There is scholarly debate about what extent the PhD can achieve both objectives – the production of knowledge and the development of the modern researcher. Gilbert says there is a “lack of consensus among academics themselves on whether the emphasis of the PhD should be on producing new knowledge or cohorts of skilled researchers” (Gilbert, 2009, p. 55). In recent history, this creative tension has resulted in the balance shifting towards the latter, with more emphasis going on generic skills developed throughout the doctoral

process (Gilbert, 2004). There has been a concentrated attempt to reduce the pedagogical burden of the PhD on the supervisor. Traditionally a doctoral student's learning in the PhD was the sole responsibility of their supervisor. Not only do students now have two or three supervisors, but universities focus much more on the research environment and culture, as well as the training provisions offered. This can be seen in the rise of research council sponsored Doctoral Training Centres and Doctoral Training Partnerships which have strict rules on the support structures in place for PhD students. However, this diversity in pedagogisation assumes the student can avail themselves of this broader curriculum. When this cannot happen – for example, if a student is not based near the university or is at their professional employment during the day – it can lead the student to fall back on their supervisors or the hidden curriculum for their learning needs during the degree.

The term 'doctorateness' has been popularised as a result, principally to determine the qualities all doctoral candidates should be able to demonstrate regardless of discipline (Trafford & Leshem, 2009; Denicolo & Pack, 2013). Yet the term has no precise or commonly agreed definition, a void which highlights a tension between academic practices and policymakers on the purpose of the PhD. This tension matters as it impacts the way the formal curriculum is structured, the support provided to students, and the way the degree is assessed. Wellington (2013) has remarked on why solving the question of the purpose of the PhD is important for policy and practice as it shapes both "the way examiners judge the written dissertation" and "the viva and the way it is conducted, and which questions are and should be actually asked" (Wellington, 2013, p. 1490). For practitioner researchers, this tension between policy and practice is further compounded by the QAA requiring a substantial body of knowledge to be acquired in an academic discipline or a professional practice. This is then purely judged by the conventional examination procedure of the viva, an event which is administered by academics, who may have less experience in professional practice than the student.

1.3.2 – A brief background of the PhD

The doctorate has a long history which can be traced back to the twelfth century at the University in Paris (Noble, 1994). The concept spread across the continent and doctorates were adopted in the disciplines of law, medicine, and theology. The process of achieving a doctorate was then structured with clearly defined rules requiring the student to undergo

first a private test and then a public defence of a thesis against challengers (Durant, 1950 as cited in Noble, 1994, p. 8).

The modern adoption of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) grew out of Germany in the faculty of arts or philosophy. Since its emergence and subsequent adoption in the liberal arts, the PhD has undergone significant changes. Firstly, whereas the thesis used to be presented orally, it became a requirement to produce a written piece of work. Secondly, the award of Doctor of Philosophy no longer meant the student had to be competent in philosophy. Finally, the PhD is no longer given to those considered to be masters of their discipline, but rather it is given to those who have demonstrated academic competence (Noble, 1994).

In Britain, the research degree was introduced partly as a response to foreign scholars choosing to go to Germany as they were awarded a qualification – a PhD (Bogle, 2017). The 1917 Conference of Universities recommended the introduction of a research degree and in the same year, Oxford University was the first to offer a doctorate (DPhil) with other universities quickly following (Bogle, 2017).

There was a steady increase in the numbers taking of PhDs throughout the early and mid-20th century. It was not until the 1970s that having a PhD was becoming viewed as mandatory for an academic position and this caused the number of students to increase further. As the numbers increased there was a need for greater scrutiny. Many funded students were taking too long to complete or not submitting at all (Bogle, 2017). Formal training was introduced for ESRC funded projects and the government launched the first Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) to judge the quality of university research outputs. The RAE assessed the number of doctoral degrees awarded by institutions which further inflated numbers (Bogle, 2017).

1.3.3 - Who undertakes a PhD?

There is not a great understanding of the number and profile of PhD students in the UK. There is not a public register of the number and breakdown of PhD students. What we do know is in the past thirty years there has been a sharp increase in numbers undertaking doctoral degrees in the UK (HEFCE, 2011), which reflects a global trend (Group of Eight, 2013).

The increase in PhD students mainly came from those studying full-time, with an 81% increase between 1997 and 2010. In that period, the number of part-time students remained comparatively flat, with 4055 students starting a PhD in 1997 which increased to 4715 in 2010 (HEFCE, 2011). Latest figures suggest 23% of doctoral students study part-time (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2020).

As previously mentioned, the PhD has traditionally been viewed as a gateway to an academic job, but this is changing. The majority of PhD students now end up in careers outside of academia, and the numbers are particularly significant for science graduates. Data analysed by VITAE from the Longitudinal Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey, which looks at graduate PhD students 3 to 4 years after submitting, shows 43.9% of graduates across all disciplines were employed in the Higher Education (HE) sector (Vitae, 2013). Though it must be noted there are wide disciplinary differences in this employment rate, with Art and Humanities and Social Science PhDs far likelier to still be working within HE than those from a natural science and engineering background. This matches the findings from the Royal Society which found only 3.6% of Science PhD graduates go on to achieve a permanent academic position (Royal Society, 2010). Although many may have stayed working in research in the private or third sectors¹.

Focusing on professional researchers, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2015 found 17.9% of respondents worked in a non-research role directly before beginning a PhD and 12.5% were still working for the same organisation as before they started the PhD (Turner, 2015). This suggests there is a significant number of PhD students who are in work before starting a PhD (rather than continuing straight from a master's or undergraduate degree) and many do carry on working in jobs outside of academia/research during their PhD.

It should be emphasised much of the data used in all the above research is increasingly out of date but has not been followed up with updated findings. Gathering statistical evidence into the numbers was out of the scope of this study and is reliant on institutional and governmental sources.

¹ It should also be noted that staying in HE after the PhD does not automatically mean a PhD graduate would be working in research. Teaching only contracts are becoming increasingly prevalent in the HE sector. See <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/universities-most-reliant-on-teaching-only-staff-named>

1.3.4 – The contemporary and cultural context of doctoral education

This research is focused on the British experience of the PhD. As much of the doctoral literature comes from different international experiences, there needs to be clarification and understanding of the cultural contextual differences of doctoral education, specifically the PhD.

Despite there being several cultural differences between countries, there are a series of intertwined global drivers in contemporary doctoral education which have been identified: massification of doctoral education, the professionalisation of doctoral education, and quality assurance (Andres, et al., 2015). These trends centre on the changing value of knowledge and research in contemporary society, with doctoral education seen as a principal tool in the development of researchers. These global trends manifest differently in different countries where they mix with existing cultural and historical roots of doctoral education and academia.

In Britain, these global trends saw questions asked whether the doctorate was able to produce knowledge workers with the skills required by business and industry (Roberts, 2002). There were concerns the degree was too specialised and not providing generic research training (Andres, et al., 2015). The result after the Roberts report has been a greater focus on research training and quality assurance. National guidelines were introduced by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), and completion rates are used to monitor doctoral programmes (QAA, 2014). This has caused a professionalisation of doctoral education with institutions creating specialised roles and departments dedicated to doctoral education.

Britain is a founding member of the Bologna process which seeks to unify higher education across Europe², and the UK doctorate conforms to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (Bologna Working Group on, 2005). This framework and the QAA Doctoral Degree Classifications sets out the required learning outcomes of the doctoral programme.

² This is not expected to change as a result of the Brexit vote. https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/j13239_british_council_report_web_1.pdf

Despite this unification, the structure of the degree at the national and institutional level within Europe is different. Scandinavian doctoral students are treated as employees with rights and a regular salary. This contrasts with most of Europe and America, which treat doctoral students as it does other forms of student, where tuition must be paid (Kehm, 2006). There are differences in the examination procedure, the Nordic countries and France require a public defence in front of a panel typically with three or more members, Australia does not have an oral examination, whereas in the UK the viva is done privately between the candidate and two examiners (Kyvik & Tvede, 1998).

1.4 - Descriptive Phenomenology

This study uses a descriptive phenomenological approach to reveal the essential general meaning structure of the phenomenon under investigation (Finlay, 2009), in this case, the experience of professional practitioner PhD students researching their field of practice.

The descriptive phenomenological method derives from the work of Edmund Husserl, who is the founder of transcendental phenomenology. Husserl saw phenomenological investigations as a search for the essential essences of a particular phenomenon, which tells us what it is. Husserl wanted phenomenology to take the researcher ‘back to the things themselves’, to the way things are experienced.

One of the key elements of the descriptive phenomenological method is bracketing presuppositions about the phenomenon to view them in a new and radical way (Kockelmanns, 1967). As I am also a PhD student, I was concerned my own experiences would taint the findings when it came to the analysing the data. When reading different theories, I came across the idea of the phenomenological reduction and realised this was an opportunity to mitigate my position as an insider researcher. The goal is not to forget everything you know about the subject, but to try to avoid engaging prior information when attending to the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009). Descriptive phenomenology aims to stay as close as possible to the descriptions of the participants and only make interpretive claims which are backed up by the data.

Descriptive phenomenology is typically used in nursing and other health-related research (Finlay, 2011). While I have found some examples of its use in education research, compared to other forms of phenomenology, such as interpretive phenomenology or IPA

(interpretative phenomenological analysis), descriptive phenomenology is an underutilised method. I choose the descriptive approach due to the lack of research which looks at the experience of this type of research student. Therefore, I felt it was essential to stay as faithful as possible to the words of the participants.

The analysis phase is perhaps the most critical part of the descriptive phenomenological approach. I have used the method of Giorgi (2009) and Todres (2005). The analysis consists of four phases: reading for a sense of the whole, discrimination of meaning units, transformation of the subject's everyday expressions into discipline sensitive expressions, and formulation of the essential general structure of the phenomenon. Giorgi's framework for analysis comes from a psychological perspective, but he clearly states the method can be applied to other human and social science research fields: "The only difference is that one assumes the attitude of the discipline within which one is working: pedagogical if it is pedagogy, sociological if sociology, etc., instead of a psychological attitude. One would then have a pedagogical or sociological phenomenological method." (Giorgi, 2012, p. 11)

Phenomenology is both a methodology and a method of research. The descriptive phenomenological methodology adopted in this thesis aims to reveal the essence of the phenomenon, that is the essential elements which bind the participant experiences to help us understand the phenomenon. The literature review (chapter 2) introduces concepts such as liminality, identity, and communities of practice which are social constructionist in nature. The reader will see these concepts used as conceptual tools in the discussion chapter (chapter 6). These two epistemological positions could be seen as incompatible if one understands essence to be an exact science. Husserl recognised the difference between the descriptive sciences and the exact sciences, and the way they function are different (Giorgi, 2009).

The history of social constructionism is rooted in phenomenology. Berger and Luckmann (1966), who are considered the pioneers of the concept in sociology with their work *The Social Construction of Reality*, credit the development of their thinking to the phenomenological work of their mentor Alfred Schutz. The first part of *The Social Construction of Reality* is a phenomenological analysis of the foundations of everyday life (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). They state in the text "The phenomenological analysis of everyday life, or rather of the subjective experience of everyday life, refrains from any causal or genetic hypotheses, as well as from assertions about the ontological status of the phenomena analysed. It is important to

remember this." (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p.20). Here they are arguing against an essentialist phenomenological analysis.

My own epistemological position then is the use of 'essence' in phenomenological research as a tool of analysis to find the invariant description of the phenomenon. When being used as a tool of social research, the essence of the phenomenon is compatible with the view that social phenomena are socially constructed. Essence then is used here as an analytical tool to reveal the core of the phenomenon shared by multiple participants. This is achieved through an analysis of multiple participant descriptions which seeks to find the invariant themes between these independent descriptions. Once you have analysed these descriptions, there is no impact on the data if you then use theoretical concepts which are social constructionist to make sense of the essences of the phenomenon. However, due to the positivist links to the term essence, I have tended to refer to them as invariant constituents to avoid confusion and provide clarity to the reader as to my stance.

1.5 - Structure of the thesis

The following thesis is divided into different chapters, with this being the first chapter.

The next chapter presents the relevant literature on doctoral education. Chapter 2 is split into two parts, the first part looks at the societal context of knowledge production, and where the PhD sits within this context. To understand the practitioner experience, there needs to be a thorough understanding of why practitioners are undertaking a PhD. It discusses the knowledge economy and different types of knowledge. The second part literature review explores the relevant literature on the experience of undertaking a PhD. Doing a PhD is more than just completing a thesis, it is about demonstrating the quality of 'doctorateness' (Denicolo & Pack, 2013), which includes the development of the qualities required to achieve the final degree. It discusses the doctoral curriculum, which is made up of both a formal curriculum and an informal curriculum and the impact this has on the student experience.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology and methods used in this study. It explains in detail the philosophical underpinnings of the phenomenological methodology adopted. It clarifies why a descriptive phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study, over other forms of phenomenology. The second half of the chapter describes in greater detail how the

research was conducted. It details the 12 participants who took part in the research, their mode of study (full or part-time), and their field of practice. This half of the chapter also contains a detailed explanation of the descriptive phenomenological method of data analysis used to analyse the participant interview transcriptions. This data analysis was broadly in line with the method outlines by Giorgi (2009) and Todres (2005). This method aims to find the invariant constituents which bind all the interviews before eventually revealing the structure of the phenomenon.

Chapter 4 comprises each participants' individual synthesis, followed by the general structure of the phenomenon. The individual syntheses are a snapshot of each participants' experience with the phenomenon. While the general structure is the combined experience of the phenomenon of studying for a PhD in one's field of professional practice.

Chapter 5 presents the findings of the research. It begins with an introduction to the five invariant constituents which came out of the data analysis. The chapter is then split into sub-sections with detailed findings for each invariant constituent.

Chapter 6 discusses each of the five invariant constituents presented in the findings chapter in relation to the current literature in the field. The final part of the chapter is a broader discussion around the findings and the implications they have for doctoral education.

Chapter 7 is the conclusion. It sums up the research project, discusses how it meets the research aims, and finally considers the contribution to knowledge and the limitations of the project.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter reviews the relevant literature in the field. As explained in the introduction, the PhD has evolved, no longer is it purely about the production of new knowledge, the emphasis has shifted to focus on the development of the researcher as well. However, simultaneously, and almost paradoxically, PhD students are increasingly less likely to stay in academia, so the degree is further evolving to become a training programme of advanced knowledge workers for primarily outside of academia. Nevertheless, the long-held dynamic of it being an academic apprenticeship is deeply embedded in the culture and makeup of PhD programmes. Those who undertake a PhD in order to research their professional practice are typically trying to achieve a different knowledge outcome than those who are pursuing an academic career, yet they are undertaking the same degree programme. So to understand the experience of doing a PhD, it is essential to understand its purpose and where it comes from and how it currently fits in the world of knowledge production, the professions, the academy, and broader societal trends. Therefore, this literature review chapter is split into two parts. The first part expands on some of the concepts introduced in the previous chapter. It focuses on the context of why professionals undertake a PhD, what type of knowledge they aim to produce, and how changes to this context caused the PhD - and the experience - to evolve. The second part focuses on the existing literature focusing on the experience of doing a PhD.

Literature Review part 1

2.1 - Knowledge, Professionalisation, Practice and the PhD

As previously stated, the goal of every PhD is to produce an original contribution to knowledge. Essentially this means to create new knowledge for the field that you are researching. Precisely what this original contribution is will differ for every PhD. This section will address what is meant by knowledge, professional knowledge, and its broader place in society. The purpose of this section is to situate the PhD to understand its relevance to professional practitioners better. An individual's motivation for wanting to undertake a PhD profoundly impacts the PhD experience. In terms of professional practitioners undertaking a

PhD, this motivation is influenced by the role the professions play in society, the individual's understanding of their place in their profession, and the type of original contribution to knowledge they hope to make.

2.1.1 - What is meant by professions and professional knowledge?

When speaking of professional knowledge, it is essential to understand the term profession is also a contested concept. One of the reasons the term is contested is due to how a profession is defined and what industries should be included as professions (Freidson, 1994). The growth of 'professions' has been perceived as an inevitable part of industrialisation (Johnson, 1972), with the former president of the American Sociological Society stating "an industrialising society is a professionalising society" (Goode, 1960, as cited in Johnson, 1972, p. 9). Despite a lack of consensus to the term, it is vital to understand the power dynamics behind professionalism to understand better who controls 'knowledge' in the workplace. Which brings to mind the classic phrase, traditionally attributed to Francis Bacon, 'knowledge is power'.

The professions of Law and Medicine are commonly seen as the original professions and as the 'ideal type' (Eraut, 1994). However, a quick search for literature on professionalisation reveals numerous articles with titles looking at the professionalisation of particular other industries and jobs (e.g. Sports coaching (Lyle & Cushion, 2010); political communication (Negrine, 2007); tourism (Thomas & Thomas, 2014)). Exactly what qualifies as a profession has long been contested, Etzioni wrote a book in the 1960s calling Teachers, Nurses, and Social Workers 'semi-professions'. In the preface, he states these semi-professions are attempting to claim a similar status of "doctors and lawyers". With their claim contested due to the fact "their training is shorter, their status less legitimated, their right to privileged communication less established, there is less of a specialised body of knowledge, and they have less autonomy from supervision or societal control than "the" professions (Etzioni, 1969, p. V). Despite the above jobs now being widely accepted as professions, writing in 1969, Etzioni succinctly articulates the on-going debates around professionalism and what industries are permitted to be classed as professional.

Johnson sees professionalism as an ideology and the process of professionalisation is an attempt to gain status and privilege (Johnson, 1972). This status and privilege is primarily

derived from their claim of unique forms of expertise. The close relationship between professions and higher education is an attempt to legitimise these professional knowledge claims (Eraut, 1994). It is possible to view doctoral education as part of a pathway to greater legitimisation for a professional field, through the creation of professional knowledge which has been approved and codified via academic gatekeepers.

2.1.2 - Definition of Knowledge

The prerequisite of obtaining a doctorate is to make an original contribution to knowledge. However, defining knowledge is tricky and there are several different definitions and arguments. Daniel Bell offers a formal definition of knowledge, which has been taken up by others (e.g. Castells, 1996), as “a set of organised statements of facts or ideas, presenting a reasoned judgement or an experimental result, which is transmitted to others through some communication medium in some systematic form” (Bell, 1974, p. 175).

However, any simple definition of knowledge fails to articulate the complicated and multifaceted nature of the term. Something which has long been acknowledged, for example Aristotle broke knowledge down into technical, practical, and wisdom (Aristotle, as translated by Thomson & Tredennick, 2004). The divide between technical and practical knowledge is of particular importance when considering professional knowhow. Technical knowledge is the sort which can be found in manuals and text books, whereas practical knowledge comes through experience in practice and can only be learned this way (Oakeshott, 1962). For Eraut (1994), this distinct separation of knowledge assumes technical knowledge can only be used systematically i.e. knowledge learned through research or theory can only be applied in a systematic manner in practice. It offers no route for technical knowledge to transfer into the practical knowledge of the professional.

Knowledge is not only divided between practical and technical knowledge. In his work *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence*, Eraut (1994) details how knowledge can be defined as “procedural knowledge, propositional knowledge, practical knowledge, tacit knowledge, skills and knowhow” (Eraut, 1994, p. 16). These categories of knowledge are similar to those offered by Gilbert (2009) in Lee and Boud’s *Changing Doctoral Practices*. Gilbert offers 6 major forms of knowledge:

1. Abstract propositional or declarative knowledge – knowing about facts, theories, generalisations, concepts – often codified in formulae or textual diagrammatic form.
2. Abstract procedural knowledge involving conceptual skills and cognitive abilities of analysis, explanation and problem solving.
3. Action knowledge involved in performance, interpersonal communication and psychomotor skills.
4. Tacit or Habituated knowledge involved in expert practice and professional judgement.
5. Cultural understandings of the perspectives and experiences of others, including empathising and working with others through shared understandings.
6. Embedded knowledge residing in systematic routines, technologies and procedures, including tool and instrument use. (Gilbert, 2009, p. 58)

Gilbert acknowledges there is overlap and these forms of knowledge do not act independently of each other. While this list is not exhaustive and offers no critique of these terms, what Eraut and Gilbert offer serves as an illustration to the multifaceted nature of ‘Knowledge’ and, as a result, when speaking of an original contribution to knowledge it needs to be understood there is not a fixed idea of how this is achieved.

2.1.3 - Knowledge Society and Economy. What knowledge is valued?

The academic view of professional and workplace knowledge is to see it as localised and context-specific (Eraut, 2009). In academia, theoretical knowledge was traditionally seen as pure knowledge and knowledge production was seen as almost the exclusive right of the academy, a position which was also the dominant view in broader society. However, the position and understandings of knowledge in society began to transform in the latter half of the twentieth century. Knowledge changed from being governed by the requirements of disciplines to being governed by the economic imperatives of nation-states – which came to be understood as the Knowledge Economy (Lee & Boud, 2009). The idea of a Knowledge Economy is tightly bound to the concepts of the Knowledge Society and Learning Society (Välimaa & Hoffman, 2008). This change in our collective understanding of knowledge has had a number of meaningful changes for Higher Education and, in particular, doctoral education (this is covered in greater detail in section 2.3).

Despite having different theoretical foundations, both knowledge society (sociological) and knowledge economy (economics) theories recognise the importance of knowledge and knowledge production for the development of societies (Välimaa & Hoffman, 2008). The knowledge economy “replaces an epistemological with an economic definition of knowledge” (Usher, 2002, p. 144). Both discourses agree on the view that knowledge is the most valuable asset the newly transformed society produces. In order to avoid confusion, due to the interchangeable nature of the two terms, from this point on I will refer to it as knowledge society unless explicitly meaning knowledge economy.

Bell refers to the knowledge society as a post-industrial society, due to knowledge being the fundamental resource of the post-industrial society (Bell, 1974). He offers two reasons for this, firstly innovation is increasingly derived from research and development, and secondly due to the economic mass of society increasingly coming from the knowledge sphere (*ibid*, p.212). However, Stehr considers post-industrial society to be a misleading term to describe the knowledge society, due to traditional industry and manufacturing still existing and instead of being replaced they have instead been transformed by the knowledge society (Stehr, 1994). The rise of digital technologies has undoubtedly played a part in this transition, but knowledge society discourse should not be synonymous with arguments of an ‘information society’ (UNESCO, 2005). Knowledge and information are different entities, where information is a fixed form of knowledge (*ibid*).

The theory of the learning society, put forward by education scholars (Eraut, 1997), works with the knowledge society discourse. Under the learning society, the traditional sites of where knowledge can be acquired are no longer applicable to the modern world (UNESCO, 2005). Changes in the labour market mean a job for life is no longer the expectation and people will often have to change careers multiple times throughout their working lives. As Drucker states in his work on the knowledge society, the key to surviving in this world is learning how to learn (Drucker, 1969). As a consequence of the shift to a knowledge society, organisations are also increasingly becoming “learning organisations” (Nowotny et al., 2001, p. 15) Placing a far greater emphasis on research and development, and on staff learning and training.

The development of the knowledge society has had a profound impact on Universities and their place in society. With knowledge playing a crucial role in the economic performance of

a country, the university is a crucial agent of knowledge production and is now required to play “a hitherto unrecognised role as agents of economic growth” (Usher, 2002, p. 144). In 1997 the Dearing report looking into the future of Higher Education in the UK explicitly laid out the Government’s position on the link between Higher Education and the nation’s economic prospects: “This recognition of the purpose of higher education in the development of our people, our society, and our economy is central to our vision. In the next century, the economically successful nations will be those which become learning societies: where all are committed, through effective education and training, to lifelong learning” (Dearing report, 1997, p. 7).

The arguments for there being a move to a knowledge society also saw the introduction of the idea of knowledge workers. These workers primarily use their heads to produce ideas and information, they contrast with manual workers who use their hands to produce physical goods or services (Drucker, 1969). As the knowledge society and knowledge production has developed, the doctoral degree has faced pressure to change and the type of doctoral graduate has changed. Doctoral students are now viewed as advanced knowledge workers. “They are the ‘knowledge workers’ with different skills, capabilities, dispositions, memberships and relationships from those imagined communities of older ideas of the doctorate within a ‘disciplinary economy’ of knowledge” (Lee & Boud, 2009, p. 18).

As knowledge has become a valued economic commodity it invites new types of people who wish to train in research. As the doctoral degree is the pinnacle post-graduate research degree this has seen an influx of students who wish to take advanced research training which falls outside of the traditional disciplinary theoretical knowledge production of the past. Due to the knowledge society, knowledge production within the university has begun to shift, and with it the expectations and understanding of what the doctorate is for.

2.2 – Knowledge Production in the Knowledge Society

Due to the knowledge society transition, in recent decades there has been a growing acknowledgement that the workplace is not only a site of learning but also as a space where new knowledge can be constructed, knowledge which has broader applicability for a profession than just a local context (Lester, 2012). This - somewhat controversial - view has

been seen as an encroachment on the supremacy of academia due to the introduction of other knowledge production spheres (e.g. governmental research, big R&D departments, think tanks).

As the arguments for western societies evolving into knowledge societies grew, the idea of there being a new form of knowledge production struck a chord in the 1990s, and different authors wrote about its emergence under various names (Weingart, 1997). The most well-known example is the work of Gibbons and colleagues in their book ‘The New Production of Knowledge’, of which a detailed discussion follows, but they were not the only ones following this chain of thought (illustrated in Hessel & van Lente, 2008).

2.2.1 - Mode 1 and Mode 2

In ‘The New Production of Knowledge’ Gibbons et al. (1994) introduced their bifurcated typology of knowledge modes, which makes a distinction between traditional, disciplinary knowledge (Mode 1) and a new space (Mode 2) where knowledge is created in “broader, transdisciplinary social and economic contexts” (Gibbons et al., 1994 p. 1). The broad differences between Mode 1 and Mode 2 can be found in figure 1. It is important to note that in their typology the two modes are not competing to supplant one and other, rather Mode 2 knowledge is seen as an alternative to traditional knowledge production.

Attributes of Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge production	
Mode 1	Mode 2
Academic context	Context of application
Disciplinary	Transdisciplinary
Homogeneity	Heterogeneity
Autonomy	Reflexivity/social accountability
Traditional quality control (peer review)	Novel quality control

Figure 1 - Hessel & van Lente (2008)

Gibbons et al. see Mode 1 knowledge as the traditional form of knowledge production - the Newtonian model of sound scientific practice, which then came to dominate other fields of academic study. At its core Mode 1 is a set of ideas, methods, values, and norms which leads to the “production, legitimization and diffusion of knowledge” (Gibbons et al., 1994). Under Mode 1, knowledge is mainly constructed in the university setting and uses traditional quality control measures.

Gibbons et al. stated Mode 2 has a number of characteristics. The first is Mode 2 knowledge production differs in that it is “generated within the context of application” (Nowotny et al., 2003, p. 186). The context of application describes the “total environment” in which “problems arise, methodologies are developed, outcomes are disseminated, and uses are defined” (*ibid*, p. 186). Under Mode 1, knowledge production was carried out “in the absence of some practical goal” (Gibbons et al., 1994, p. 4). While Mode 1 knowledge can, of course, result in a real-world application, this application is separated from the actual production of knowledge and requires ‘knowledge transfer’ (Hessels & van Lente, 2008). In Mode 2 however, there is no gap between the production of knowledge and the application of its use. Something which creates an interesting element for the experience of PhD students operating in the between area of Mode 1 and Mode 2.

Second, it is transdisciplinary; by this, they meant the potential use of a number of theories and methodologies to solve problems. Transdisciplinarity is distinct due to its operating within and being sustained in the context of application. It is not being developed somewhere else and then being applied to a particular context by a new set of practitioners. Gibbons et al. state Mode 2 is undeniably a contribution to knowledge, essential for doctoral level of study, as it comprises of empirical and theoretical components. However, it is not necessarily adding to a disciplinary base of knowledge: “Though it has emerged from a particular context of application, transdisciplinary knowledge develops its own distinct theoretical structures, research methods and modes of practice, though they may not be located on the prevailing disciplinary map” (Gibbons et al., 1994 p. 5). Due to its transdisciplinary nature, Mode 2 knowledge is “highly sensitive to further local mutations depending on the context of application” (Gibbons et al., 1994 p. 29). However, as Eraut (2009) points out, all knowledge, including knowledge which has been codified, acquires specific meaning by the context in which it was encountered and used. Thus, to some extent, the knowledge gained through research, whether Mode 1 or Mode 2, will always have a local component which comes through the *translation* of the new knowledge into local contexts.

The third characteristic of Mode 2 knowledge is the diversity in the spaces knowledge is produced and the types of knowledge produced (Nowotny et al., 2003). This characteristic is partly due to the technological changes which allow for much more rapid dissemination of

research, which has led to many new types of organisation entering the research sphere, such as think-tanks or market research firms. Latour sees this as a move from a ‘culture of science’ to a ‘culture of research - , whereby science is certainty and hard facts, and research is uncertainty but warm and involving (Latour, 1998).

The fourth characteristic is Mode 2s reflexivity. Unlike Mode 1, which can be categorised as an objective investigation, Mode 2 is a “dialogic process” between research actors and subjects (Nowotny et al., 2003, p187). The consequence of this is “new knowledge cannot be regarded as being ‘outside’ the research process because problem solving environments influence topic-choice and research-design as well as end-uses” (Nowotny et al., 2003, p. 187).

The fifth characteristic of Mode 2 is the difference in quality control compared to Mode 1. Mode 1 knowledge production needs to pass through the disciplinary gatekeepers, usually via the peer review process, to become codified knowledge and incorporated into academic practices of that discipline. Whereas Mode 2 knowledge arises through a context-specific issue and outcomes can be uncodified and, unlike Mode 1 knowledge which is seen to represent truth and validity (Eraut, 2009), is often acknowledged to be individual, location, and context-specific (*ibid.*).

This bifurcated model of knowledge production means a practitioner conducting PhD research into their professional practice is straddling between Mode 1 and Mode 2. They are beholden to the traditional structures of the academic model of the PhD but are also operating within the confines of Mode 2. This may create a tug and pull effect for the student operating in this ‘between’ space.

The Gibbons et al. model of knowledge production also challenges the traditional understanding of what a PhD is for. Taylor and Beasley (2005) argue that the traditional PhD aimed to produce Mode 1 researchers who become subject specialists conducting research for its own sake. But the modern knowledge economy requires researchers trained in Mode 2: “researchers inside or outside academia who were able to spot commercial opportunities for the application and exploitation of research, bring expertise to bear upon research problems, effectively manage research projects, and place and market the final product. In a nutshell, the traditional PhD was about producing academics, but the new knowledge

economy required research entrepreneurs" (Taylor and Beasley, 2005, pp. 11-12). This has led to the expectation in knowledge intensive economies that training for doctoral students will focus on building Mode 2 researchers as well (Taylor, 2012).

The rise of professional doctorates (see below) might be seen as a reaction to this as they offer the opportunity for Mode 2 knowledge to spread into disciplinary knowledge, something Scott et al. (2004) acknowledge with their updated modes of knowledge which take into account the professional doctorates ability to operate in both modes of knowledge. However, for PhD students researching their professional practice this may not be the same and the restrictions of Mode 1 knowledge may come into conflict with their status of researcher in *their* professional practice during the liminal period of being a PhD student. If the professional doctorate offers a negotiation between the two types of knowledge, then those doing a traditional PhD are at risk of falling into the gaps.

2.2.2 - Competing theories, critiques and Zeitdiagnose

The thesis presented by Gibbons et al. in The New Production of Knowledge is not without its critics. The main critiques of the paper are summed up into three categories. The empirical validity, conceptual strength, and political value (Hessels & van Lente, 2008). The critiques of the political value of The New Production of Knowledge centre on the belief that the authors support the development of Mode 2 (Godin, 1998). As Shinn (2002) argues "The authors appear to be true believers in a new cognitive and social order. They work actively in its favour and seek to persuade others to think likewise" (Shinn, 2002, p. 604). The veracity of this claim seems to be an irrelevant point as far as the validity of Mode 1 and 2 goes. But it is a charge the authors have attempted to avoid, on the very first paragraph of the book they say "No judgements are made as to the value of these trends – that is, whether they are good and to be encouraged, or bad and resisted" (Gibbons et al., 1994, p. 1)

A further critique focuses on the theoretical foundations of Mode 1 and 2. Shinn argues: "These programmatic and methodological difficulties may be a consequence of the fact that the approach lacks a theoretical referent. It is not specifically connected to any conceptual framework - for example, to that of Durkheim, Weber, Parsons, Bourdieu, Habermas or Luhmann. The New Production of Knowledge does not work out or define its key

sociological concepts. One is tempted to ask, does it possess any?" (Shinn, 2002, p. 604). This critique seems to have been accepted by the authors and they have sought to address. As Nowotny et al. (2001) explain in 'Re-thinking Science', their follow up to 'The New Production of Knowledge', the transformation of knowledge cannot be separated from the context of wider societal changes and is in fact inextricably linked. Here they draw upon sociological theories of Risk Society (Beck, 1992) and reflexive modernisation to explain this link. Their discussion focuses on post-modernity discourse of neoliberalism and globalisation. However, this has also been criticised as being all encompassing (see the discussion on *Zeitdiagnose* below).

Another of the common critiques can be dismissed for similar reasons. In relation to the empirical claims of the book, whereby Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000) and others (see Godin, 1998) have questioned the claim of Mode 2 being a new production of knowledge. They argue "The so-called Mode 2 is not new; it is the original format of science before its academic institutionalization in the 19th century" (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000, p. 104). The arguments for or against this point are not relevant to this thesis which is only interested in if PhD students researching their professional practice are operating between the boundaries of Mode 1 and Mode 2. Therefore, it is only concerned with the validity of the concept of Mode 1 and 2, and not which one emerged first.

Perhaps then the most damning critique of the Mode 2 model is the argument it lacks an empirical basis for the claims made in the book. The authors have been accused of offering neither social theory nor empirical research, but instead have produced a work of '*Zeitdiagnose*' (Välimaa & Hoffman, 2008) a German description for sociological work which seeks to answer the existential questions of the era we are living in. These works can be described as: "Such descriptions of the spirit of the ages usually combine familiar materials in a novel way, are normative in nature and pursue to yield new topical insight" (Tuunainen, 2005, p. 283). The New Production of Knowledge offers a basis for further analysis but should not be recognised as more than that (Välimaa & Hoffman, 2008). Whereas other '*Zeitdiagnose*' models of Knowledge Production have attempted to gain a more empirical footing, the work of Gibbons et al. has expanded into an even more "abstract and encompassing theory" with their follow up work Re-thinking Science (Tuunainen, 2005, p. 283).

One such model of knowledge production which attempts a more empirical basis is the Triple Helix model introduced by Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000; Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1995; Leydesdorff & Etzkowitz, 1996). Unlike the work of Gibbons et al, the triple helix model emerged over a number of articles and conference papers. The triple helix model sees the previously separate spheres of the university, industry, and government as becoming interdependent, and due to this overlap hybrid organisations form at the interfaces. Whereas before the universities impact to economic development came only through long term contributions, a new linear innovation ‘social contract’ has emerged between the university and wider society (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1995, p. 1). Etzkowitz refers to the university making a contribution to economic growth as its ‘third mission’, alongside teaching and research (Etzkowitz, 2003). Their model does not outright dismiss the notion of Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge, but rather sees their current knowledge production sphere as a mix of the two (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000, p. 119).

Their model identifies four processes to the production, exchange and use of knowledge in society. The internal transformation of the three helices, the influence of one institutional sphere on another, the creation of trilateral linkages or networks between the three helices, and finally the impact these links have on their originating sphere and larger society (Etzkowitz, 2003). This has led to an entrepreneurial culture in universities, which has impacted on the entire Higher Education sector: “the introduction of entrepreneurialism into the academic scene affects the educational and research missions of all of institutions of higher learning, to a greater or lesser degree” (Etzkowitz, 2003, p. 315).

Despite attempting a more empirical footing, the triple helix model is open to the same accusations of Zeitdiagnose as *The New Production of Knowledge* (Välimaa & Hoffman, 2008). Tuunainen (2005) highlights how both models are totalizing and isomorphic. He says there are “different kinds of universities in the world just as there are different kinds of activities within each university. Further, as these functions are not always in harmony with one another, it is questionable whether any of the all-embracing conceptualizations is defensible as such” (Tuunainen, 2005, p. 292).

If then we take these theories to in fact be Zeitdiagnose it does not diminish their importance or validity. The idea of Mode 2 knowledge has been widely accepted in academic and policy circles (Shinn, 2002), and while the triple helix has been less cited in

academic work it also has made an impact at a policy level (Shinn, 2002; Tuunainen, 2005). By making an impact at a policy level it becomes self-fulfilling and the lack of empirical basis becomes less of a critique.

What the competing theories of modern knowledge production demonstrate is the shift away from the traditional conception of knowledge production being solely the purview of Universities. This break from the past has inevitable consequences for PhD programmes which must adapt to this change in knowledge production. Because it is the elite form of research training the doctoral degree must be capable of training researchers who will operate outside of the old Mode 1. As the number of PhD students has risen significantly in the past 20 years, so too has the portion of PhD students who remain in academia once they graduate grown smaller (Royal Society, 2010; Vitae, 2013). PhD graduates need to be capable of operating in Mode 2 environments.

2.3 - So where does the PhD fit into all this?

The rise of the knowledge society and the changes to knowledge production have caused the PhD to change. Policy changes have mandated universities act to modernise the degree, something which is a global trend (Andres, et al., 2015). This section details the policy shifts which have caused the PhD to change and how this change has manifested at the institutional level. It goes into detail on the existing literature on the rise of professional doctorates - how they differ from the conventional PhD and how they have been designed with practitioner researchers in mind.

2.3.1 - The PhDs role in the world

The bologna process sort to unify Higher Education standards and qualifications across Europe, this process led to the creation of the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area. A part of this process concerned doctoral education and its role in delivering a European Knowledge Society (Christensen, 2005). The European University Association's Council for Doctoral Education highlights the importance of Doctoral Education in advancing EU societies:

“By generating knowledge and scientific and technological breakthroughs, universities play a crucial role in advancing European societies. Doctoral education is

an essential contributor, shaping the link between education, research and innovation, and impacting Europe's economic, scientific, technological and social development." (European University Association, 2018, p. 1)

The council goes on to say doctoral education "trains researchers capable of engaging with society and contributing innovative solutions to Europe's industry and other economic sectors" (European University Association, 2018, p. 1). Likewise a European Commission report specifically makes the link between knowledge produced in the doctorate and economic prosperity: "Doctoral training is a primary progenitor of new knowledge, which is crucial to the development of a prosperous and developed society" (European Commission, 2011, p. 1). It is clear from these words that doctoral education is more than an academic initiation process or training programme for future lecturers. For the EU the doctorate plays an important part of driving the (knowledge) economy by training researchers for outside academia.

The 2005 'Bologna Seminar' on doctoral training developed ten key principles for doctoral programmes for the 'European Knowledge Society'. These principles aimed to be the foundation of doctoral programmes and research training across Europe, including the UK. The first principle set out the EU's position that the doctorate should be about more than just the research output and should train students for jobs outside of academia: "The core component of doctoral training is the advancement of knowledge through original research. At the same time it is recognised that doctoral training must increasingly meet the needs of an employment market that is wider than academia" (Christensen, 2005, p. 2). In response the League of European Research Universities (LERU) report on the future of the doctorate suggested they be organised to be "international, interdisciplinary and increasingly intersectoral" (Bogle et al., 2011, p. 4). Again, these policy shifts are positioning the doctorate as a training programme for research workers outside of academia. Organising the doctorate to be 'interdisciplinary' and 'intersectoral' aligns with the attributes of Mode 2 knowledge production. The QAA's requirement that a doctoral candidate must have a substantial body of knowledge in an academic discipline *or* a professional practice is further evidence a move away from the old disciplinary regime of the PhD.

2.3.2 - Changing PhDs and competing doctorates

The PhD traditionally has been seen as preparing the next generation ‘stewards of the discipline’ (Golde & Walker, 2006). However - as shown above - the academy’s position as the gatekeepers of disciplinary knowledge and the site of knowledge construction has been eroded (Gibbons et al., 1994).

Doctoral degrees in the UK have undergone structural changes in the past twenty years. This has been driven by policy changes as part of the knowledge society discourse. The cultural change of doctoral education started as a response from funding councils concern at low completion rates (Metcalfe, 2006). This concern resulted in funding councils requiring a 70% completion rate within four years or Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) faced losing funding (Metcalfe, 2006). The Roberts report (2002) was commissioned to investigate Higher Education’s role in the UKs productivity and innovation performance. Roberts highlighted how universities were not adapting quickly enough to meet either the needs of industry or expectations of doctoral students. He recommended funding councils make doctoral funding conditional on students meeting stringent standards in research training, principally in transferable skills. These mandates required HEIs to focus on the way the PhD programmes are run, the quality of supervision, and the examination process (Park, 2005). Further change has come in the form of new types of doctoral degree, as a response to the needs of business and the professions (Rolfe & Davies, 2009).

One of the key outcomes has been a shift from only viewing the PhD as a product, to the seeing the PhD as a process (Park, 2005). This has been manifested as a focus on developing the researcher (Park, 2005). The funding councils, led by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), followed the recommendations of the Roberts report and began to require HEIs to introduce compulsory training in research methods and transferable skills as a condition of funding (Lunt et al., 2014). There was a backlash from the academic world who saw these changes as ‘box ticking’ and a one-size-fits-all approach (Lunt et al., 2014). However, the introduction of compulsory research training “led to far more robust institutional monitoring and support. Students were given opportunities to develop a broader set of research and professional skills, and encouraged to think about how these

could be put to use in a range of different careers" (Lunt et al., 2014, p. 156). This has been viewed as a professionalisation of doctoral education (Andres, et al., 2015).

The promotion of transferable research skills saw the founding of Vitae - a non-profit organisation to promote and enhance research training for post-graduate students. Their Researcher Development Framework highlights the expected skills and competencies to be developed by doctoral students focusing on their transferable skills for employment (Vitae, n.d.).

A greater emphasis on research training is a positive outcome as long as it filters to all doctoral students. Universities need to ensure those coming *from* business and industry to study for doctoral degrees, who are not necessarily receiving research council funding, are able to access research training. The development of professional doctorates is an answer to this, but professionals still choose to study for a PhD which does not have the same provisions. It is essential those coming from a Mode 2 environment are supported in their development during the PhD.

2.3.3 - Professional Doctorates and other doctorates

As mentioned above, no longer is the PhD the sole route of undertaking a doctorate in the UK. There is now a "family of doctoral awards" (Park, 2007, p. 3). These doctorates fall into three categories: the traditional PhD, doctorates by publication, and the professional doctorate (QAA, 2015). The latter two doctoral awards are typically aimed at mid-career professionals who typically undertake them part-time.

A PhD publication is a doctoral degree awarded by using existing publications - typically three - as a portfolio of work which is then wrapped in an original introduction and conclusion. These publications do not have to be peer reviewed papers in a journal they can also include other forms of publication such as book chapters or creative work. Typically, this method is for those with established research background and it does not contain elements of research training you find in other forms of doctoral degree.

Of most relevance to this study is the professional doctorate. Those who study for a professional doctorate would be in the similar bracket as the focus of this study. The professional doctorate allows experienced professionals to situate their developed

knowledge in an academic framework (QAA, 2015). Consequently, they are usually taken up by mid-career professionals (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016).

The professional doctorate was developed as the traditional PhD was seen as too distant from practice (Rolfe & Davies, 2009) and did not fit the needs of professions (QAA, 2014). The first professional doctorates in the UK began in 1989 in Clinical Psychology (DClinPsy) and the number of universities and types of professional doctorates grew throughout the 1990s (Scott et al., 2004). With the exception of medicine, this expansion has continued in all disciplines with the number of institutions and the number of students taking the professional doctorate (Costley, 2014).

To better cater to the needs of mid-career professionals the professional doctorate has a different structure to the traditional PhD. Professional doctorates are typically split into two stages with taught elements - including assessment, research training, and cohort-based learning - in stage 1. Stage 2 is independent research with a thesis and examination (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016). The thesis element of a professional doctorate is typically smaller than in a traditional PhD (Barnard, 2011). The end result of a professional doctorate is still to produce an original contribution to knowledge but it also must make an original contribution to professional practice (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016).

The taught element of the professional doctorate creates a cohort amongst the students. Research has found cohorts to be almost universally positive experience for professional doctorate students (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2011). Smith et al, found students enjoy working with other students from different professional backgrounds. They also found students welcome an element of peer pressure which can spur them on (Smith et al., 2011). The cohort effect is one of the primary motivators for students to undertake a professional doctorate (Wellington & Sikes, 2006). While the cohort effect is well known and an intentional part of the design of professional doctorate programmes, one study by Drake and Heath found the reality did not meet students expectations and cohorts quickly disintegrated due to the different pace students were studying at and a lack of time to meet up (Drake & Heath, 2011). Possibly suggesting there needs to be a strong willingness from the university to facilitate and nurture the cohort.

It has been argued the professional doctorate represents an attempted compromise by universities to cater to Mode 2 knowledge production while preserving the traditional PhD as a Mode 1 enterprise (Rolfe & Davies, 2009). Lester saw their development as more accepting of Mode 2 knowledge as they take “a more situated view of the research process and the centrality of the researcher within it” (Lester, 2004, p. 758). Lester goes on to argue professional doctorates offer a space “where research and practice coexist in a cyclic or spiral relationship: practice gives rise to new knowledge, which in turn informs changes in practice, and so on.” (Lester, 2004, p. 758)

Conversely, Scott et al.(2004) view the professional doctorate as a direct challenge to the Mode 1 and 2 model of Gibbons et al. which they see as out-dated (Scott et al., 2004). For them the professional doctorates offered in the UK are “underpinned by different epistemologies, different strengths of disciplinary boundaries, different understandings of the relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge and different ways of operationalizing these constructs in the development of their programmes” (Scott et al., 2004, p. 41). During a professional doctorate knowledge may emerge from within the site of practice but the solution comes from disciplinary knowledge base.

As a response to Gibbons et al, Scott et al. identified four modes of knowledge. These modes show how professional doctorates “construct both knowledge itself and the act of doing research” (Scott et al., 2004, p. 42). Their four modes are:

- Mode 1: Disciplinary knowledge

This mode sees the student being inducted into the disciplinary practice of the university. This results in the student entering into a period of self-examination of their own practice.

- Mode 2: Technical Rationality

The second mode sees the practice setting relegated to simply being a source of theoretical deliberation. The candidate will set aside their own subjective experiences and knowledge as a practitioner in the field. Instead they incorporate scientific knowledge which “transcends the local and the particular” (Scott et al., 2004, p. 45)

- Mode 3: Dispositional and transdisciplinary knowledge

Their third mode sees the student learn a number of different dispositions and are able to apply them into practice based on what works best. This mode adopts a non-prescriptive view of the relationship between theoretical discipline based knowledge and practical professional knowledge (Scott et al., 2004). Texts can be useful resources for practitioners but do not provide the technical knowledge to operate in the local practice. The universities role is to enable “practitioners to develop dispositions that enable them to reflect on their own practical experience and go beyond it” (Scott et al., 2004, p. 49). They see this mode as most closely aligned with Gibbons et al.’s Mode 2 as it is “trans-disciplinary, judged by whether it works or not, pragmatic in orientation, situated within the workplace, has loose quality control, and derives its context from the work itself” (Scott et al., 2004, p. 51). Their final observation is this form of knowledge is really only concerned with the individual and their practice, and is ‘limited in scope’ as a result of this (Scott et al., 2004, p. 51).

- Mode 4: Critical knowledge

The final mode is an explicit attempt to be critical of current working practices and culture. Which gives it an “implicitly and change-orientated” flavour (Scott et al., 2004, p. 51). The candidate is not attempting to find a solution to a problem, but rather trying to find out what is happening. They conclude by summarising it: “This fourth mode of knowledge may be contrasted with disciplinarity, technical rationality and dispositionality in that it attempts to undermine conventional knowledge discourses within which most practitioners work and in the process undermine the legitimacy of intuitional life” (Scott et al., 2004, p. 53).

What can be taken from these four modes is practitioner research is not a unified phenomenon. Individuals have different motives and goals from their research. While Scott et al. modes specifically look at the professional doctorate there is nothing in there which cannot apply to practitioner researchers studying for a PhD.

Their four modes of knowledge offer an interesting understanding of the type of research practitioner researchers are engaging with in the professional doctorate. However, these four modes are very different from the wider societal explanation of knowledge Gibbons et al. and others offer. Instead their analysis offers an illuminating view of the strategies those

engaged in a professional doctorate use in a reaction to operating between Mode 1 and Mode 2.

Although the degree has a different structure to the PhD, with a significant course work component before a (shorter) thesis, understanding the professional doctorate experience can be relevant to understanding the experience of professional practitioner PhD students (and the opposite is also true). The commitment is of a similar level, students are likely to be of a similar profile, some of the challenges are likely to be the same.

One of these challenges is how they manage their current employment alongside the degree. Mellors-Bourne, et al. (2016) found only around a half of the professional doctorate students who took part in their study involved their employer in their decision to undertake the degree. As a doctorate is a significant undertaking it is likely to have an impact on their professional workload. Given they may need ongoing support from their employers during the degree it is perhaps surprising students were not more active in involving their employers before deciding to do the degree. Previous research has found support from employers to be far from universal and ongoing during the degree. Wildy et al (2014) refer to professional doctorate students as being “time-poor and experience-rich” as they are likely to be mature-aged and mid-career professionals. Davis and Frame (2016) highlight the importance of candidates securing support from their employers during the professional doctorate, stating “success comes from a strong synergy between the doctorate and the candidate’s work practice” (Davis & Frame, 2016, p.29). Their research showed candidates whose employers did not fully understand the nature of the professional doctorate were given less ongoing support from their employer in terms of time allocated to work on the professional doctorate. Drake and Heath argue the research culture within workplaces is a key factor in doctoral success. They found the research culture in a workplace can change mid-way through a doctorate and, as a result, it can dramatically change the support an employer offers a candidate (Drake & Heath, 2011). Mellors-Bourne, et al’s (2016) research showed day jobs fully occupied students even when they were given flexibility from their employers to work on the doctorate. They found in almost all cases the student had to use their personal time or annual leave in order carry out their doctoral study.

Given professional doctorate students tend to be more mature in age than (the majority of) PhD students, the impact of their personal lives is also a factor which limits their time to

work on the doctorate. Wellington and Sikes (2006) highlighted the burden undertaking that a professional doctorate whilst continuing to work has on personal lives and relationships. Their research found cases where relationships ended due to the strain caused by the professional doctorate (Wellington & Sikes, 2006).

2.4 - Part 1 Summary

Part one has introduced the PhD and its position in the broader debates of knowledge production.

This part has shown that the purpose of the PhD has changed due to the shifting importance of knowledge in developed nations; the PhD now has a new role in knowledge societies.

Where previously it was an academic apprenticeship, it is now the elite training programme for advanced knowledge workers. These changes have meant the doctoral degree has had to adapt; research training is now meant to focus on multidisciplinary transferable skills, new types of doctoral degree have evolved, and the degree has become more professionalised with a focus on completion rates. These changes have seen the numbers studying for doctoral degrees increase rapidly, and new types of student enter the space.

Theories of knowledge production, such Gibbons et al.'s Mode 1 and Mode 2 or Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff's triple helix, are a useful way of looking at the contextual playing field practitioner researchers are operating within. The increasing importance of research to the economic prospects of western societies may explain why so many practitioners are motivated to undertake a doctoral degree. The increasing numbers studying for doctoral degrees seem to back this up.

There must not be a split in doctoral degrees whereby the PhD caters for Mode 1 researchers and professional doctorate caters for Mode 2. Policymakers insistence the PhD act as a training programme for advanced knowledge workers which focuses on transferable skills is an acknowledgement of this possibility. However, this requires the acceptance of those in higher education that this research training must provide skills graduates will need outside of academia.

This research training includes the production of a thesis which demonstrates an original contribution to knowledge. Although, as this chapter has demonstrated, knowledge is a

multifaceted concept and what makes up an original contribution is not an exact science. Professional doctorate degrees require an original contribution to practice which suggests a different purpose to the degree compared to the traditional PhD. Mode 2 knowledge is validated by its fitness of purpose in application as it is the claims to truth judged by academic peer review. Therefore, it begs the question of whether the way the PhD operates and is assessed is biased to the development and replication of Mode 1 knowledge.

It is possible then this type of doctoral student is operating in, or between, both Mode 1 and Mode 2. If those researching their professional practice are straddling between Mode 1 and Mode 2 it begs the question of whether PhD programmes are appropriately set up to accommodate this. Unlike professional doctorate programmes, which have been developed with this in mind, the structure of the PhD remains targeted at a particular type of normative full-time student.

PhD programmes developed from a Mode 1 background and the degree is the result of the objective pure science tradition. The macro changes in knowledge production have necessitated an adaption, but the experiences of PhD programmes for this type of student remains unknown. The question needs to be asked if the PhD in its current form is still able to meet the support needs of students who are researching their professional practice? When there is the option to study for a professional doctorate, which has been developed with this type of student in mind, it is curious why many still turn to the traditional form of the doctoral degree. The next chapter will look at the existing literature on the experience of doing a PhD in more detail.

Literature review part 2

2.5 - Experience of doing a PhD

Doctoral study is an in-between space when the student is not yet a fully qualified researcher in their field, but they have left behind their previous state, this is known as a liminal phase. For PhD students who are researching their professional practice doctoral study means leaving behind their position as just practitioners in the field without yet occupying the new role as a qualified researcher in their practice. The liminal period for a PhD student is long, between three and seven years, and transformative.

This section also introduces the theories of threshold concepts and landscape of practice and explains how they are linked to the experience of doing a PhD. Threshold concepts are ‘stuck places’ students arrive at in their studies. Crossing thresholds is transformative and plays a vital role in the learning and knowledge construction processes. While a landscape of practice is the whole field which is made up of different communities of practice. This section argues PhD students who are researching their professional practice are moving between practices during the liminal phase of doing a PhD and therefore it is important to have a better understanding of this experience from the students’ perspective.

2.5.1 - Liminality, Threshold Concepts, and Identity

In his best known work ‘Les rites de passage’ the ethnographer Arnold van Gennep outlined how all rites of passage go through three stages; separation, liminal and incorporation (Gennep, 1960). The liminal phase, as taken up by Victor Turner (1969a; 1969b), represents the bridge between the previous and coming. The liminal period is “ambiguous” and offers “none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (Turner, 1969).

Whilst liminality has its roots in anthropology, it has also been taken up as an analogy by other disciplines. In psychology for instance those who follow the work of Carl Jung use the term in a more individualised way than anthropologists. Relating liminality with the transcendent function Hall comments: “What Turner’s concept of Social liminality does for the status in a society. Jung’s psychological concept of the transcendent function does for the movement of the person through the life process of individuation” (Hall, 1991, as cited in Nicolaus, 2011, p. 181).

In education, liminality forms a crucial part of threshold concept theory. Meyer and Land's work positions threshold concepts as portals through which one must pass in order to progress (Meyer & Land, 2003). The threshold holds the key to the disciplinary knowledge base. Threshold concepts, once understood, then lead to a transformed way of thinking about a problem or issue. They assert that threshold concepts may represent or lead to 'troublesome knowledge' (Perkins, 1999) – knowledge which at first is 'alien' and requires a new conceptualisation of the issue. Threshold concepts have been characterised as being transformative (leading to a substantial shift in how the subject is understood), integrative (it requires the integration of the new way of thinking about or practising the subject), and normally irreversible (Meyer & Land, 2005).

But another important characteristic in their original thinking is that threshold concepts are a period of coming to understand. In their original paper they saw liminality as the process a student was in when they arrived at a threshold concept: "Difficulty in understanding threshold concepts may leave the learner in a state of liminality" (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 10). However, they seem to have realised this basic description was an inadequate use of conceptualising liminality. In their later work, they have given the concept more flesh by referring to its original anthropological roots. They say the period of liminality can be "protracted" and "involve oscillation between states" (Meyer & Land, 2006, p. 24). Which is something professional practice PhD students are likely to be facing by nature of their dual identities – practitioner and student.

Meyer & Land also say this oscillation between states can lead to regression to an earlier status, although once the liminal space has been entered there can be no full return to the pre-liminal state (Meyer & Land, 2005). For those who are still practising while doing a PhD, 'regression' may be unavoidable as they switch between their role as practitioner and PhD student. But they cannot fully return to the pre-liminal state. For example, their perception of their practice may forever be changed due to the process of doing the PhD and the new knowledge and understanding they gain in that time (this would even be true if they did not go on to complete the PhD). Therefore, the entire PhD should be viewed as a liminal space.

Admitting the concept has been somewhat ill-defined within the threshold concept literature, Land et al. have attempted to give further conceptual meaning to the phrase 'liminal space' (Land et al., 2014). They argue liminal space begins with the "encountering

and integration of something new”, which then leads to the individual understanding the deficiencies of their previous views of the subject (Land et al., 2014, p. 201). This results in not only the individual “letting go of the older prevailing view” but also letting go of their “earlier mode of subjectivity” (Land et al., 2014, p. 201). It is possible this understanding of a liminal space is exactly what PhD students researching their professional practice are experiencing³. As they might be oscillating between states – as practitioner and researcher – achieving this might be the key to successfully leaving the liminal space.

Land et al. also address the transformative nature of the liminal space. As should be clear by now, it is a space where understanding or practice can be transformed, but also as a consequence, it is a space which “entails a reformulation of the learner’s meaning frame and an accompanying shift in the learner’s ontology or subjectivity” (Land et al., 2014. p. 200). In other words, the liminal space is not just impacting on the individual’s way of viewing their practice, but also their whole identity and how they situate their practice.

Of course, it could be argued identity transformation happens as a result of any big change in an individual’s professional life and this does not require one to have entered a liminal space. Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner argue entering a new community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) changes the individual’s identity:

“learning is not merely the acquisition of knowledge. It is the becoming of a person who inhabits the landscape with an identity whose dynamic construction reflects our own trajectory through that landscape. This journey within and across practices shapes who we are...In other words, the journey incorporates the past and the future into our experience in the present” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 19).

The social nature of identity has long been recognised, Gee defines identity as “being recognised as a certain “kind of person”, in a given context” (Gee, 2000, p.99).

Identity then is not a fixed entity, rather it is a social act which requires a process of constant renegotiation as an individual moves through “different forms of participation”

³ This brings individual motivation (Scott et al., 2004) for doing a PhD into the conversation. If they are motivated to undertake a PhD for reasons other than solving an identified problem within their practice (such as earning a qualification to improve their CV), then they may struggle to let go of their prevailing views of the practice. If this is the case it could be seen as a doctoral threshold concept.

(Jawitz, 2009 p. 243). The idea of identity as a fluid process is bound up in the different factors which influence the overall self (Stets & Burke, 2002). Nasir & Saxe state identities “are not located solely in the individual, but, rather, are negotiated in social interactions that take form in cultural spaces” (Nasir & Saxe, 2003, p.15).

Thus, identity development should be seen as situated in what Holland et al, term “collectively formed activities” (Holland *et al.*, 1998, p.40). The authors conceptualise this social dynamic of identity as *figured worlds*, “socially and culturally constructed realm[s] of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (Holland *et al.*, 1998, p.52). Our participation and agency are shaped by the socially produced and culturally constructed practices we inhabit. Identity is developed in the link between the collective and the personal.

The implication of figured worlds for those entering new practices means it is a challenge to their previous meaning frame. As Holland et al., explain: “The production and reproduction of figured worlds involves both abstraction of significant regularities from everyday life into expectations about how particular types of events unfold and interpretations of the everyday according to these distillations of past experience.” (Holland *et al.*, 1998, p.53)

As is the case of a liminal space, prior research has shown identity transformation is not just a by-product of doing a PhD, but as an essential part of the outcome. As Green puts it: “Doctoral education is as much about identity formation as it is about knowledge production” (Green, 2005, p. 153) going on to refer to engaging in doctoral study as “identity work” (Green, 2005, p. 159). In their project on doctoral learning journeys, Wisker et al found ontological transformations were a part of the PhD process and becoming researchers (Wisker *et al.*, 2010). While Crossouard & Pryor have found ‘becoming a researcher’ plays an important role in achieving ‘doctorateness’ (Crossouard & Pryor, 2008). Therefore, the experience of doing a PhD is far more than just producing an original contribution to knowledge as an outcome.

Identity has frequently been taken up as a conceptualising framework for understanding doctoral education (McAlpine, 2012; Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Barnacle & Mewburn, 2010;

Carlone & Johnson, 2007; Lee & Boud, 2003), yet the underlying assumptions as to the meaning of the term are varied and often left undefined (Castelló *et al.*, 2021).

McAlpine and colleagues' work on doctoral and early career researchers introduces the idea of identity-trajectory as a way of understanding how identity formation is crucial to how doctoral students learn and navigate their journey (McAlpine, 2012; McAlpine *et al.*, 2014). They describe identity-trajectory as incorporating "a view of life as a progression of experiences, intentions and emotions that can be constructed as a narrative that connects events in a meaningful way whether looking forward or back" (McAlpine & Turner, 2012, p.536). Rather than implying a simple uninterrupted transformation, they emphasise the process of identity development is an ongoing process.

Their work is a pivot from the more dominant structural approach to identity typically used in research into doctoral education and academic identity development (Castelló *et al.*, 2021), instead they place greater focus on individual agency. They use the term 'trajectory' to symbolise the "developmental perspective in which learning from experience is a natural feature of life with work experience intertwining with personal desires and relationships (McAlpine *et al.*, 2014, p.954). Crucially then they also place great importance of the full package of someone's life and biography to academic identity development, rather than just their prior professional or academic experience (McAlpine, 2012).

McAlpine and colleagues define identity as "how individuals represent the (a) continuity of stable personhood over time and, at the same time, (b) experience a sense of ongoing change" (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018, p,27). Their work does not view people as having multiple identities, rather they consider individuals to have a single unique identity which "incorporates changes in perceptions, emotions, knowledge, and abilities over time through experiencing life" (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018, p.27).

McAlpine and colleagues' work may place greater emphasis on agency, but their understanding of identity is sympathetic to the limitations structural forces can have to limit the power of agency. They state: "individual agency and intention need to be investigated while not disregarding the structures that can support and constrain such agency." (McAlpine *et al.*, 2014, p.954)

If transformation is required within the PhD, it inevitably leads to PhD candidates who are coming from outside of academia to have to negotiate between their previous professional identity and a new academic identity. Slay & Smith (2011) see professional identity being shaped in three ways: initial socialisation within the profession, career transitions which cause individuals to adapt, and life experiences which cause transition to the individual's priorities and outlook which impacts on their professional identity. Naturally, any experienced professional researching their professional practice will already have been socialised into the norms and expectations of the profession. However, parts two and three will directly be influenced by their new role as a research student. The next section will explore the importance of this initial socialisation further.

2.5.2 - Conceptual thresholds and doctorateness

Conceptual threshold crossing developed out of the work on threshold concepts and adapted it for post-graduate learning. At doctoral level, students are expected to be thinking in a more conceptual and critical way than undergraduate students.

“[Doctoral students are expected] to be moving into questioning given notions and concepts, critiquing established research and worldviews and contributing through their research to both factual knowledge *and* increases in depth of conceptual understanding, i.e. in *meaning*, in the often multi- and inter-disciplinary subject areas in which their research question resides.” (Kiley & Wisker, 2009, p. 433)

This goes to the heart of what the doctorate is. The European Union’s guidelines on what is expected of a PhD student says they must be “capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas” (EURAXESS, 2016). What Kiley & Wisker are demonstrating in the above quote goes beyond formal expectations in assessment criteria. It forms part of what Trafford and Leshem (2009) see as ‘doctorateness’, which is the complete set of components that “combines both ‘doing’ and ‘achieving’ a doctorate” (Trafford & Leshem, 2009, p. 305).

The term has become increasingly popular as a way of describing the process and outcomes of the PhD, possibly in response to the changes required from the PhD to focus more on the development of the researcher (Poole, 2015). Despite its increasing popularity there is debate over the precise meaning of the term. Murray (2003) says the “facets of

'doctorateness' include research design, presentation, coherent argument, quality of writing, a kind of three way 'fit' of design, outcomes, and conclusions and initial and final conclusions" (Murray, 2009, p. 90). Trafford & Leshem, who coined the term, agree with this line of thinking. They argue at end of the process the candidate will be expected to defend their thesis so that it meets the requirement of doctorateness (Trafford & Leshem, 2002). In other words, it is the whole package of what an examiner would expect to see in the final thesis by the time a candidate is submitting.

The other side of the debate sees doctorateness as something less bodied. Denicolo & Pack see doctorateness as "a quality rather than a state or a tangible thing. Achieving a doctoral award, and having or demonstrating doctorateness, are closely related but not the same thing" (Denicolo & Pack, 2013, p. 193). It could be possible to get the degree without achieving doctorateness. Yazdani & Shokooh caution against placing too much emphasis on the thesis when evaluating doctorateness, instead focusing on "the importance of characteristic formation of the doctoral graduate" (Yazdani & Shokooh, 2018, p. 43). Given doctorateness is a concept which has risen in prominence in the aftermath of the structural transformation required by the PhD viewing it in a purely embodied way does not capture the doctorate's shift to a degree of advanced research training. Any use of the term should be centred around the individual doctoral student rather than purely focusing on the thesis.

Kiley & Wisker's research identified generic research threshold concepts which candidates commonly arrive at and need to grasp to successfully navigate their 'doctoral learning journey'. Crossing these thresholds – a learning leap – leads to the creation of new ideas and knowledge (Wisker, 2012). Their initial work identified six conceptual thresholds. These are:

- **Argument** - Trouble developing the work into a thesis that is a defence of a position
- **Theorising** – Trouble developing a theoretical model as an outcome from the research
- **Framework** – Trouble placing the work within a wider theoretical framework or methodological position
- **Knowledge Creation** – Trouble understanding what an original contribution to knowledge is and how their work meets this, and the limitations of doing a PhD

- **Analysis and interpretation** – Trouble with analysis of the data collected and locating their own work within the existing literature
- **Research paradigm** – Trouble selecting an appropriate research method for the chosen investigation

(Kiley & Wisker, 2009)

Using the terminology of threshold concepts, they refer to these points as ‘stuck’ places (Kiley, 2009). They argue failure to negotiate these thresholds can cause the candidate to suffer depression and impact on their self-confidence or self-esteem (Kiley & Wisker, 2009), leading to taking too long to complete or even to the candidate dropping out. Wisker sees students moving through these generic research thresholds in stages. Starting at the moment before understanding occurs, through to the stuck places where thoughts are not fully formed, finally to the moments of clarity and understanding (Wisker, 2012). This final stage leads to a shift “in the way the student sees the world and themselves in it” and these ontological and epistemological transformations are linked to knowledge production (Wisker, 2012, p. 15). Therefore, conceptual thresholds are where the transformation occurs within the liminal space of the PhD and understanding what occurs during the stages of a conceptual threshold is vital to understanding both the liminal period of the PhD and knowledge production.

Wisker (2012) speaks of the important role supervisors have in nudging their students to cross conceptual thresholds. She says supervisors should “consider most the ways in which we are enabling, encouraging and empowering students to work conceptually so that they are being critical, evaluative, and problematising and creating – not just being busy” (Wisker, 2012, p. 16). Their research findings also highlight how supervisors can identify when students are working at the required level to have mastered these thresholds. These were: “Questioning and problematising of accepted concepts; Being able to mount a defensible argument; Conceptual and theoretical framework development; and Developing questions, design, data analysis, conclusions – so that conceptual and theoretical conclusions will be produced.” (Kiley & Wisker, 2009, p. 440).

Other writers have attempted to identify further conceptual thresholds. Trafford & Leshem (2009) have argued doctorateness should be viewed as a threshold concept. They contend

there needs to be synergy between the research components which form doctorateness and evidence of this can be found in the thesis. These components are: contribution to knowledge, stated gap in knowledge, explicit research questions, conceptual framework, explicit research design, appropriate methodology, correct data collection, clear/precise presentation, full engagement with theory, cogent argument throughout, research questions answered, and conceptual conclusions (Trafford & Leshem, 2009, p. 309). They view a lack of synergy between these components as symptomatic of candidates not fully understanding the research process or how to convert this into a doctoral level thesis. This argument only works if you accept doctorateness as a purely embodied concept which can be evidenced in an output. It is possible to argue synergy itself is a threshold concept without reducing doctorateness to an embodied concept.

Feldon et al. (2017) have attempted to take conceptual thresholds in a more discipline specific direction, focusing on biological sciences. They sought to identify skills which are integral to higher degree students and distinct from skills they would have acquired earlier in their academic studies. Their research proposes two threshold concepts: “(1) critical but balanced reading of primary literature and (2) the design of experiments with disciplinarily appropriate controls” (Feldon et al., 2017, p. 2587). For the first of these they found that students began with the belief the foundational knowledge base of the discipline was infallible. Students overcame this gradually through working with others in the laboratory, an example of the strong enculturation culture within the natural science PhDs. The second of their proposed threshold concepts involves the student realising the method and design chosen are part of the argument of an experiment.

Although Feldon et al.’s work is limited to a specific discipline, their conclusion of the importance of enculturation highlight a gap with much of the existing writing on doctoral threshold crossing. The original work focuses on the role of supervisors and speaks little of other ways students can be nudged to cross thresholds. McKenna (2017) has begun to address this gap by looking at the role doctoral communities can have on aiding candidates in crossing thresholds. Using data gathered from two doctoral programmes, she found ‘doc weeks’ – full week-long programmes comprising of workshops, panel discussions, and guest speakers which are held three times a year – and a complementary online community strongly supported students in crossing conceptual thresholds (McKenna, 2017). The

participants in McKenna's study were mainly part-time students who were working full-time, which holds particular relevance for this study. Further work could seek to identify how the wider doctoral curriculum can aid students to cross conceptual thresholds.

2.5.3 - Communities of Practice and landscapes of practice

How a candidate learns is an important part of understanding the knowledge construction process during the PhD. One way of understanding how people learn is Lave & Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning. In their theory, newcomers - or apprentices - join an established community of practice, and through legitimate peripheral participation in this community they gain mastery of the knowledge and skills required to become full members of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Newcomers are only permitted to contribute as peripheral participants in the community of practice, a special status as potential member of the practice conferred on them by a master or gatekeeper.

This period as a peripheral participant can be viewed as the period of liminality. Newcomers are not quite full members of a community. However, they have left their past status behind when entering a new community of practice. Learning during this time occurs in the social relations between the newcomers and the old-timers within the community of practice. For communities of practice are created and evolve as "shared histories of learning" (Wenger, 2008, p. 86). By conceptualising doctoral students as inhabiting both a liminal space and a new community of practice (this exact nature of this community of practice will be different for every candidate) then a strong understanding is required of the social relations which foster knowledge creation during this time. For doctoral students are not just expected to master the knowledge base of the discipline they are working within but are required to add to it.

It is important to note, communities of practice should not be seen as isolated entities, or independent from other communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Meaning those who are switching between practices cannot leave behind either role when switching between practices (Drake & Heath, 2011). Therefore, we must understand how PhD candidates who are researching their professional practice navigate the boundaries of multiple communities of practice and how this affects their research, learning, and identity.

The intersection between related communities of practice make up the ‘landscape of practice’ which comprises the body of knowledge of a profession (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner state that all communities of practices within the broader landscape are practices. By this they mean that in addition to those on the frontline of a practice, the wider community of a profession, such as managers and researchers, are also each a community of practices within the landscape. As a practice is the product of those who are engaged within it, all practices within a landscape must have a local flavour. Regulations or mandates can influence a practice, but it is still those within the practice which make the practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Therefore, where one practice in the landscape has more power than another it does not ‘subsume’ the other practice. It can influence the practice but the “knowledge of one practice is never merely implemented in another” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 16).

This has two important implications for the PhD students in this study. Firstly, they are having to cross between, at least, two practices within the landscape. While they may be full members of the practitioner community of practice, they are now also a legitimate peripheral participant in a research and academic community of practice. Does this peripheral role come into conflict with their full membership? Does crossing the boundaries of these two practices allow the ‘insider researcher’ any critical distance to research their practice? (Drake & Heath, 2011) This potential lack of critical distance could be why theory becomes a threshold concept for some doctoral students (Kiley & Wisker, 2009). What impact does the perspective of one practice have on the other? (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). What are the ontological ramifications of traversing between these boundaries? Fenton-O’Creevy et al. (2015) caution the role professional identity can have on “a sense of identity as a capable person, knowledgeable about problems and their solution, in one context, may be difficult to express in another.” (Fenton-O’Creevy et al., 2015, p. 43)

Secondly, what happens to their research findings in the context of both the local practitioner community of practice which they are/were a member of, and also on the wider landscape. As Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner explain: “Engagement in a lived practice is too complex and dynamic to be a mere implementation of prescription or the simple application of research” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 17). Oscillating between the boundaries of these two communities of practice could lead to a struggle. For

example, if the candidate is critical of the practices of the practice in their research but finds they still have to engage in them as a practitioner.

The academic-workplace boundary typically is thought of as a one-way trajectory, from apprentice to full membership. Fenton-O'Creevy et al. argue shifting from looking solely at communities of practice to landscape of practice "highlights other modes of participation" (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2015, p. 43). They introduce the concept of imagined trajectory, which in their model considers two factors. Firstly, whether the student is on a trajectory where the end point lays within it or are they just passing through with the end point outside. And secondly, how much do they interact with the practices of the community as a result of their imagined trajectory (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2015). They identify two types of student who intersect with the academic community but whose imagined trajectory takes them outside of it, the 'tourist' and 'sojourner' (see figure 2). The tourist has marginal participation inside the academic community of practice, their identity remains largely unchanged through this interaction and the practices of the community remain largely foreign. The sojourner participates more like an apprentice, their experience in the academic community of practice has transformative impact on their identity, they assimilate more of the practices of the community, but they recognise they are merely passing through (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2015, p. 44). Their model focuses on undergraduate students, but it is a useful conceptualisation for PhD students who are working at the academic-workplace boundary.

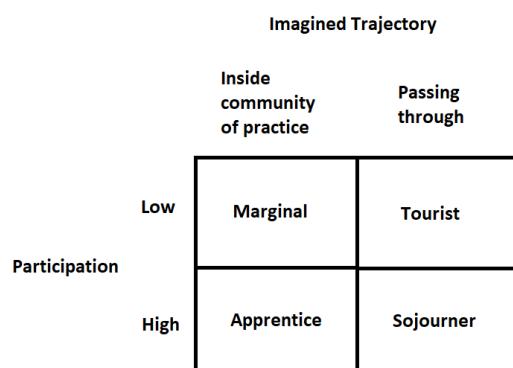


Figure 2 - Fenton-O'Creevy et al. (2015) Forms of Peripheral Participation

Fenton-O'Creevy et al. argue that imagined trajectory creates a crucial distinction between the sojourner and the traditional inbound member of the community of practice through their engagement with the practices of the community. They state the sojourner is engaged in identity work, but that it is not “aimed at assimilation within the community but at accommodation to the practices of the community and its regime of competence in order to function effectively within and beyond the community” and this space presents a “profound opportunity for learning” (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2015, p. 45).

Fenton-O'Creevy et al. believe the effective management and balance of identity requires stability across three elements of their landscape of practice; personal (lives outside of their profession), situated (lives inside the profession), and professional (professional values and beliefs) (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2015). For professional practitioner PhD students, they are facing challenges to all three of these elements. Their personal lives will likely be under strain through doing the PhD (Hramiak, 2017), their life inside the profession will have changed, and their professional values and beliefs may be altered through their engagement with the PhD.

2.5.4 - Doctoral Curriculum and pedagogy

There is a difference between doctoral pedagogy and curriculum. The former is how a subject is taught while the latter is what is taught. Both have become increasingly important due to the changes mandated on the degree. In their book on *Changing Practices of Doctoral Education*, Boud and Lee (2009) speak of the ‘pedagogisation’ of doctoral work. This pedagogisation has changed doctoral education from being focused exclusively “on ‘research’ to one on ‘training’, which plays out at the level of material practices of seminars, workshops, examinations, etc” (Lee & Boud, 2009, p. 20). As previously discussed in the first part of this chapter, candidates are now encouraged, or even expected, to undertake research training during their PhD. In the same book Gilbert (2009) says there is value in “considering doctoral training as an issue of curriculum as well as one of pedagogy” (Gilbert, 2009, p. 56). Both pedagogy and curriculum are of relevance when exploring doctoral education. It is important to have a good understanding of not only the doctoral curriculum but also the way this is delivered and experienced by the candidate. The personal, learning,

and institutional support offered in doctoral programmes is vital in ‘nudging’ students to cross the required conceptual thresholds (Wisker et al., 2017).

Gilbert sees the doctoral curriculum operating as four types: intended, enacted, hidden and informal (Gilbert, 2009). The intended curriculum is the formal statements of purpose, planned outcomes, or skills to be learnt. The enacted curriculum is the planned delivery of the programme to achieve the intended curriculum. The hidden curriculum is the practices and culture of an institution or programme which is not openly constructed to achieve a pedagogical aim. The informal curriculum is activities outside of the programme which aid learning (Gilbert, 2009). Others group these into two categories the formal and hidden curriculum (Elliot et al., 2020). This section will now explore the doctoral curriculum in more detail.

2.5.5 - The formal curriculum - intended and enacted

In doctoral education, the intended curriculum are the planned parts of the programme – such as research training and supervision – and the enacted curriculum is how these are delivered. The following looks in detail at the existing literature on supervision and research training. It covers both the planned provision and the delivery of this.

2.5.5.1 - *Supervision*

The most important part of the formal curriculum is postgraduate supervision. Of all the published research on doctoral education, supervision is the most popular topic. Frequently this comes from the perspective of the supervisors, often at the expense of the student perspective.

The student-supervisor relationship is a key part of the PhD. Research shows good supervision can have a significant impact on a PhD candidate’s likelihood of success (Ives & Rowley, 2005; Heath, 2002). Perceived supervisor supportiveness is the greatest predictor of student satisfaction (Dericks et al., 2019). Supervisor expertise in the research topic has also been linked to student satisfaction with the PhD programme (Holdaway et al., 1995; Ives & Rowley, 2005). Therefore, it is important when applying for a PhD that the candidate ensures their supervisory team is the right fit (Wisker, 2001), this means finding supervisors with experience in the field you are researching.

In the case of those researching professional practice this supervisory selection becomes even more essential. During a professional doctorate, the candidate may have joint supervision, from both the academic and professional background. Scott et al. see this as conferring “credibility” on the candidate in both arenas (Scott et al., 2004 p. 131). However, this may not be the case for a PhD student researching professional practice who may only have supervisors from inside the university. This comes back to the ‘in-between’ of Mode 1 or and Mode 2 for PhD professional researchers. At a time when significant numbers of PhDs (Vitae, 2013) are entering the labour market outside of academia, this potential lack of professional legitimacy could undermine the future prospects of candidates. However, despite this it is rare students get to select their supervisors at all.

The primary role of the supervisor is to advise and support their allotted PhD student/s through the process. Within this there is some debate as precisely the role of the supervisor and the shape supervision should take (Cullen et al., 1994). In their handbook for doctoral supervisors Taylor and Beasley document an exhaustive list of 39 tasks supervisors could be expected to be responsible for, these range from making sure the student is aware of the regulations of the degree, to helping them with career planning (Taylor & Beasley, 2005). That their list includes many tasks outside of strictly nurturing the research project highlights the expanded role of supervisors from the early days of the PhD. It has long been noted that the supervisors role has developed to include more administrative duties, becoming “managers of researchers” (Wright & Lodwick, 1989, p. 24).

What makes a ‘good’ supervisor is not an exact science. This is because supervision is not a standardised practice and there are different styles of supervision (and of course there are different types of student). Delamont et al. see good supervision as being a self-conscious act, rather than relying on spontaneity or intuition (Delamont et al., 1997b). A supervisors approach is influenced by both their concept of research supervision and their own experience of supervision as a doctoral student (Lee, 2008). Focusing on the Social Sciences only, Acker et al. (1994) modelled supervision in two modes, the technical rationality model and the negotiated order model. “The technical rationality model gives priority to issues of procedure or technique, while the negotiated order model conceptualizes supervision as a process open to negotiation and change” (Acker et al., 1994, p. 483). In their study they painted these as two ideal-type models of supervision, but their findings showed the

negotiated order mode was what tended to happen in practice. Where there was pressure to improve completion rates supervisors were shown to modify their practice (Acker et al., 1994).

Gatfield (2005) reviewed the literature of supervision to develop a model of preferred operating styles of supervision, plotted onto a managerial grid of support and structure axes (see figure 3).

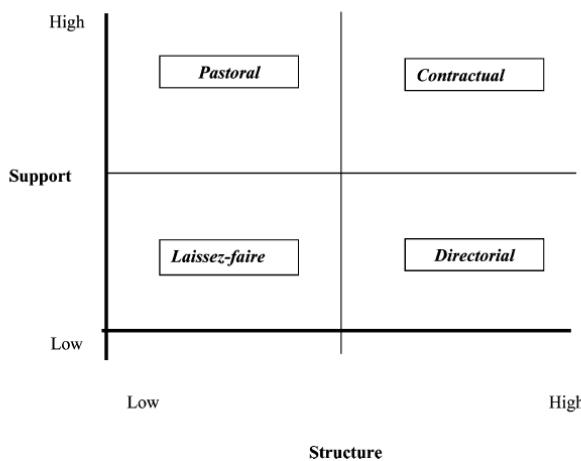


Figure 3 - Supervisory Management Grid (Gatfield, 2005, p. 317)

His work identified four supervisory styles plotted within this grid:

- Laissez-faire (Low Structure – Low Support). If the candidate has low motivation and lacks management skills and the supervisor lacks commitment to interaction with the candidate and is not directive. This style may come across as uncaring.
- Pastoral (Low structure – High support). If the candidate lacks management skills but will use all support available and if the supervisor is comfortable giving pastoral care and support but not necessarily being directive in a task-drive manner.
- Directorial (High structure – Low Support). If the candidate is highly motivated and able to manage the project relatively independently and the supervisor has a close and interactive relationship with the project but does not engage in personal support.
- Contractual (High Structure – High Support). The candidate is able to act on their own initiative, and the supervisor is highly involved in the project and develops a caring relationship with the candidate. (Gatfield, 2005, pp. 317-318)

Using semi-structured interviews with experienced, ‘successful’, supervisors, Gatfield found the contractual style as their preferred operating style. However, his findings showed the supervisors were able to adapt and change styles at different phases of the project or to react to the candidate being “in crisis” (Gatfield, 2005, p. 321). In addition, Gatfield’s model showed the student’s own agency and personality plays a part in the process. Each candidate will require different support to the next and the supervisor needs to adapt to meet the needs of the student (Gurr, 2001).

Like Gatfield’s model, Murphy et al. (2007) also offer four approaches, or ‘orientations’, to supervision: Controlling and task-focused, controlling and person-focused, guiding and task-focused, guiding and person-focused. Using interviews with 34 supervisors and students in an engineering department, they asked the participants their beliefs about supervision, as well as their beliefs about research, teaching and learning more generally. They then used the data to map these beliefs to the four supervision approaches.

Anne Lee (2008, 2012) offers a holistic model of supervision styles to the four quadrant frameworks of Gatfield and Murphy et al. Like Gatfield she identified approaches to supervision using a literature search and then used empirical data to refine and test this. She argues for five approaches to supervision:

“(1) Functional: where the issue is one of project management. (2) Enculturation: where the student is encouraged to become a member of the disciplinary community. (3) Critical thinking: where the student is encouraged to question and analyse their work. (4) Emancipation: where the student is encouraged to question and develop themselves. (5) Developing a quality relationship: where the student is enthused, inspired and cared for” (Lee, 2008, p. 51)

She readily admits this also offers a “tidy reconciliation” of the supervisory process and, when written down, fails to capture the “messiness” (Lee, 2012, p. 13). But in admitting this she explains the framework is meant to “intertwine in a complex manner” and the approaches are not independent of each other (Lee, 2012, p. 12). Both Gatfield and Lee argue that no one approach is the correct way to supervise, rather it is about the correct fit for student and supervisor (Lee, 2012).

At the end of her study Lee poses the question of whether different supervision styles have any impact on whether the student seeks work in academia after (Lee, 2008). Which is certainly an interesting question with regards to practitioner researchers re-entering academia for the PhD and their motivations post-PhD.

Models or lists of supervision styles offer a useful starting point to understand some of the broader subtleties of supervision. However, they fail to fully capture what Cullen et al. see as “highly complex, dynamic and relational” relationships between two variable human beings (Cullen et al., 1994, p. 102). Thus, these models tend to fail to capture the experience from the perspective of the student and offer no explanation of why the relationship can breakdown.

They are also based around an expert-novice dynamic from the practices of the traditional PhD, one which assumes a normative understanding of a full-time student who is professionally inexperienced. Nancy-Jane Lee believes models of supervision do not work for professional practitioners on professional doctorates, stating “there are no emerging frameworks or exemplars of good professional doctorate supervision practices” (Lee, 2009 p. 644). Lee found no evidence supervisors adjusted their supervision style between PhD and professional doctorate students, did not distinguish between the needs of the two types of student, and did not account for professional doctorate student’s status or experience (*ibid*). This also suggests supervisors would not adjust their style or would not distinguish between the needs of different types of PhD students. Watts (2008) has called for a more elastic approach when supervising part-time doctoral students due to the length of the degree and the potential for student focus to dip due to their commitments outside of the degree. She suggests supervisors focus on communication, planning, and empathy (Watts, 2008).

That professional practitioners would need a different style of supervision has long been held. Brennan (1998) felt as doctoral programmes were increasingly attracting professional practitioners it was going to cause a shift in the expert-novice relationship. She explains the impact of this:

“The supervisor is not working on an apprenticeship model, training up a replacement but rather has to accommodate as a student someone whose expertise

may not only be more relevant to research in a particular site, but also someone who is often older or more senior in their position than the university staff member involved as supervisor. It is likely that there will be different demands and different questions asked by the students" (Brennan, 1998, p. 81).

This suggests the need for a different pedagogical relationship between supervisor and student for senior practitioners. Professional practitioners may have different expectations of what they can expect from their supervisor relationship than traditional students. Mawson and Abbott (2017) argue it is possible for supervisors to assume professional competence means they do not need assistance with the research process.

Malfroy found there is often a mismatch in expectations between student and supervisor, which then causes long-term issues (Malfroy, 2005). This is borne out by the work Pyhältö, Vekkaila, et al. (2012) carried out post-doctoral degree, which shows the difference in perspectives between students and supervisors about factors which contribute to a successful doctoral journey (Pyhältö, Vekkaila, et al., 2012). Conversely, supervisors tend to focus on the personal characteristics - such as lack of ability, drive, or focus – of individual students to account for a successful or unsuccessful candidature (Gardner, 2009). This individualistic view fails to consider the factors which contribute to a lack of drive or focus, such as issues with their employers or personal issues (these examples would be a lack of stabilisation in the Fenton-O'Creevy explanation of landscape of practice). Whereas students emphasise the need for social support and interaction with other researchers (Pyhältö, Vekkaila, et al., 2012; Protivnak & Foss, 2009), while highlighting a lack of supervision and issues developing domain-specific expertise – such as understanding theoretical frameworks, selecting research questions and appropriate methods - as problems (Pyhältö, Toom, et al., 2012).

In the 'Good Supervisor' Wisker writes supervisors should "aim to establish a clear relationship between student and supervisor, with defined parameters right from the start" (Wisker, 2012, p. 85). She suggests the use of learning contracts which establish the working practices and ground rules of the mutual relationship, suggesting these should be agreed at the first meeting (Wisker, 2001, p. 54).

2.5.5.2 - Research Training

The Roberts review SET for success (2002) highlighted PhD training as inadequate and failing to meet the needs of business and industry. SET for success recommended HEFCE⁴ (Higher Education Funding Council for England) and the research councils make all funding conditional of meeting stringent minimum standards of training during the PhD (Roberts, 2002).

Despite the demand for more stringent research training there is still a lack of research of the student experience of research training during the PhD. This can partly be explained by the diversity and local flavour of training offered across the sector. This lack of uniformity in research training can be perceived as troubling as the quality and experiences will differ wildly from programme to programme. There has emerged a two-tier system of doctoral training in the social science with the launch of ESRC funded doctoral training centres (DTCs) and other funding councils have launched similar initiatives. There are now Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) and Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs), which offer structured research training for research council and other external research funders (such as the Wellcome Trust). This funding and status as a site of doctoral training come with guidelines of what is expected within the training programme (Economic & Social Research Council, 2015). However, these training programmes are usually only accessible to funded students and at a small number of institutions.

Barnacle and Usher have questioned if the training provided to PhD students works for those studying part-time and working full-time. They found the research training offered was designed for a normative model of PhD candidate – young, full-time and inexperienced (Barnacle & Usher, 2003). Whereas the students in their study had different motivations and needs to this ‘typical’ PhD student. Their study took place in Australia, but their findings underscore the importance of looking at the experience of PhD students outside of the normative understanding.

⁴HEFCE has recently been disbanded and its previous functions have been taken up by the Office for Students and Research England - <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/>

2.5.6 - Hidden curriculum and informal curriculum

Apart from formal support and learning during the PhD, there is also the hidden curriculum, or what has been called ‘accidental pedagogy’ (Ward, 2013). Elliot et al. describe the hidden curriculum in doctoral education as “as the unofficial (and informal) channels of genuine and useful learning that can be acquired within or outwith both the physical and metaphorical walls of academia.” (Elliot et al., 2020, p. 4). While Gilbert sees it as being the practices, values, culture of a doctoral program which influence the learning of the candidate without being explicitly designed to achieve this goal (Gilbert, 2009).

By its very nature, there are no set provisions for what is included in the hidden curriculum. Elliot et al, list different activities which could be included in the hidden curriculum, these include: Learning conversations with other scholars – from other post graduate research students (PGRs) through to professors; informal writing groups; PGR support networks; lunchtime walks; community gardening; volunteering; reading groups; PGR led learning activities – such as societies; or a ‘third space’ activity – an activity outside of education, work, or family life (Elliot et al., 2020, p. 23). Many of these listed provisions are primarily campus-based activities which rely on the student working in or around the campus regularly. This is not always possible for part-time, distant learners, or PhD students with professional commitments in the day.

One of the hidden curriculum provisions listed above which does not need to be campus based is a PGR support network. Studies have shown the positive impact peer groups can have on doctoral candidates in the natural sciences (Cumming, 2010; Kemp et al., 2013) as well as the social sciences (McAlpine & McKinnon, 2013). A key part of the hidden curriculum, as described by Gilbert, is pedagogic continuity of PhD candidature. Pedagogic continuity is not explicit instruction or training through research courses, but rather it is the ‘enculturation’ of doctoral students into the academic culture (Delamont et al., 1997a). However, it has been argued this enculturation is experienced differently for those doing a PhD in the natural science and those doing social science and humanities PhDs (Delamont et al., 1997a). In the natural sciences, pedagogic continuity is predicated on two factors: the flow of big science money and the role of post-doctoral researchers. Delamont et al. found many of the Science PhDs in their study were working in a research team centred around a

key research lead, usually the principle supervisor, with other PhDs and post-doctoral researchers. The practice of former PhD students going on to post-doctoral positions in the sciences plays a vital role in providing “continuity of vision” (Delamont et al., 1997a, p. 327). These research teams centre around research grants and funding and enable the handing down of common rituals, skills, equipment and, importantly, the research problems of the discipline.

In contrast PhD students in the humanities and social sciences do not work in the same manner and, therefore, do not have the same pedagogic continuity. “The [social science] PhD student is not spending 40 hours a week alongside recently graduated postdocs who can provide intellectual and social role models. Even when a social science department is good at getting grants and full of ‘research active’ staff, there is no equivalent to the pedagogic continuity of laboratory science” (Delamont et al., 1997a, p. 327). Delamont et al.’s thoughts on enculturation of doctoral students is similar to Lave & Wenger’s (1991) theory of situated learning and should be thought of as a community of practice.

Mantai & Dowling (2015) have found social support operates in three ways – social (emotional and moral), academic (academic, conceptual, and editorial), and instrumental (financial or administrative). They found families, colleagues (academic and professional), and supervisors can provide all three forms of support. This matches the findings of other studies which have reported strong social support from family, friends and peers being linked to doctoral success (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011; Gardner, 2008; Jairam & H. Kahl Jr., 2012). The findings of Mantai & Dowling also show the social support provided by colleagues were strongly complementary to the supervisory mentorship (Mantai & Dowling, 2015). However, Teeuwesen et al. (2014) and Deem & Brehony (2000) have found part-time students are less likely to be in contact with other students. The latter puts this down to not being connected to the campus in the same way as full-time students tend to be. Part-time students only come onto campus to see their supervisors or to use library facilities (Deem & Brehony, 2000).

Professional doctorate courses understand the importance of the cohort effect, and the taught elements of the course produce a strong peer network (Scott et al., 2004). In their study participants studying in the Education Doctorate (EdD) and Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) saw the peer group as vital in sustaining motivation, as well as having

others to share experiences with. They found this was particularly the case for researching professionals who could share problems unique to their experience of the doctorate (Scott et al., 2004).

Gilbert also briefly references an informal curriculum, which he sees as learning occurring through engaging with institutional events which do not fall into the enacted or hidden curriculum (Gilbert, 2009). This would include learning which occurs when attending student organised events or doing extracurricular activities such as volunteering (Elliot et al., 2016). This could be informal peer run writing groups (Kumar & Aitchison, 2017), engaging in student politics, or even talking to peers in the canteen. A good example would be the potential benefit of 'snack studies' which is research conducted outside of the main thesis (Turunen, 2012). Turunen saw these snack research projects as ways of combating the isolation of the PhD by working in a research team to produce papers on other projects.

However, these examples all imply a normative - full time PhD experience. Professionals studying for a PhD part time may not have the luxury of getting involved in snack studies or extra-curricular activities. Often, when considering the student experience, those who are studying part-time alongside work commitments are under appreciated and can fall between the cracks. This is something the professional doctorate has considered but for those studying for a PhD there seems to be no such support or attempts to develop the enacted curriculum described above, leaving students at the mercy of the informal curriculum and external support networks. This may cause more reliance on the supervisor for those studying their professional practice than it would for other PhD students.

2.5.8 - Doctoral challenges

As the numbers engaged in doctoral study have grown so too have the type person engaged in doctoral study. As we have already discussed, no longer is doctoral education the preserve of a normative mould of student – white, single, male – who is being socialised for an academic position (Gardner, 2008). The growth in doctoral education has brought new types or degrees as well as new types of people studying for a PhD. This new cohort of student may have different needs and experience different challenges to the 'traditional' PhD student.

Acker and Haque's study of Canadian sociology PhDs from diverse backgrounds found five major challenges the candidates experienced: "surviving financially; learning the rules; figuring out the faculty; preparing for the future; dealing with divisions and diversity" (Acker & Haque, 2015, p. 231). Learning the rules, figuring out the faculty and dealing with divisions and diversity could all be associated with 'doctorateness' and a part of the hidden curriculum of doing a PhD. Whereas financial concerns and planning for the future should be within the purview of the University's support systems. However, Waight and Giordano have found doctoral students tend to not use the institutional student support services. Instead they rely on external support networks, including friends, personal doctors, and online resources (Waight & Giordano, 2018). They suggest students are not using the support systems put in place at universities due to either not knowing services exist, not being able to get to the university campus, or believing the services are not adequate to support their needs (Waight & Giordano, 2018). Their findings highlight part-time/distance students are particularly at risk during the doctoral period. Although they do not back this up within their findings, I would suggest this might be due to PhD programmes still being designed for a normative understanding of what a PhD student is. For example, if a student is studying for a part-time PhD whilst working full-time, they may not be able to access support services during working hours.

That Acker and Haque found preparing for the future as a major challenge in the doctoral journey should not come as a surprise. Recently there has been a seemingly constant stream of articles appearing in broadsheet papers⁵ and academic press about the anxiety inducing post-PhD job market⁶. Given almost half of PhD graduates leave the HE sector there has been a push to highlight the transferable skills PhD students gain (Vitae, n.d.). However, many students report not having an appropriate understanding about the career possibilities outside of academia (McAlpine et al., 2013) and as many as half of doctoral graduates do not aspire for an academic career (Neumann & Tan, 2011). This is an important point, as it is imagined the participants in this study are going to be mainly mid-

⁵ For example: <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2018/apr/20/for-academics-on-insecure-contracts-its-hard-not-to-feel-undervalued>

⁶ This has even been termed quit lit, which highlights the dying dream when people give up on getting an academic job (Perel, 2018)

career professionals for whom this major challenge of ordinary doctoral study may not apply.

These challenges highlight the emotional burden doing a PhD can have which can act as a barrier to successful completion. Within doctoral education research there has been a turn towards the student experience in relation to the impact doing a PhD has on the candidates mental health (Levecque et al., 2017). Feelings of inadequacy (Hay & Samra-Fredericks, 2016), isolation (Hutchings, 2017), balancing personal and family relationships (Tharp Byers et al., 2014), and workload and time management issues (Tharp Byers et al., 2014) have all been found to impact on a candidates mental health.

2.6 - Summary of chapter

This chapter has argued the PhD is a liminal phase and the experience of doing a PhD should be viewed through the lens of liminality.

All PhD students are entering a liminal phase; but those who are researching their professional practice are leaving behind their previous role as only a practitioner/professional to engage in a period of research in that profession. Although they may continue practising alongside their research, this does not stop this period from being a liminal space. The period of the PhD is still a transition before they emerge as a qualified researcher in their field. Therefore, in the case of those researching their professional practice, the period of the doctoral degree represents a departure from their previous state as practitioners in their field, without yet fully occupying the transformed role, instead they occupy a new space as research apprentices in this field.

The liminal space allows for, or possibly even requires, an ontological as well as an epistemological transformation from those who occupy it. These transformations can be achieved in two dimensions, through entering a new community of practice and by arriving at and then engaging with research conceptual thresholds. The transformations which take place in the liminal space are key to knowledge production.

The quality of the doctoral curriculum can help to facilitate or hinder a smooth liminal phase. The PhD programme, as designed by each university, is only a part of the doctoral curriculum, which also encompasses the hidden and informal curriculum. The requirements

and the challenges of doing a PhD for professional researchers are different to traditional, normative PhD students.

This chapter has demonstrated there is a lack of understanding of the experience of practitioner PhD researchers. What this study hopes to achieve is to illuminate the experience of the doctoral curriculum for this small but significant subset of doctoral students.

Chapter 3 - Methodology and methods

3.1 - Introduction and aims

This research is interested in the student perspective and lived experience of those who are researching their field of professional practice. The last chapter highlighted the lack of empirical research focused on the experience of this particular type of student. This raises the question of whether the existing research on the doctoral experience is relevant to practitioner PhD researchers. Taking that into account, I chose a methodology best placed to explore this experience, which is why I settled on a phenomenology.

When explaining a phenomenological study, the first step should be to state the research agenda and interest unambiguously (Todres & Holloway, 2004). With this in mind, I start this chapter by again stating the research question which has guided this research project: **What is the experience of PhD students who are researching their field of professional practice?**

Along with the research question, there are three aims to this study:

3.1.1 - Research aims

- To draw upon participants' experiences to identify the barriers, and challenges, encountered during PhD study which focuses on their field of professional practice.
- To draw upon participants' experiences to identify how PhD students overcome the barriers, and challenges, encountered during PhD study, which focuses on their field of professional practice.
- To identify and critically discuss the support required by PhD students who are engaged in research which focuses on their field of professional practice

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the aims of the project, its guiding theoretical methodology, and the methods used in the data gathering and analysis. This chapter will also offer a justification for the methodology and methods used.

The chapter is split into two sections. The first section focuses on the justification for using the (Husserlian) phenomenological methodology. This section discussed why a phenomenological approach was best suited for this research, and then why a descriptive

phenomenological approach was used. The second half of this section goes into detail about the philosophical foundations of the methodology.

The second section focuses on the research methods used and how the research was conducted. It explains in detail the descriptive phenomenological analysis framework and describes the steps used.

3.2 - Why Phenomenology?

As this study is focused on an under-researched group of PhD students, a methodology which was able to explore their experience was required.

As I began thinking about the research project and devising a research question, it became clear through reading the literature on doctoral education that much of the work lacks the students' perspective. This was particularly the case for those who study their own practice. I wanted to select a research methodology and paradigm which best suited exploring the lived experiences of this subset of doctoral students. As the research question concerns the student experience, it was deemed a qualitative approach was the best way of achieving this. Whereas quantitative research is associated with hypothesis testing (Lapan et al., 2012), the research question for this study is more open and concerned with finding out what the participants are experiencing. A qualitative research paradigm allows for a more in-depth investigation into the experiences of those who are doing a PhD in their professional practice (Creswell, 2013).

Phenomenology has been considered the study of how we experience a phenomenon (Smith, 2016). The purpose of a phenomenological study is to discover the universal essence of the phenomenon which is being investigated, from the perspective of research participants who have experienced the phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). In the case of this study, the phenomenon in question is PhD research into one's own professional practice. Through the analysis of the individual experiences, this thesis will move towards "a general insight" into the phenomenon (Finlay, 2011, p. 16).

I first became interested in phenomenology when I started to become concerned about my own position in this research project. As I am also a PhD student, I was worried about my own experiences, and preconceived notions could taint the findings when it came to gathering and analysing the data. In my effort to avoid this, I came across the concept of

bracketing, or in phenomenological terms *epoché* (I explore this concept further below), which led me to look at phenomenology further. Crotty explains the importance of this in phenomenology: “if we lay aside, as best we can, the prevailing understandings of those phenomena and revisit our immediate experience of them, possibilities for new meaning emerge for us or we witness at least an authentication and enhancement of former meaning” (Crotty, 1998, p. 78). Phenomenological researchers acknowledge that it is impossible to bracket our preconceived notions entirely (Moustakas, 1994). However, the goal is not to obtain true objectivity but rather to be fully open to what may emerge (Finlay, 2011).

While other qualitative methodologies, such as narrative inquiry or ethnographic method, would also have allowed the exploration of participant experience, a phenomenological methodology offered the best chance to explore the data gathered in as a ‘clean’ way as possible through using the bracketing method.

3.2.1 - Why descriptive phenomenology

There are two schools of phenomenological research as a method of inquiry, descriptive and interpretive. While some research method textbooks present phenomenology as a unified approach⁷ (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015), there are clear differences between the two methods. Descriptive phenomenology is inspired by the theory of Husserl, while the interpretive method is based on the thinking of Heidegger. Whilst both methods use description and interpretation, the primary debate between the two methods centres around the amount of interpretation the researcher does in the analysis phase (Finlay, 2009). Descriptive phenomenology aims to reveal “essential general meaning structures of a phenomenon” (Finlay, 2009, p. 10). This is achieved by staying as close as possible to the data as gathered and by only making interpretive claims which are supported by the data. Giorgi asserts, unlike an interpretive analysis which will attempt to explain ambiguities in the data, “a descriptive analysis attempts to understand the meaning of the description based solely upon what is presented in the data” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 127). Any gaps in the data should be filled by collecting further data and not through theoretical speculation (Giorgi, 2009).

⁷ This also extends to many phenomenological studies, which do not state their chosen form of phenomenological inquiry, instead leaving the reader to deduce the information (Lopez & Willis, 2004)

Following the Husserlian theory, a descriptive phenomenological method attempts to bracket presuppositions and adopt a non-judgemental stance (Finlay, 2011).

The interpretive method of phenomenological research sees interpretation as a part of its ontological roots. Interpretation is a part of being-in-the-world, where things are experienced as something already interpreted (Finlay, 2009). To see the meaning of being, one must look beyond the everyday meanings (Dowling, 2011). Heidegger himself states “The meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in interpretation” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 25). Van Manen argues this means all description is an act of interpretation (van Manen, 1990). Unlike descriptive phenomenology, the interpretive branch does not aim to bracket presuppositions, instead it sees them as part of the essence (Gadamer, 1988).

Choosing which of the two phenomenological approaches to adopt depends on the research question and study aims. Interpretive phenomenology requires a research question which asks for meaning of the phenomenon under investigation. Whereas, a descriptive phenomenological approach is used if the researcher wants to describe the phenomenon in order to understand the essences of the phenomenon (Reiners, 2012). I choose to take the latter position for two reasons. The first was due to the lack of existing research into PhD students studying their professional practice. By taking a descriptive approach, I could focus on the participants own views of their experience to build a picture of the needs and challenges specific to this particular cohort of students. The second reason was due to the bracketing process at the heart of the descriptive method. I felt this was important due to my position as a traditional PhD student, i.e. one who was not researching their professional practice, which could have left my own presuppositions and experiences to cloud the analysis of the participants' experiences. I wanted to try and avoid my own experience bleeding into the interpretation of the data.

The rest of this section focuses on the philosophical background of phenomenology. It is essential to understand this because, as explained in detail below, phenomenology is both a methodology and a method of investigation. Thus, in order to fully understand the method used in this study, it is vital to understand the foundation of phenomenology.

3.2.2 - An overview of Husserlian Phenomenology

The term phenomenology dates back to 1765 (Kockelmans, 1967b, p. 24) appearing in the works of Kant and Hegel, but it is accepted the theoretical movement of phenomenology was started by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century. Husserl's thinking evolved into what is known as *transcendental phenomenology*. This branch of phenomenology is categorised by the participants' descriptions of the phenomenon, not explanations or analysis (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. viii). The three-core process of transcendental phenomenology are Epoché, Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction and Imaginative Variation (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). However, before looking further at the process of phenomenology, careful attention needs to be given to the philosophical understanding of the term.

Husserl's conception of phenomenology was a rejection of the natural sciences claim to provide a comprehensive interpretation of reality (Cerbone, 2010). For Husserl philosophy cannot begin based "on the presupposed foundation of experience of the world as something that is pre-given as obviously existing" (Husserl, as cited in Kockelmans, 1967, p.28-29). This anti-naturalist view presented phenomenology as *presuppositionless*, whereby Husserl wanted phenomenological investigation to go "back to the things themselves" (Kockelmans, 1967a, p. 29), and return to the data of consciousness (Kockelmans, 1967b). This leads Husserl to proclaim his phenomenological principle of principles:

"that every originally giving intuition is a legitimate source of knowledge, that everything which presents itself to us originally in 'intuition,' so to speak in its bodily presence, has to be taken simply as what it presents itself to be, but only within the limits in which it presents itself" (Husserl, 1931, p. 91)

Husserl's understanding of 'intuition' is the presence in consciousness of an essence of the phenomenon (Lauer, 1967). Phenomenological investigation is thus a search for the essential essences of the particular phenomenon. By essence, Husserl uses the term to mean the "intimate self-being" of the phenomenon which "tells us what it is" (Kockelmans, 1967a, p. 80). In this principle of phenomenology Husserl is influenced by Descartes who believed the reality of an object is contingent on there being a subject, "the object is said to

possess objective reality insofar as it exists by representation in thought" (Descartes, 1912, as cited in Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). Phenomenology's role is not to get stuck in the subjective domain, but instead its whole *raison d'être* is the unavoidable role subjectivity has in the "process of constituting objectivity" (Moran, 2000, p. 15)

When Husserl speaks of consciousness, he is referring to the "internal experience of being conscious of something" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 28), and both the *act* of consciousness (subjective) and the *object* of consciousness (objective) are linked through the concept of intentionality (Moustakas, 1994). For Moran (2000) Husserl presented intentionality as "the basic thesis that all conscious experiences are characterised by 'aboutness'. Every act of loving is a loving *of* something, every act of seeing is a seeing *of* something" (Moran, 2000, p. 16).

Husserl divides intentionality into *noema* and *noeis*, the noema is the perception of the phenomenon, while the noesis is the act of perceiving (Cerbone, 2010). Husserl saw the noema-noesis as "correlative parts" in the mental process of intentional experience (Moran, 2000, p. 154). Gurwitsch (1967) posits the noema should be distinguished from the actual phenomena as it exists in reality. We can view the phenomena from different angles, distances, or times, each of these acts of perception is a noematic act, but each act is presenting the phenomena differently. Gurwitch says "These perceptions enter into a synthesis of identification with one another" which synthesises to one real thing, instead of multiple unconnected perceptions (Gurwitsch, 1967, p. 129). The consequence of this for educational research lies in investigating (noesis) many different perceptions (noema) of the phenomenon to form a clearer picture of the phenomenon you are investigating, for example interviewing enough participants to understand the essence of the phenomenon.

3.2.3 - The Reductions

For phenomenological research to be presuppositionless, Husserl introduced the concept of the transcendental-phenomenological reduction and the Epoché. The reduction requires one to adopt a new attitude, whereby one must challenge the taken for granted knowledge. It requires one to view things in a different way, in a "original and radical way" (Kockelmans, 1967a, p. 30). The purpose of the reduction then is to understand the world as it is experienced. Borrowing a phrase from his mathematical background, Husserl says you must

“bracket the objective world” (Husserl, as cited in Schmitt, 1959, p. 239), which means to leave behind previous understandings or preconceptions of the phenomenon under investigation. As Kockelmans puts it: “It is the task of the phenomenological reduction to lead us back from the cultural world of the sciences to the primordial world of life” (Kockelmans, 1967a, p. 34).

Breaking the term ‘transcendental-phenomenological reduction’ down to its component parts helps to understand its meaning. As Schmitt offers:

“The transcendental-phenomenological reduction is called ‘transcendental’ because it uncovers the ego for which everything has meaning and existence. It is called ‘phenomenological’ because it transforms the world into mere phenomenon. It is called ‘reduction’ because it leads us back to the source of the meaning and existence of the experienced world, in so far as it is experienced” – Schmitt, 1959, p. 240

There is some debate amongst scholars on whether Husserl saw Epoché as an interchangeable term for the reduction, or if it is a concept in its own right (Kockelmans, 1967a). This debate is partly caused by Husserl’s complex and differing terminology used to describe the reduction (Schmitt, 1959). Moran (2000) sees the Epoché, literally translated as abstention (Smith & Smith, 1995), as a part of the reduction due to the emphasis Husserl placed on the Epoché effecting a “return to a transcendental standpoint” (Moran, 2000, p. 147). Epoché then is the *process* of leaving to one side preconceived notions of the phenomenon under investigation, the phenomenon should then be revisited anew and the Epoché should be seen as an essential step in the “preparation for deriving new knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85).

In addition to the Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction, Husserl also spoke of an eidetic reduction. The eidetic reduction is the procedure by which one moves to discover the general essence of a phenomenon. Like most of his work, his thoughts on the eidetic changed over the course of his writing, and as a consequence, his precise understanding has many different interpretations. But many agree that by essence, Husserl means pure generalities, one which is “independent of experience” (Kockelmans, 1967a, p.31). Husserl sees the eidetic reduction as an individual act of “seeing” the universal. Using the example

of the colour red, Husserl says to achieve pure “seeing” of the concept of redness you need first to have performed the transcendental phenomenological reduction: “I snip away any further significance of redness, any way it may be viewed as something transcendent” (Husserl as cited in Moran, p. 134). From then on one can grasp a pure understanding of redness which is absent of any particular context: “no longer is it the particular as such which is referred to, not this or that red thing, but redness in general” (Husserl as cited in Moran, p. 134).

3.2.4 - Bracketing & Phenomenological attitude

To operationalise the reductions for the use in social research it is necessary to modify the ideas of Husserl. The philosophical reductions focus on one’s own experiences of a phenomenon, although as a research method you are investigating the experiences of others. Therefore, it is required to adopt what Giorgi has called the scientific phenomenological reduction, or the phenomenological attitude (Giorgi et al., 2017). This means “view the objects of consciousness from the perspective of pure, essential consciousness, which means a consciousness that is not limited by any existing forms of it” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 88)

Those engaged in a transcendental phenomenological approach make “systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated” (Moustakas, 1994 p. 22). The goal is not to forget all you know about the phenomenon under investigation. This is a key part of phenomenological theory, something Merleau-Ponty makes clear “The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xiv). Instead of a complete reduction, it means not letting past knowledge of the subject be ‘engaged’ while attending to the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009, p. 92).

In a descriptive phenomenological study, the researcher must bracket their previous knowledge in order to be fully present to their participant (Finlay, 2009). This is done by assuming the phenomenological attitude (Finlay, 2008). Giorgi describes this as a shift in attitude “so one can be fully attentively present to an ongoing experience rather than habitually present to it – or, perhaps better – be present to it as we are in the natural attitude. A certain heightening of the present is being called for, not an obliteration of the

past" (Giorgi, 2009, pp. 92-93). In other words, this is achieved primarily by acknowledging and being consciously aware of the need to consider the phenomenon based on the present information.

Assuming the phenomenological attitude is a task which runs through the whole research project and should not be something done prior to the data collection phase. Finlay cautions novice researchers against a token effort at bracketing:

"Novice researchers are particularly disadvantaged as they commonly mistake the bracketing process as a straightforward method of setting aside assumptions and as an initial step in research of acknowledging subjective bias towards establishing rigour and validity." (Finlay, 2008, p. 3)

The process of bracketing should continue throughout the research process (Finlay, 2009). The phenomenological attitude must be adopted during the interviews and in conducting the analysis.

3.3 - Research methods

The methods used in this research project were based on the framework for descriptive phenomenological research outlined in the work of Amedeo Giorgi (Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi, 2012).

Before explaining the methods of data gathering and analysis, it is important to note the philosophical work of Husserl mentioned above is not a method for social inquiry. Giorgi articulates this point clearly: "phenomenological philosophy is a foundation for scientific work; it is not the model for scientific practice. The insights of the philosophy have to be mediated so that scientific practices can be performed" (Giorgi, 2000, p. 4).

The next section of this chapter will detail the methods used in the recruitment of participants, data collection, and analysis.

3.3.1 - Participant recruitment

There is no agreed number of how many participants should be recruited for a phenomenological study. Creswell (2009) recommends between 5 and 25 participants, which is a broad range. Smythe claims the time available to do the research makes a difference and draws on her experience as a supervisor to suggest for a doctoral study 12 to

20 participants is required. She adds “there is certainly an upper limit. One seeks to honour each participant by working intensively with their data” (Smythe, 2011, p. 41). Giorgi argues there needs to be at least three participants in a phenomenological study, as it is essential to have variations in the data (Giorgi, 2009). He goes on to argue the depth of the data is more important than the number of interviews, “the greater the amount of data obtained from each subject, the fewer the number of subjects required” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 198). Kvale makes a similar point, but in a blunter way, by stating “Interview so many subjects that you find out what you need to know” (Kvale, 1994, 165).

With the above information in mind, I recruited 12 PhD students from six UK higher education institutions. I agree with Smythe’s (2011) reasoning that a doctoral study using phenomenological methods should recruit more participants than a shorter study would require. I initially aimed to recruit between 12 and 18 PhD students from at least three institutions to allow a broad range of experiences in which to look for generalisations between them. Having different institutions is an integral part of the design as the exact nature of doctoral programmes will be different across the sector. I also wanted to make sure at least one of these institutions was part of the Russell Group⁸ which allows an interesting contrast to the post-92 university⁹ in the study.

Five PhD students were recruited from the University of Brighton where I am based. The postgraduate administrator in the doctoral college sent out an email (see appendix a) to all PhD students and supervisors advertising the research and asking people who would like to take part to contact me. From the responses I received, interviews were arranged via email.

Seven students were recruited from outside the University of Brighton. Recruiting outside the University proved difficult. My original strategy, as laid out in my ethical application, was to target individual universities and contact their equivalent of Head of Doctoral Studies asking for permission and if they would help recruit participants. When targeted all responded positively to my request for permission, but their assistance did not prove to be fruitful, and I never heard back from any potential participants. This left me with a

⁸ The Russell Group is an association of twenty-four public research institutions. Despite being 15% of UK universities the group take in 76% of all research funding (The Russell Group of Universities, 2016).

⁹ Post-1992 are new universities or former polytechnic which were granted University status by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992

significant dilemma which I discussed at length with my supervision team. Due to the limitations placed upon me by my ethical approval, it was felt I would need to change my ethics application and try different styles of recruitment.

On the new ethics application, I was given more freedom to directly recruit participants from external institutions (the advert can be found in appendix b). One of the methods I specifically suggested I would use was to directly target students if they fit the requirements of the study. I also said I would try and use a snowball technique whereby I would ask those I have interviewed if they knew of anyone else who was a practitioner doing a PhD within their field. Bryson describes this method as “the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contact with others” (Bryman, 2012, p. 98). There are concerns in a snowball sampling that it biases the sample, you are more likely to get those who have had similar experiences to those who they know (Johnson, 2014). While this was a concern, I had to balance recruiting enough participants with this issue. I strived to ensure the snowballing only happened of one participant, rather than a chain of participants. Combining these two methods proved to be more fruitful, and I was able to recruit seven external PhD students. In total there are twelve students from six institutions.

3.3.2 - Sample

This project focused on traditional full-time and part-time PhD students, as opposed to professional doctorates or doctorate by publication. This decision was reached as there have been a number of studies looking at the experience of the professional doctorates (Pratt et al., 2015; Lester, 2012; Scott et al., 2004; Drake & Heath, 2011). However, despite much research into PhDs, there has been little focusing on students who are studying for a PhD in their field of professional practice. Whilst the numbers of professional doctorates are increasing, there is still significantly more students undertaking PhDs. The reasons for students favouring PhDs, even when researching their own professional practice, may be numerous but is not the focus of this study which is only interested in their experience of the degree they did decide to do.

In a phenomenological study, the only essential criteria are that the research participants have experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I recruited participants using a

purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling places a key criterion at the centre of the recruitment (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003), in this case, the potential participants must be final year PhD students who are researching their own professional practice. Within this, I hoped to attract a range of different disciplines. I did not consider it to be vital to have a set number of different professional fields as I was concerned this would be unworkable in recruiting, but having variety was important to ensure the findings were not discipline-specific. I limited recruitment to PhD students who were either in or approaching their final year. This was to limit the boundaries of the data collected to PhD students at a similar stage of experience. The sample did not actively limit participants due to age, gender or ethnic background, but instead adopted a heterogeneous approach (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003) to look at a broad range of backgrounds.

Table 1 shows the students who were interviewed in this research. It documents the type of university they were enrolled at, their discipline of study, their field of practice, if they were studying full or part time, whether and how much they were still working, the number of supervisors they had, and the stage of their PhD they were at when the interview was conducted.

3.3.2.1 - Students

Identifier	University type	Discipline	Profession	Full or Part time	Still working?	Number of Supervisors	Stage
P 1	Post-1992	Health	Nurse	Part time	Yes – 4 days a week – Senior Lecturer	2	Final draft
P 2	Post-1992	Social Science	Council worker	Part time	Yes - full time	3	Final draft
P 3	Post-1992	Education	Teacher	Part time	Yes – full time – Deputy head teacher	2	Final draft
P 4	Post-1992	Social Science	Therapist	Part time	Yes – Practicing self-employed therapist	2	Final draft
P 5	Post-1992	Education	Teacher	Full time	Employed by previous school	3	Writing up
P 6	Post-1992	Public Health	Health Visitor	Full time/Part time	Yes – About to start new job as lecturer	3 (went down to 2)	Two weeks from submission
P 7	Russell Group	Health	Nurse	Full time	No	2	Writing up
P 8	Post-1992	Health	Nurse	Four years	Yes – Between 20 and 30hrs per week	3	Writing up

P 9	Post-1992	Health	School nurse	FT	Yes	2 (went up to 3)	Writing up
P 10	Post-2007	Education	Teacher	FT	Yes – 4hrs per week	3	Writing up
P 11	Russell Group	Health	Nurse	FT (but working FT)	Yes – FT – Senior Job	2	Writing up
P 12	Post-1992	Education	FE teacher	PT	Yes – FT FE Teacher	2	Analysing data

Table 1 - List of participants and relevant information

3.3.3 - Data collection

Interviews were chosen as the method of data collection as they tend to provide more in-depth descriptions of the phenomenon than asking the participants to write down their experiences (Giorgi et al., 2017). A semi-structured life world interview is the typical method of a phenomenological interview and should not be conducted as a closed questionnaire (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). By focusing on ‘what’ is the phenomenon and ‘how’ does it ‘live’ in real-world experiences, it results in a set of descriptions which are evidence for better understanding the phenomenon (Todres & Holloway, 2004, p. 86).

An interview schedule was prepared to guide the interviews (See appendix e), but the participants were free to take the interview in the direction they wanted. The questions on the interview schedule needed to be “open and expansive” (Smith et al., 2009) the participants were encouraged to talk at length about the phenomenon. Giorgi suggests for a descriptive phenomenological interview the questions need to be “broad and open ended so that the subject has sufficient opportunity to express his or her view point extensively” (Giorgi, 1997, p. 245). Beyond this, Giorgi’s advice is limited as to how to gather the data used in the analysis. Kvale and Brickman suggest the interviewer must adopt a stance of “deliberate naiveté”, which is their way of describing the phenomenological attitude (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 31). This also adds weight to what Finlay means by the phenomenological attitude continuing throughout the research process (Finlay, 2009).

3.4 - Data Analysis

The data analysis phase of the descriptive phenomenological research procedure allows us to probe the “whatness” of the phenomenon under study – “what is it and what makes it what it is” (Todres & Holloway, 2004, p. 82). The goal in this stage is to move beyond the individual descriptions of the participants to capture a sense of the whole. The analysis will reveal the essence of the phenomenon and lead to the creation of a ‘general structure’.

While the steps outlined below are important in assisting the development of a general structure of the phenomenon, the stages are merely tools to help aid the researcher in the task of “intuition and reflection by providing different occasions for meanings to cohere through different factual variations” (Todres & Holloway, 2004, p. 87). The steps are therefore designed to turn individual experiences into an articulation of generality.

Generality is not the same as generalisability, rather in phenomenological research, it is the expression of patterns which are formed from the coalescing of the descriptions (Todres, 2005). This provides insight into the “whatness” of the phenomenon and how different elements co-exist and function together (Todres, 2005).

The process of data analysis followed a combination of the steps of phenomenological analysis outlined by Giorgi (1985, 2009, 2012) and Todres (2005). The framework consists of four essential steps:

1. Sense of the whole
2. Discrimination of meaning units within a *psychological* perspective and focused on the phenomenon being researched
3. Transformation of the subject’s everyday expressions into *psychological* language with emphasis on the phenomenon
4. Synthesis of transformed meaning units into a consistent statement of the structure of the subject’s experience (Giorgi, 1985, p10-19)

This is followed by the creation of the general structure.

Giorgi’s framework for phenomenological analysis comes from a psychological perspective, as this is his background. However, he is clear that the method is generic enough to be applied to other human and social science research:

“The only difference is that one assumes the attitude of the discipline within which one is working: pedagogical if it is pedagogy, sociological if sociology, etc., instead of a psychological attitude. One would then have a pedagogical or sociological phenomenological method.” (Giorgi, 2012, p. 11)

Bearing this in mind, in future where Giorgi uses psychological, we can take it to mean educational for the purposes of this thesis as this is the disciplinary field this work has been conducted in.

During the analysis, it was essential to adopt the phenomenological attitude and not go “beyond the given” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 127). This meant staying true to the descriptions and voices of the participants and not bring my own experiences or pre-conceived interpretations into the analysis. I felt this was essential due to how easy it would be to bring my own experience of doing a PhD into the analysis. It is impossible to leave your own experiences behind totally but by being consciously aware of this potential conflict means I was able to mitigate it as best I could by entering the phenomenological attitude. The next part of this chapter will look at the process each of these steps in further detail.

3.4.1 - Transcription and a sense of the whole

The first step in Giorgi’s phenomenological method is to get a sense of the whole. Here he suggests the researcher may need to read transcripts, usually of many pages, multiple times in order to get a grasp of the full text (Giorgi, 2009). Todres also suggests it is necessary to adopt an empathic attitude when reading in order to fully immerse oneself in the lived experience of the description (Todres, 2005). He says this can only be achieved through suspending one’s preconceptions as best you can (Todres, 2005). With this in mind, I listened to the audio of each transcript before reading through each one. I found listening to the voices of the participants helped to immerse myself in an empathetic way with the data more than I could through just reading.

3.4.2 - Discrimination of meaning units

The purpose of this step is to form units of meaning from the participant descriptions. As the transcripts are too big to manage as a whole, this step breaks the descriptions down into component parts. The meaning units should be sensitive to both the final goal of establishing an understanding of the experience and to the perspective of an educational

analysis of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009). This step is similar to coding in other forms of qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) but it is important to remain within the phenomenological attitude, within a perspective of educational research and always remaining mindful of the phenomenon under investigation (Giorgi, 2009).

In order to establish the meaning units, I reread the transcripts and, as I was reading, I highlighted chunks of the data every time I felt there was what Giorgi refers to as a ‘significant shift in meaning’ (Giorgi, 2009). Giorgi describes how it should be a spontaneous activity, and the researcher should not “interrogate” the meaning units, or try and “establish a priori criteria” for marking them (Giorgi, 2009, p. 130). Giorgi acknowledges that there is no recognised system of doing this process, and different researchers would highlight different meaning units.

3.4.3 - Transformation of the subject's everyday expressions into educational language with emphasis on the phenomenon

Giorgi sees this stage as the core step of descriptive phenomenological analysis. The researcher returns to the beginning of the transcripts and starts to interrogate each meaning unit. The goal is to transform the everyday language of the participants into “more general and transferable insights” (Todres, 2005, p. 112) in order to make explicit the educational value of the descriptions (Giorgi, 2012). As Finlay describes it, the “implicit meanings are transformed into explicit ones” (Finlay, 2011, p. 97).

In practice, the first step was to create separate documents for each transcript. In each document, I copied that participant’s meaning units into a two-column table, with each meaning unit occupying a different row in the left column and the corresponding blank right-hand column were used to write the transformed meaning unit (an example can be found in table 2). I did this by changing the meaning unit into the third person and then carefully turning their words into discipline sensitive expressions. This process has two benefits - it highlights the key educational nature of the participant’s description, and it makes the data from various participants easier to form into one structure (Giorgi, 2009). Transforming the meaning units into discipline sensitive expressions was at times challenging. The exact wording had to be faithful to the experience and meaning of the participants’ descriptions. This took a lot of thought and consideration and was, at times,

frustrating. At times I had to rewrite the transformed meaning units many times before I felt it was right.

P 7 Description	Transformed meaning unit
Twitter, I find that really helpful to keep in contact with people professionally. Also, the Health Foundation runs some schools. So, I have met quite a few people through that who are doing something similar and often are in a similar situation. So, have had to come out of clinical practice and are feeling quite isolated. That is where Twitter has come in handy because they come from all around the country, so you can't just go and have a coffee. So, we tend to sort of tweet each other with inspiring messages.	P 7 also says she uses online communication to keep in contact with people she has met through the health foundation. She says these people are similar to her, in that they have come from clinical practice and are feeling isolated. Because they are not geographically able to meet up, they use the social media platform Twitter to tweet each other supportive messages.

Table 2 - An example of the transformed meaning units

Giorgi warns of the laborious nature of this step, and how the meanings will not just be able to be picked out, instead, they must be “detected, drawn out, and elaborated” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 131). Armed with this information, I went into this prepared for a drawn-out task. This process took several months as I worked to transform the meaning units.

Again, it was important to stay within the phenomenological attitude to ensure my preconceptions and experiences are not impacting the transformation of the descriptions.

3.4.4 - Formulation of the essential general structure of structures

This step presents a synthesis of each participant's transformed descriptions to create a consistent statement of the themes, or invariant constituents of the phenomenon. Whilst each participant's experience was unique and individual, the task in this step was to reveal what was invariant between all participants. Giorgi explains how an invariant constituent is essential to the whole if the structure would collapse without it (Giorgi, 2009). Todres explains the purpose is to: “establish what is typical of the phenomenon and to express such typicality in an insightful and integrated manner” (Todres, 2005, p. 113). Therefore, you are

aiming to establish what is typical of the phenomenon under investigation and then presenting the essence of the phenomenon (Todres, 2005).

Practically, there is no standard or agreed way to go about this step. When looking at examples of this method used by other researchers, I found different ways of doing this step. One such method was to come up with invariant constituents and place the transformed meaning units into these to see if they fit within this structure. I felt such an approach was too prescriptive and decided the best approach was to use the transformed meaning units to guide the creation of the invariant constituents and then test these through writing the general structure. Giorgi advises using the Husserlian phenomenological approach of what is termed ‘free imaginative variation’ during this process. Free imaginative variation means to remove an aspect of the phenomenon to see if this removal transforms what is presented in an essential way (Giorgi, 2009). To give a concrete example of this, every participant spoke at length about their supervisors when asked to describe their experience. Removing any mention of this aspect of their experience would fundamentally change the overall whole.

P6
Motivation - stand out in field
Motivation - Family expectations
Recruitment - trouble recruiting
Supervision - resisting direction of research
Supervision - lack of expertise
Supervision - guiding project v ownership
Methodology

Figure 4 - An example of the short labels from the transformed meaning units

Therefore, I returned to each of the transformed meaning units and analysed each one to give them a short label to signify what they were about (figure 4 shows an example of the

labels). I then printed these in a different colour for each participant and set to work, grouping them together into core themes to find the invariant constituents. This process took much thought and tinkering to arrive at four invariant constituents (Figure 5 shows a photo of the final result - additional photos of the process can be found in the appendix f). Once this was done, I named each of the constituents and considered if the structure would collapse without each one. It was also vital in this step that each participant was represented in each of the constituents as otherwise it would not meet the criteria of being universal to the overall essence. After presenting and discussing the four invariant constituents with my supervisors, I decided to split one of them into two. This was decided as it was felt two distinct themes were housed within one and splitting them would not cause either to collapse. This meant the final structure has five invariant constituents.



Figure 5 - Invariant constituents

Once I had arrived at the final invariant constituents, I began to write the general structure. In order to do so, I first developed an individual synthesis for each participant using their transformed meaning units. This was to help maintain the “biographical integrity” (von

Eckartsberg, 1998, p. 39) of the individual data and to help formulate the writing of the general structure. Following this, I began to write the general structure by marrying up the invariant constituents and binding together the transformed meaning units with the help of the individual syntheses. This can be seen in the following chapter.

As consistent with other qualitative methodologies, the results section of this thesis is made up of a detailed presentation and explanation of the invariant constituents using the participants' words. The final step of the process is to consider the findings of the study alongside the literature and current studies in the field, in the form of a discussion chapter (Todres, 2005; Giorgi et al., 2017).

3.5 - Ethical considerations

The University of Brighton's research ethics policy (University of Brighton, 2016) was considered and adhered to in the design and implementation of this study. An ethical submission to the university's College Research Ethics Committee (CREC) was submitted. Due to the insider research aspect and the fact I would be interviewing University of Brighton students, it was felt the application had to go to the higher tier 2 level of ethical review. This required more scrutiny of the research plan.

When designing the study, one of the main ethical considerations was my role as an insider researcher. Insider research is research projects which are undertaken by those who have an existing connection to the institution or social group they're investigating (Sikes & Potts, 2008). I hit this definition in two ways. Firstly, my position as a PhD student who was researching other PhD students. Secondly, as I was asking students who were enrolled at my university to take part in the research.

The merits of insider research have been long debated (Sikes & Potts, 2008), and there are genuine challenges which need to be considered when undertaking insider research. Hanson (2013) identifies proximity to research participants as a particular element which brings both advantages and disadvantages. The pros mean there is easier access to research participants, and the insider status may simulate greater levels of trust between participant and researcher. However, the con is the potential for the interview to become conversational, whereby the researcher is too relaxed or afraid to probe deeply. Alternatively, the research may offer their own opinion or bias, which corrupt the

participants responses (Hanson, 2013). Platt writes of this concern, stating: “one is anxious that the interviews should not be a socially unpleasant occasion, and that one should appear well in the eyes of people who constitute a significant reference group and with whom one will continue to live when the research is over” (Platt, 1981, p. 77). To mitigate against this, I did not interview anyone who worked in the department I was based in. Nor did I recruit anyone I had previously worked with or engaged with at the University. I did conduct two pilot interviews with doctoral students who worked in my department who I was familiar with. I wanted to test my interview guide but also see if I avoided offering my own opinion or comments in the interviews. This was important as I did not want to corrupt the data.

While easier access to research participants and a higher degree of trust are advantages, they also come with potential ethical dilemmas. I was worried students might have felt compelled to cooperate in the research as I was a fellow student who they knew was funded by the university they were enrolled at. To mitigate against this, I made sure the information sheet said they did not have to take part and if they chose not to there would be no negative outcome, and no one would be told they were invited and declined. If they did choose to take part, they could withdraw at any time without consequence.

I was also concerned that students may worry about their anonymity even with guaranteed confidentiality (Costley et al., 2010). Given other staff and students will know the research is taking place and the results will be publicly available at the university, it may be possible for those inside the organisation to identify those taking part. This worry may impact the quality of the research data if the participant is reluctant to take part or becomes guarded in what they share. This may have been a particular concern for the students taking part, as they may have been worried that I would also speak their supervisor and mention something they have said.

As per my ethical approval, written consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were emailed an information sheet and a consent form (a copy of each can be found in Appendix c and d). The forms were also brought to each interview for the participant to read one more time and to sign the consent form if they had not already done so. The information sheet explained to the participants the purpose of the study and what was required of them.

In the initial ethical application, I said I would recruit participants from other universities by contacting the head of the doctoral college to ask for permission and help recruiting at that institution. This initially proved successful as I was given permission at each of the institutions I contacted. However, their help in recruiting participants was not as successful and this left me stuck. I had to amend my ethics to include the possibility of finding participants myself at the institutions where I had been granted permission and through the use of a snowball recruitment technique. The snowball technique presented the challenge of compromising anonymity as those who recommended a participant may be able to identify who this is or vice versa (Johnson, 2014). To ensure there was not a chain of participants who would be able to identify each other, I limited snowballing to just one other participant.

3.6 – Reflections on methods

The descriptive phenomenological method adopted in this research project presented challenges on both a practical and conceptual level. I had never used this method before and was at first slightly overwhelmed by the method of analysis described by Giorgi.

In order to refine my interview guide and method of interviewing, I conducted two pilot interviews with PhD students who were researching their field of professional practice. Both of these students worked in my department and I knew each of them well. I did not feel I could ethically use these interviews, but the experience allowed me to refine the interviews I did after and it was a valuable experience. These pilot interviews also allowed me to ask the students if they felt I was bringing my preconceptions into the interviews or offering my own slant on the experience when questioning them. This gave me reassurance and again allowed me to refine my own approach for the interviews which would make up this study.

My main concern was what attracted me to the method in the first place, the bracketing. As mentioned previously I was concerned by my own position as a PhD student who was researching PhD students. Particularly bracketing presuppositions and assuming the phenomenological attitude in the analysis seemed daunting at first. There was little practical information as how best to achieve this step. I recorded my own reflections and experiences of the PhD prior to commencing the analysis. Listening to this back allowed me to be aware of my own presuppositions. This step allowed me to feel confident when analysing the data

that I was, to the best of my ability, assuming the phenomenological attitude and being faithful to the descriptions of the participants.

3.7 - Summary of Chapter

This chapter has explained the descriptive phenomenological method used in this research project. It was discussed in detail how the research was conducted, and the methods used. The data analysis steps of Giorgi (2009) and Todres & Holloway (2004) were explained and how this was done in practice. This study had to consider the ethical implications of my status as an insider researcher – a PhD student who was researching PhDs.

Chapter 4 – Participant Individual Syntheses and General Structure

4.1 - Introduction

This chapter presents each participants' individual synthesis. These are followed by the general structure of the phenomenon of studying for a PhD in one's field of professional practice.

The individual synthesis was deemed necessary in order to maintain the "biographical integrity" of the data (von Eckartsberg, 1998, p. 39). Giorgi recommends a synthesis of the data for the "purposes of communication to the scholarly community" (Giorgi, 1997). These individual syntheses provide an opportunity to preserve the variations in the data before presenting the general structure (McSherry, 2018). The individual syntheses are not meant to be read as a series of connections which form the general structure, rather they are biographical snapshots of each participant.

Writing the general structure is necessary to allow the reader to see the invariant constituents working together. Reed explains the purpose of the general structure as describing "how the elements of a phenomenon function constitutively, how they interrelate to form the unity of the experience" (Reed, 1987, p. 102).

4.2 - Individual Syntheses

4.2.1 - P 1 Individual Synthesis

P 1 is a senior lecturer at the university she is enrolled in. Although she has been out of professional practice for a significant length of time she still identifies as a 'nurse'. She fears working at the University for too long will cause her to become too far detached from her practice. P 1 struggles with constantly 'changing hats' from being a nurse, a lecturer, a colleague, a student, a mother, and a wife.

In order to do the PhD, she has a day a week scholarly leave, although in practice this often gets used for other professional activities which leaves her having to find time outside work hours. Due to her professional and family conflicts P 1 has found her PhD work has come in bursts of productivity at certain times to meet deadlines. She found immersing herself in

established communities of researchers at the University, special interest groups, helped her learning and created a group of peers she could communicate with specifically about the PhD. She feels within her relationship with her supervisors there has been a qualitative shift where she has gone from novice to expert thanks to their help.

4.2.2 - P 2 Individual Synthesis

P 2 is a council employee who stumbled into doing a PhD through trying to obtain funding for a community project. He did not have any post-graduate experience so the University required him to undertake a post graduate certificate before he could progress to doing the PhD fully. His degree is focused on the community organisation he runs aimed at improving mental health. Despite his lack of academic experience, he has been drawn deeply into social theory as he has tried to develop a theory to explain his practice.

Developing his thesis has been a constant battle. This has manifested his production of different drafts of chapters whereby he estimates to have submitted thirty or forty different ten thousand-word chapters. He struggles to write in an appropriately academic format to be considered for a PhD, something he has worked on with his supervisors.

4.2.3 - P 3 Individual Synthesis

P 3 is an experienced education practitioner who had reached a level where she needed to find further stimulation within the field. She felt supported by the senior management at her school so looked further into the opportunity of doing a PhD. P 3 gave up a day a week of her employment and used this to study for the PhD part-time. For her PhD project P 3 was actively trying to change the culture within her school to a more resilience-based practice, which required the support of staff. The changes she implemented have been ongoing for five years and she has found staff from across the hierarchy have been supportive of the new way of working.

She was based over 60 miles from the University she was enrolled at which meant she had little contact with the department or campus she was based in. Despite being someone who works better alone she found the process isolating at times. She felt supported pastorally by one of her supervisors who set up peer supervision and encouraged a group of students studying similar topics to contact each other. P 3 found this helped with her wellbeing and with her learning as students were sharing work between each other.

4.2.4 - P 4 Individual Synthesis

P 4 was a self-funded PhD student studying part-time. At the time of our interview he was approaching his seventh year of study. P 4 is practicing therapist and came into the PhD highly driven to learn more about his practice. At the beginning he had a very specific vision for what he wanted his PhD to focus on but found this was unpractical. This caused conflict between P 6 and his supervision team as they warned him of the multitude of difficulties he would face with his original vision.

P 4's PhD experience was shaped by his relationship with his supervisors. He had no say in who his supervisors were and felt they lacked the professional background for his project. His status as a self-funded played an important part in the breakdown of trust with his supervisors. He felt as he was paying for the PhD it should have given him more control over the proposed direction and methodology used in the study. The breakdown in the relationship reached a nadir when P 4 had to attend a review meeting to see if he could continue with the PhD. He felt this was forced on him because he had voiced his criticism of his supervisors. Following this review process, he felt unable to speak openly about his supervisors.

4.2.5 - P 5 Individual Synthesis

P 5 is a full-time PhD student who gave up her practicing position as a teacher to study full-time for the PhD, she had six months remaining at the time of our interview. She was motivated to do the PhD as she realised her career progression was pushing her down a leadership pathway, something she was resistant of. Her PhD was part of a wider intervention, her research was to evaluate a part of this intervention. She went into the PhD viewing it as a research apprenticeship and was concerned whether this project could sustain her interest over three years.

The intervention she was evaluating was delayed which caused her to have no data for her first year. She initially felt this was beneficial as it allowed her to immerse herself in the literature and attend research training and events. As the intervention was based several hundred miles away from where she is based it created problems in gathering data. She feels a lack of ownership as she was not involved in designing and carrying out the intervention, merely evaluating it. P 5 has two young children and a husband and feels

family issues have been a barrier in her PhD journey, but her supervisors have been very supportive of the limitations these issues have placed on her.

4.2.6 - P 6 Individual Synthesis

P 6 switched from being a full-time student to a part-time student after three years of the degree. At the time of the interview he was in his fifth year and was preparing to submit. P 6 was junior in his practice when he began the PhD, and this played an important role in shaping his experience. Due to his inexperience in practice and his initial full-time status as a doctoral student, the PhD has had a significant role in developing his understanding of his practice and his professional identity.

P 6 found the research environment at the university to be hierarchical and dysfunctional. Rather than nurturing novice researchers, he felt older and senior staff were threatened by someone comfortable operating in both research and practice fields. This led to confrontations and disciplinary measures which P 6 felt crossed the line into bullying. This led to him isolating himself from the university and the department he was working in. The dysfunctional and competitive research environment impacted his supervision, where he felt the second and third supervisors were using written feedback to critique the direction of the project the lead supervisor had pushed for. The supervisors lacked the practitioner knowledge to help structure the research project, this was particularly the case with the lead supervisor who was more interested in the theoretical side, which P 6 feels disrupted the start of his project.

4.2.7 - P 7 Individual Synthesis

Even though it was in her field of expertise, P 7 had to technically leave the NHS in order to do the PhD. This caused an identity crisis which became a theme of her degree. She struggled adapting to the role of researcher rather than clinician, for example she found interviewing a different style of communication to talking to patients. This extended to the isolation felt as a student compared to that of a clinician. This caused dips in motivation and feelings of depression. The experience of data collection left her feeling a lack of control over the process as she was at the mercy of other people. Whereas the analysis and writing up is down to her and she feels more at ease.

She felt her degree was frontloaded with a lot crammed into the first year with little space for reflection. She had no qualitative background so had to develop this knowledge and skill – which she saw as understanding a whole new language - while simultaneously making decisions and plans as to the structure of the project. She had a positive relationship with her supervisors who were always on hand for advice while challenging her too.

4.2.8 - P 8 Individual Synthesis

P 8 was enrolled on a PhD programmes designed for junior practitioners to become researching practitioners. She was doing the PhD full-time but working up to thirty hours per-week in her profession as a nurse. She had only been a qualified nurse for months when she began the PhD and she felt she was still very much developing her craft at this time. Although on reflection she feels she learned a lot about her practice through doing the PhD it was a struggle juggling both her professional development and the PhD, which caused her to feel stress and suffer with anxiety. She felt there was a lack of cohesion between her PhD programme and her employment which exasperated the issues she was experiencing. She felt the demands placed on her by her supervisors gave no consideration to her other professional commitments of which they were aware.

She struggled with understanding what to do at the beginning of the PhD and found the reality different from what she had read in textbooks. She was unprepared for the practicalities and the administrative parts of the PhD. Her supervisors did not come from her professional field and this caused a mismatch in expectations and a gap in knowledge. She did not realise at the start she should have been making demands of what she wanted from her supervisors.

4.2.9 - P 9 Individual Synthesis

P 9 was also enrolled on a PhD programmes designed for junior practitioners to become researching practitioners. She was contracted to do the PhD over four-years whilst continuing to work. She found balancing the PhD and her professional job too hard and seriously considered leaving the programme. Eventually she reduced the PhD to three-years and cut her work hours for a year. By making her stipend into three years it gave her financial freedom to choose how many hours to work which helped with the work/life balance.

She was motivated to do the PhD as a personal achievement and had no post-graduate background or research training. She feels she did not fully understand what a PhD was and expected it to be more structured like previous study she had done. She struggled with one of her supervisors who was not active in the process and did not provide feedback. P 9 puts this down to his lack of experience in nursing or nursing research. She has had to add a third supervisor after repeatedly complaining which improved the situation and created more balance.

4.2.10 - P 10 Individual Synthesis

P 10 was a full-time teacher who reduced her contract to four hours teaching per week to study for the PhD full-time. This has had an impact on her sense of belonging to her profession and she feels excluded from the school she works in. As a mid-career professional, she was motivated by personal enhancement and decided to achieve this through academic study rather than chasing further career enhancement. The PhD was a set project attached to funding but has evolved significantly away from its intended focus something supported by her supervisors. The project had to evolve due to issues recruiting participants. This led to a breakdown of the original research plan.

The breakdown of her research plan caused P 10 to question her ability and skills as a researcher. She found the day-to-day experience isolating and this was heightened during this period of trouble. There was a lack of other PhD students to speak to and she found herself working alone in the office. This time changed her perception of the PhD and what is possible in three years. During this time, she was in regular contact with her lead supervisor which she felt kept her motivated. Her similar age and profile to her lead supervisor was beneficial to their positive working relationship.

4.2.11 - P 11 Individual Synthesis

P 11 is a senior health practitioner and sought funding to do a PhD which would have a direct benefit to her service and patients. She previously started a PhD but had to drop out after two years. She felt her supervisors had pushed her in a direction which did not meet her desire to focus on her service. When she returned to try again for a doctorate it had to fit alongside her job without drastically reducing her work hours, she is now doing a PhD by publication. She has since taken on more responsibility at work which has overshadowed

the PhD. However, her senior status has meant she has been able to implement change in her service during her degree.

She had a lack of research experience at the start and through attending mandatory research training she realised she needed to switch from a qualitative approach to quantitative as she felt this suited her more. During her first attempt at undertaking a PhD, P 11 was dissatisfied with her supervisors who she felt were treating her as a regular student and did not consider her senior workload. She is more satisfied with her current supervisory team who she feels understand her professional commitments and support this with a light touch to supervision that does not apply any pressure on P 11.

4.2.12 - P 12 Individual Synthesis

P 12 is partly funded to do the PhD by her employer but continues to work full-time as a Further Education teacher. P 12 motivation was to move from the FE sector to Higher Education and felt obtaining a PhD would be the best way to achieve this. While her employers were initially supportive, she feels there has been a growing mismatch between their priorities and hers and this negative attitude from her managers has impacted her enthusiasm for the PhD. This has also caused her to negatively reflect on her practice and the sector she works in. She feels there is a basic lack of understanding of what is involved in a PhD within her profession which has caused the issues. The college have been reluctant to let her have one hour off a month to attend supervision sessions, which takes place in a free period.

Due to a lack of colleagues with PhDs and her full-time status P 12 has felt very isolated. She only has her supervisors to speak about the PhD with, but this has also been disrupted as there have been enforced changes in the supervisory team. Both her original lead and second supervisor left the University in the first two years of the degree. It took her six months to build a good working relationship with her new lead supervisor who had to take on many PhD students due to the previous supervisor leaving. There has been a lack of training or support from the University outside of supervision.

4.3 - General Structure

Presented below is the general structure of the phenomenon of studying for a PhD in one's field of professional practice.

Studying for a PhD in one's field of professional practice is a demanding endeavour. They decide to undertake a PhD for various different personal and professional reasons. Students begin the process without a fully developed understanding of what a PhD is and their individual motivation and goals influence their expectations of what they can achieve and how the degree programme functions.

Once they have begun the degree practitioner research students tend not to engage heavily with PhD programmes outside of the initial phase of research training, this is especially the case if their end goal is not to find a job in academia. This can lead to students becoming isolated and feeling lost. Developing robust informal communities helps both wellbeing and learning during the journey. Drops in motivation as their professional and personal lives take precedent are to be expected due to the length of the degree and a strong peer group can help navigate these troughs.

Due to their lack of involvement with other parts of the formal doctoral curriculum, the supervisory relationship takes on even greater importance than it typically would. Students' expectations of their supervisors are formed early and reinforced during their conversation with other students. Without a formal discussion around expectations it can lead the student to become dissatisfied with their supervisors if they expect greater involvement than the supervisor is able to give.

Studying for a PhD changes the way the students view and interact with their profession, something which happens during their period of study. Students require ongoing and continued support from their employers and are frustrated if this is withdrawn.

4.4 - Summary of Chapter

This chapter has presented each participants' individual synthesis, followed by the general structure of the phenomenon. The general structure is the whole essence of the phenomenon working together, it is not the findings of the research. The next chapter will focus in-depth on the findings of each of the five invariant constituents.

Chapter 5 - Findings

5.1 - Introduction and Invariant constituents

As per the methodological approach outlined in the previous chapter, the data analysis phase of this research aimed to identify the invariant constituents which make up the general structure of the phenomenon. The invariant constituents are the essential elements of studying for a PhD in one's field of practice. They were descriptions found in all the interviews, and without each of them, the general structure would collapse. The analysis phase identified five invariant constituents:

- Understanding what a PhD is
- Learning and support during the PhD are not limited to what is provided formally by the University
- Supervisor relationship is the primary source of interaction between student and the University
- The PhD is only one part of the students' lives and must be managed alongside other parts
- Doing a PhD irreversibly changes the way students view their profession

There are moments of overlap between these elements, but all five make up the experience of doing a PhD for students who are researching their field of practice. This chapter considers each of these invariant constituents in detail.

This chapter introduces a number of themes and sub-themes within these invariant constituents. In order for the reader to better follow this chapter I have produced a table which lists the themes and sub-themes alongside their page number. This can be found in Appendix G.

5.2 - Understanding what a PhD is

This section presents findings from the first invariant constituent – *Understanding what a PhD is*. This constituent concerns how students develop as researchers during the PhD and the stages they go through. This section begins by discussing students' motivation for studying for a PhD and their expectations of what they could get out of the degree. It then discusses research training students receive during the degree. The final two sections focus

on the day-to-day work on the research project and the formal milestones within the PhD programme, and how these impacted their experience.

5.2.1 - Student Expectations & Motivation

This section is concerned with students' expectations and motivations for the PhD when they began and how this shaped their ongoing experience. One key element was the need to meld expectations and motivation with the limitations of a PhD. Learning these limits was a vital part of the PhD learning journey.

5.2.1.1 - Develop a full understanding of what a PhD is in order to move forward

Not being fully aware of what a PhD was or what was required was a standard description from the participants. Many of the participants came to the PhD after being outside of academia for some time. Based on their descriptions, the length of time outside of academia formed part of the explanation as to why they did not know what to expect from the degree. Another part of the explanation concerned not having colleagues who had undertaken a PhD who could share their experience.

Participants in this study had to learn how a PhD operates - what can be accomplished, what is required from them, and how to plan their project out - before they could fully engage with the PhD.

"Well, I think I was quite naïve. I thought a PhD was the pinnacle of academic achievement and I think I thought that I would change the world and revolutionise the way that my respiratory patients were cared for. I realised that my aim if you like is really to identify characterise and start to explain what is going on, I am not intervening at all. So, I guess, I had very unrealistic expectations of what I could achieve, that is one thing." – P 7 - Nurse

P 7 is a good example of this. She explained how it took until the end of her first year before she felt her expectations had shifted away from this view. She came to this realisation after completing her ethical application.

"So, you are putting it down in a protocol and then you realise actually I can't put very much in this protocol because I can't do it and for the time being it won't get

through ethics. So, that really came home to me through the ethical process.” – P 7 - Nurse

She described how the first year was a lot of learning as she did not have a qualitative background and it required a lot of reflection.

Before this knowledge was fully developed participants were prone to leaning on their supervisors. In some instances, they came to regret this, P 4 described feeling naïve at the beginning of the PhD which led him to follow advice from his supervisors which he later regretted. Initially, he wanted to understand better his personal practice as a therapist and what made it effective. He planned to record his therapy sessions which he would then analyse. Gaining a better insight into his practice, with the goal of improving it, was a core part of his motivation for doing the PhD. However, his supervisors pushed him away from this idea:

“But they said to me, oh no, that is not really a good idea. You know, it should be about something or someone that is not you. I had not come across Alec Grant and his autoethnography at that point. I had not really come across all the support for what is called practice-based evidence as opposed to evidence based on practice. I don’t know if you are familiar with that. So, rewinding to the beginning I think that is really what I would still prefer to have done. Like what makes my practice effective. But I was sort of put off that by my supervisors and I don’t know why, but I think it was the first of many mistakes they made.” – P 4 – Therapist

P 4 had a poor relationship with his supervisors which he believed stemmed from him receiving, what he perceived as, this poor advice from them. It was his lack of understanding about the PhD and the limitations of the degree which caused the early issue with his supervisors. This initial direction tainted his relationship going forward and, as a result, his confidence in any further advice offered from his supervisors. Later in the interview, P 4 reflected how he retrospectively understands some of the advice, and the direction his supervisors wished him to take. This realisation came from a place of understanding the demands of the PhD. Had his supervisors had more appreciation to his naivety at the beginning of the process, their relationship with P 4 might have been different.

Some of the participants described how a lack of other PhDs in their professional sphere meant they were unprepared when starting. P 8 described how, within her field, there was a lack of motivation to do further study. This professional malaise to further study left her feeling she had no one to speak to who could share their experience of what a PhD was:

"It was kind of daunting [starting the PhD] because I had no idea what a PhD was, and I didn't really have anyone around me who could tell me. My colleagues who had done nursing with me were not that way inclined they didn't really want to do any further study or anything at that point." – P 8 – Nurse

It may be worth supervisors enquiring if there are any professional or personal role models in the candidate's life whom they can speak to for advice about the experience of studying for a PhD.

5.2.1.2 - Motivation for doing a PhD can shape initial expectations of what the student believes a PhD is and what can be achieved

Participants' expectation of the PhD is closely bound with their motivation for deciding to undertake a PhD. Their motivation firmly determined what they expected to get out of the degree, which then influenced their expectation of what depth is required to do a PhD once they began. P 2 described his starting motivation as wanting to understand his professional practice in a theoretical way. He wanted the PhD to be a space where he could think deeply about the topic. This motivation laid the foundation for how he expected the PhD to be and what he expected he could achieve once he started. However, it transpired his idealised understanding of what he expected a PhD to offer became troublesome in his approach to undertaking the PhD. At the time of our interview, he was in his sixth year since starting the PhD, and he was still struggling with situating his practice within any theoretical models. In his case, he was using writing to develop this thinking without moving the project forward:

"Writing, writing, writing, writing. I have written, I must have written I would say get on for a million words. You know, in terms of... say your chapter is ten thousand words. I must have submitted I would say thirty or forty chapters. So, that is kind of half a million words." – P 2 – Council worker

P 2 felt a lot of his writing was working with different theories and seeing if they worked. He explained he was drawing upon his experience of improvisation as a Jazz musician. His

expectations were drawing upon his personal life experience. He found that his expectations of the PhD were coming into conflict with his supervisors' expectations and broader academic standards. He described how his supervisors were continually battling to bring his writing to the standards required for a PhD:

"It is my supervisors job as they have explained to me many times is just to keep the shit out of my writing, you know, and they think it is hilarious and they are right as well. They say, look we like the way that you write but we have got to get it into a certain format in order to be accepted as a PhD. I am just like what is the point. What is the point of this? Why am I doing this? But I do know why I am doing it, it is so that I can then... it is just to have a theoretical basis for proper NHS intervention into this community based workshops, really." – P 2 – Council worker

The difference between expectations and reality can take time to manifest, the example of P 7 in the previous section showed this. In another example, P 10 described how she was initially dismissive of those who warned her how difficult doing a PhD is, this attitude survived until she reached a significant challenge in the process. P 10 struggled to recruit participants - an issue which caused her whole research plan to breakdown and the focus of her study to change. This problem caused her to re-evaluate her entire understanding of the PhD:

"Whilst people say to you at the beginning, a bit like parenting, oh, it is really hard, you go yeah, really, how hard can it be. All of a sudden, you find yourself in a place where you go actually this is really bloody hard." – P 10 - Teacher

It is part of the supervisor's role to manage expectations, by setting boundaries and limitations of a study. The example below shows that supervisors can sometimes use expectations to stimulate learning.

"she [supervisor] likes to push her students whether that is good or bad. So, she likes to push you to a deadline. So, she will set you expectations, but she probably tries to see if you will meet the impossible deadline first before and then try to debrief maybe about why you..." – P 9 – School Nurse

However, what was not present in the interviews was any evidence the supervisors were helping to define the *initial* expectations, either before the PhD formally began or during the first few weeks. There was a sense some supervisors use their initial contact to push the student to have to discover. P 3 - who admitted she had no idea what sort of undertaking a PhD was - described how her supervisor used the first meeting to give her a task without fully explaining the degree.

"when I had my first meeting with her she said, right I want you to just go away now and write me an essay that is ten thousand words long on the construct of resilience. Right, and that was it, that was the brief. I was like, oh my God, I don't know where to start, you know. It was like, it is massive and I had never written to PhD level before." – P 3 – Deputy headteacher

P 3 went on to reflect how this was useful as it forced her to critically engage and begin reading. However, this initial strategy is risky for practitioners with demanding professional lives. Other participants explained how they resented being treated as if they were a typical student by their supervisors, they wanted more direction and clarity on what they should be doing.

5.2.2 - How students learn to undertake a PhD

This section concerns how students develop an understanding of what the PhD is and learn to undertake a PhD. Training modules proved to be essential for those who had been in practice for a long time and created a bridge between their practice knowledge and academic frameworks.

5.2.2.1 - *Training modules are vital for those who had in practice for a long time*

The central aspect of University support present in the participant experience came in their descriptions of the training offered to PhD students. Overall, the participants were positive about the research training their university offered, and how this helped them in their studies.

Crucially, many of the participants had been out of academia for some time and, consequently, these students found the training offered invaluable. P 11 described how her University required her to undertake two master's modules, in qualitative and quantitative methods, before she was able to start. They felt she did not have the required knowledge in

research methodologies to complete a PhD. P 11 found doing this training helpful as it changed her perception of what methods suited her style of working. Before doing the modules, she felt qualitative methods would suit her study, and she was drawn to the in-depth insight qualitative could give her about her practice. However, she found through doing the modules her skill set did not suit qualitative inquiry:

“But what I found that I was really bad at is with qualitative analysis. I thought I could do it really well, but I was kind of really ripped to shreds during those modules. Because I hadn’t put the depth; I hadn’t used the right frameworks. Every time I used a framework, no, that wouldn’t be the right one.” – P 11 – Senior nurse

However, she found by completing the module that quantitative methods suited the issue she wanted to investigate with her practice. She also felt that adopting a quantitative approach was necessary to balance her conflicting priorities:

“Yeah, it is a pragmatic way of thinking about it is like I need to get this done in the timeframe, what fits, what can I do, what is going to work, how can I survive this process.” – P 11 – Senior nurse

For practitioners, they often have to adopt a pragmatic approach to research, but to arrive at this realisation is part of the learning process.

5.2.2.2 - Training modules provided a bridge between practice knowhow and academic frameworks

A minority of the participants specifically mentioned how the training modules were how they learned some of the methodological terms vital to completing a PhD in their discipline. For example, P 3 described how she learned the words ‘epistemology’ and ‘ontology’ during a research methodology module:

“I did the one [research training module] on methodology, when I discovered what the word epistemology and ontology meant. So, I kind of picked and chose between different ones that I needed where I had areas of weakness, where I had absolutely no clue at all.” – P 3 – Deputy Headteacher

This example describes an important step in academic acculturation which is vital to working at the required level for a PhD. While the participants were confident in their ability

to understand and describe their practice, those who had been out of academia for some time initially struggled to situate their practice within academic terminology and frameworks. This was a learning barrier they had to overcome in order to progress with their research.

Another common - and related - description concerned learning and understanding academic theories. P 6, who was due to submit his thesis shortly after our interview, described how it took a long time to match his topic to academic theories, he felt this was due to having no formal training in the social sciences.

"Then I think the... having a topic like that and then having to learn the theoretical framework having never had sociological or philosophical training before that was quite difficult. So, I finally got the thesis to a point now where the data and the theory complement each other" – **P 6 – Health visitor**

He spoke in more detail about his research training, which he considered to be designed to give a broad overview of different methods and methodologies. He found in-depth training opportunities in the methodological areas he wanted to use to be lacking.

"It wasn't that useful because I ended up doing my PhD as a critical realist synthesis and a Foucauldian discourse analysis, which are quite specialised. I mean, even like the discourse analysis training that I had, that there was a lecture on, it didn't refer to anything on post structural discourse analysis, it was all very much psychologically driven, very linguistic focused." – **P 6 – Health Visitor**

To compensate for this, he explained how he used conversations with academic and other PhD colleagues in his office, which he described as informal training. However, he found his colleagues were sometimes hesitant to give too much advice and direction as they felt it was the job of the supervisors.

Not all the participants were inexperienced with research within their field, P 7 described in detail how she drew upon experiences from her professional life to adapt to the methodological needs of the PhD. She explained how she had trouble using a qualitative approach to research as she felt this meant adopting a different way of thinking compared to her professional life. Although she had never done qualitative research herself, she said

she had helped recruitment for a qualitative study and did some of the analysis alongside the principal investigator. She feels this experience was vital in not only learning qualitative methods but also to change her way of thinking:

"So, that was really useful to start understanding it because I had mainly worked on very quantitative studies. I think being a clinician you come from that mindset where you are like, how can you be objective in this, if your research instrument... you are collecting your own data and then analysing it, it is just not objective. So, to start to break down some of that kind of mindset was very helpful." – P 7 – Nurse

This example demonstrates practitioners sometimes have certain methodological preconceptions which can form part of their initial expectations.

5.2.3 - The day-to-day undertaking of a PhD

Once students had learned what was required practically and methodologically to work towards a PhD, they were able to focus on the process of actually doing the day-to-day research project. These findings were the parts of their descriptions that concerned 'doing' the PhD, such as completing literature reviews, conducting interviews, planning, analysing data, and writing. Also included are working practices.

5.2.3.1 - *Unforeseen issues are likely to arise. Researchers thinking needs to be adaptable, and research plans need to be malleable*

It is common for all PhD students to produce a research plan. As well as providing information on the theory and direction of the research, it also requires in-depth thought about the methods of research. Outlining a timeline over the length of the degree can be a tricky proposition, and producing a timeline is most likely based on a realistic guess of what is achievable. However, events outside of the researcher's control can dictate the progress of the project. How the researcher adapts to these events can determine if the project remains workable.

Participant recruitment came up several times as a problem for the participants. P 10s struggles to recruit participants became so problematic it led to her having to change her whole thesis plan. Initially, she was hoping to recruit by approaching headteachers and asking for access to their teachers. She found the headteachers she approached did not want to add to their teachers' workloads, so were unwilling to help. This issue caused a

significant delay in recruiting, which left her having to switch from the planned three interviews to just a single interview:

"So, the study was meant to be... we were meant to start in September and the plan was that we would recruit 15 teachers in the beginning of the academic year, and we would interview them three times. One per term. We would look at the evolution of their year because the academic year is a very important process in teaching because each year is different. Each year is driven by a timetable, demands and what is going on... But because of the way that the... the restrictions that we had or the barriers that we had and the way that things developed we ended up having only one interview with the number of people that we managed to recruit." – P 10 – Teacher

In this extract, she explains the importance of the original approach to her study; however, circumstances she did not anticipate dictated the change. This issue with recruiting participants meant her study was fundamentally different from what it would have been had she been able to proceed as she planned.

P 6 and P 4 were other participants who described being unable to recruit participants — something which also had a significant impact on their studies. Like P 10, P 6 described unanticipated issues with gatekeepers which caused a delay, with many just not responding to his requests. This meant he had to change from using a planned three case study areas to just a single case study.

Perhaps the most extreme example was that of P 4, who had to abandon his whole research plan due to recruitment issues:

"Could I get anyone to agree to participate in this very interesting study? No, there was all kinds of resistances. So, after a year, maybe even two years I had to abandon that which was so frustrating and obviously, is probably why I am still here doing it."
– P 4 – Therapist

He came to view this as an issue with his supervisors' lack of experience in his field. He believes supervisors with more experience in his field would have been able to anticipate the issues he was going to face. He also wondered if they had come from a therapist background would they have had the contacts with the appropriate gatekeepers to help

with his recruitment. This example highlights the difference in initial expectations of what can be expected from supervisors and the reality of what they can provide.

5.2.3.2 - Students can draw upon their project management experience

Problems with recruitment can be viewed as project management issues. Project management would not commonly be thought of as part of the doctoral curriculum or taught within research methods modules. Where there is a lack of appropriate support, students must learn strategies of managing their project themselves. Those who are doing a PhD in their professional practice might have more experience with project management than a PhD student who has come straight through the university system.

Those who have this experience exhibited more resilience in being able to adapt their research plan quickly. For example, P 1, who also struggled with recruitment to the extent it caused her to modify her research design, described how she overcame recruitment issues through the use of snowballing. She realised she was stuck and this was a project management issue, rather than a flaw in methodology, and was able to evolve her research plan to overcome this issue by using the participant she had recruited to recommend further participants. She explained how from a single participant she was able to recruit others whom that person knew and fit within her target sample:

“But that one person, I got so much recruitment form that one particular initial snowballing, that really allowed me to collect data in a really productive way. It meant my timeframe was able to evolve quite nicely.” – P 1 – Lecturer in Nursing

This was an unintentional method of recruiting and was not in her initial plan. She went on to explain how this inspired learning about research processes in the PhD which may not be taught in courses or found in books:

“But the real learning in the PhD is actually just the process more than the content. I mean, you are... personally it is the content, right? But professionally and it is... I think sometimes as a PhD student you forget that student element that we are learning and you learn the tricks, so you get tips from people and you kind of, oh I wish I had done that, but then you will remember that for next time.” – P 1 – Lecturer in Nursing

P 1 demonstrates the messiness of research which comes with experience.

5.2.3.3 - A problem with one part of the PhD process can bring to the fore other issues with the PhD

Issues with recruitment did not only lead to issues with the research plan. P 10 described how it also caused issues with other elements of her PhD experience. During this period, she experienced heightened feelings of isolation, particularly within her workspace at the University.

"What it turned around to be was that this place, this office, this personal office space which was a great thing, turned into a place of isolation and loneliness.

Because I wasn't getting the participants, I wasn't going out doing the interviews and it became a very dead, quiet space that was really quite horrid". – P 10 - Teacher

She described how seemingly small things, such as turning the radio on in the office, had a positive impact and acted as a release to the isolation she was experiencing. This period of struggle with her PhD caused P 10 to reflect on her practice and view parts of her practice in a different light.

"I became very... so, for example, the fact that I was still teaching school, it made me become very appreciative of things in school that perhaps when I was teaching there full time, I was kind of ranting and raging at." – P 10 – Teacher

It was common for students to compare their working practices in the PhD to their professional working practices when describing moments of difficulty with the doctorate.

5.2.3.4 - Participants found writing a PhD different from other forms of writing. Regardless of their writing experience or proficiency, thesis writing was a skill which had to be honed.

The PhD is a significant piece of writing, typically around 80,000 words, and consequently, many of the participants described their experience of writing.

Learning to write in an academic style was a frequent description from the participants. P 12 felt as an English teacher the writing part of doing a PhD would not be a problem. However, after receiving early feedback from her supervisor, she realised she had to develop different writing skills:

"So, I think my writing was crap to start off with, you know, with my first supervisor she just despaired when I first did a piece of writing. But then again, I have not done any academic writing for years." – P 12 – FE Teacher

She went on to admit she was initially confused by this feedback as it threatened her professional identity as a teacher of English. However, she was able to use this early feedback to reflect on what changes she needed to make in her writing.

"I think I was sophisticating things to start off with and trying to sound grand and make it more important than it was. Whereas now I have realised that I just need to communicate clearly and effectively because the ideas you talk about are so hifalutin anyway, you don't want to confuse things." – P 12 – FE Teacher

P 5 was also a teacher working within the English curriculum and, like P 12, she felt confident with her writing ability going into the PhD. She described writing the thesis as an art form which she had to perfect. She spoke of how she had the tools required at the start, but she had to learn how to use them appropriately. She gave an example of this by recalling how she was comfortable writing different chapters of the PhD separately, but when bringing them together they did not have a consistent style or voice. She felt she had to work hard on writing at the appropriate level while also conveying an argument with which she was happy. Whereas, in previous drafts, she was writing in an academic manner without saying anything of meaning. Like P 12, this is something she addressed through feedback from her supervisors:

"Techniques that my supervisor suggested to me have been really helpful, like when I was writing up the data, I had put a tiny quote from a member of staff and then launch into my analysis of it for pages. Whereas she was saying if I put all of the quotes that I had selected from the interviews that were really important that I want in my chapter to hinge on and then try to link them using as few words as possible to make the point of why I had included the quote. So, we did it first as bullet points and then expanded it. So, things like that. It is about making the content more meaningful but not losing the kind of academic quality of the writing." – P 5 - Teacher

Not all the participants described being able to respond to feedback from their supervisors. As touched upon in the Expectations & Motivations section, P 2 described how he has

struggled with writing the PhD and the feedback he has received. At one point during our interview, he explained how he had been struggling to find a balance in the feedback he was receiving around the analysis chapter:

"Analysis, the analysis sections I had one chapter, they [his supervisors] said, there is not enough data here. The next chapter it is all analysis, it is all abstract, okay, a super abstract analysis. Too much analysis, not grounded in data. Alright, go away again and try and balance that" – P 2 – Council worker

As previously mentioned, he described in the interview how he had submitted thirty or forty chapters, suggesting he is still trying to find a balance. He found these drafts were coming back with different comments each time, and this caused him to go away and produce another draft using a different theoretical angle.

Earlier in P 5s interview, she described working with a document the size of a PhD as a learning curve. This was something which came up in other interviews, P 6 spoke about the challenge of crafting his argument consistently throughout the thesis. He spoke about how in his previous experience as a student, he would typically produce essays at the last moment but felt the PhD required a different style of working due to the scale.

"The PhD there is a lot more deeper meaning to that. You have got to make sure... like what I am doing now is editing my chapters to make sure that the five points I have mentioned in the introduction, go across the whole of the thesis and then make sure there is a lot more connectives. So, theoretical frameworks matching disciplines, matching research questions. There is that constant referring back to, going forward. It does make the thesis... making it really strong as an argument. But that takes time. Sometimes I am just not in the mood to write." – P 6 – Health worker

He also talked about the importance of creating the right atmosphere for writing. In the course of our interview, he had previously explained how he stopped working at the office due to the hostile atmosphere he felt there. He also explained he preferred not to write at home as there were too many distractions. His preferred working space for writing was in a

public space which had access to food and some background noise of other people. Working in a public space is a common preference for some PhD students and academics¹⁰.

5.2.3.5 - Writing viewed as a way to regain control of the PhD

One participant saw writing as a way of regaining control of doing a PhD. She described how elements such as participant recruitment and data collection were partly out of her control, whereas the writing process was solely down to her.

"So, I love writing. Writing is my thing, I did English as a degree. So, I actually really enjoy it. In some ways it is quite nice to get away from all the stressful bits. Because you can actually control it. So, I think what I have found really frustrating about the research governance process was there is nothing you could do. I mean, I had practically setup tent outside one hospital's R&D department [to recruit participants] because it is in other people's hands and I think now I have got all my data I kind of... I am a complete control freak, I like having control over my own workload and so I can manage my workload and I can see where I am going. I know it is a big task, but it is mine to do and mine to fail at or mine to succeed at. So, I don't... in some ways I quite like that because I like the balance of power is back with me now, I have my data and I have enough... I think enough time to write up. So, I am quite relaxed about it. It is not a problem." – P 7 - Nurse

She cited her background in writing and described how much she enjoyed writing, which may partly explain why she alone described writing as regaining control.

5.2.4 - Formal PhD Stages/Milestones

Within the PhD curriculum, there is typically a series of milestones or stages students must meet. The name of these differ at each university, but they are typically a formal research plan submitted within the first year, followed by a transfer or midway progression review the student needs to pass to continue with the degree. It has become more common for students also to have an annual progression review. Given the significance of these milestones, it is perhaps no surprise some of the participants brought them up when describing their PhD experience.

¹⁰ <https://thesiswhisperer.com/2011/09/08/office-or-cafe-which-is-the-better-workspace/>

5.2.4.1 - PhD milestones can have a lasting negative impact on the PhD experience

PhD milestones and the processes surrounding them can have a significant and lasting impact on a student's PhD experience. From our interview, it was clear that the annual review process played a significant part in shaping how P 4 reflects on his PhD experience. As already explained in the last section, P 4 was forced to change his initial research question. This change occurred shortly before his annual review, which would take place with members of the university's doctoral college. He explained how typically this meeting was formulaic, where they would ask how you are getting on and if there are any problems. In this meeting, he spoke about being dissatisfied with his supervisors and how he had had to change his research question due to his issue with recruiting participants. As a result of this meeting, the doctoral college requested he must undertake a second level of the review where he was asked to produce further work to demonstrate his new research question and provide evidence that he was able to continue with the PhD. For this second meeting, his supervisors requested he produces a new methodology chapter indicating the changes in his research plan. Something which he thought went against what was best:

[Second level review] is like if you don't pass the [second level review] they can kick you off basically and you usually have to do something to prove that you are in. So, [supervisor] said... I had literally just changed the question, so I hadn't had time to do anything. My point of view is that I should do a literature review on pluralism, you know, that is where I was going in terms of process. Then he said, I think you should do a methodology chapter. So, that was my task for the [second level review]. It is really annoying, because I really wanted to do the literature review. But I had to bung that backwards, focus on this methodology chapter, do the methodology chapter." –

P 4 – Therapist

At the review meeting, he felt the review panel was unnecessarily harsh and critical, describing them as behaving like 'gestapo people'. Before he reached the outcome of the process, the initial reviewers left their positions at the doctoral college and were replaced. This meant P 4 had to face a further review with the new members of the doctoral college which went very differently to the first experience:

"They were fine, cool, cool, cool. But like [new review member]: 'just one question, I am not sure why you did a methodology chapter and not a literature review chapter'.

At that point, you know, if I would have had a pistol or a shotgun and my supervisors would have been there I probably would have killed them both. I just like... I just said, I don't know ask my supervisors. You see that was another mistake. It just seemed like all along, they hadn't helped. I wanted to write a literature review chapter or get on with the literature review at least which would have... to write a literature review chapter at that point would have made sense. – P 4, Therapist

P 4 described how he feels the first second-level review panel reacted in a deliberately antagonising manner because he criticised his supervisors in the first review meeting. Whether this accusation has any truth is not relevant and not something I can comment on. However, this is what P 4 feels, and as a result, this experience changed how he viewed the advice he was receiving from his supervisors and his perception of the university from this moment onwards:

"But I mean what it [treatment at second level review] did do, was that at that point I thought right, I am not going to question my supervisors ever again. But you see I am not sure was it the supervisors that made me do that." – P 4 – Therapist

This example shows how the practitioner student can perceive the university system working against their interest in favour of their own.

5.2.4.2 - Practitioners can feel their reviewers do not understand their field

While P 4's review left a lasting impact, this was not the case for all those who had a negative experience. P 6 recalled how he failed his first transfer which required further work before resubmitting. He described how he felt his reviewers were inexperienced, after this there was increased training within the department for examiners.

"Then even though I failed an upgrade there was significant consequences within the faculty about training for examiners after, even though I had to resubmit." – P 6 – Health visitor

Other participants brought up dissatisfaction with their reviewers. P 9 described how her reviewers did not have a background within her field. She felt this meant a lot of her meeting was taken up with having to explain things to them. Those who are doing a PhD within their field of practice are used to being around people who have a deep

understanding of their field. This could cause some students to falter when having to present their work to unfamiliar audiences. Having to defend your thesis at an early stage to those not in your field can strengthen the work and provide an opportunity to learn a critical skill.

P 6 went on to describe how, despite the setback of failing his transfer, he never felt he could not do the PhD:

"I think there is something about if you are a PhD student failure is never an option. I mean, I failed my first my upgrade and I wish I could put on Twitter now, I failed it, feeling crap about it, but I didn't feel like I couldn't do it." – P 6 – Health visitor

Thus, demonstrating the resilience required of a doctoral student.

5.2.4.3 - Review process can have a positive effect on work

P 6 also saw the positive side of having to resubmit:

"Saying that the resubmission made my work a lot better. That is the only good thing about it." – P 6 – Health visitor

This feeling was also present in the interview with P 5, who spoke about how she found the milestones a useful exercise, and it improved her learning. She explained how these milestones created opportunities for other people to evaluate her work. Something she viewed as important in shaping her perception of where she was at with her PhD:

"I wasn't very good at self-evaluating the standard of my work. Sometimes I would hand a chapter in thinking it was brilliant and it was rubbish and sometimes I would hand a chapter in thinking it was rubbish and it was brilliant. So, I was constantly fluctuating between thinking that I was managing and not managing the PhD and those opportunities the RPA and the transfer, definitely helped me to feel like I could get it all together and submit it and it would be okay. Good enough. It gave me confidence and the feedback were really useful, where there were bits to improve." – P 5 – Teacher

P 9 concurred and said passing her transfer helped keep her in the programme when she thought about leaving:

Joe: Do you regret that, carrying on?

P 9: No, not now. I think getting through like transfer, viva, you feel like you are making progress even though I still have to finish writing it [the final thesis] which I know is my fault and doing all the edits and things

P 5 further explained how the deadlines for the milestones created external pressures which simulated what she was used to in the workplace:

"because there was always the temptation with the flexibility a PhD provided to focus on other things like my kids. Those time points where I had to push on to get to a certain point were really helpful because I was so used to external pressures that having none for three years would have meant that I probably didn't get it done." – P

5 – Teacher

She was able to draw upon her professional experience to focus on the PhD at crucial times.

5.2.4.4 - Students researching within the NHS face a further, challenging, milestone

Ethics was another milestone which came up frequently in the interviews. Ethical approval might not be considered part of the doctoral curriculum in the same way as the official milestones, but it was clear from the interviews some of the students saw it as a significant milestone they had to pass.

For the participants who were from a health background, ethical approval took on a further level of meaning due to the extra level of scrutiny that the NHS ethical process can add.

Those who had to go through this process described it using various synonyms for complicated and lengthy.

"So, in the world of the NHS our ethics and research governance processes are labyrinthian" – P 7 - Nurse

P 9 recalled how it took her around eight months – of her four-year degree - to gain ethical approval. This length of time was much longer than she expected, and this unanticipated timeframe caused an impact on her initial research plan:

"So, for example, because it is an NHS project, well it was conducted in the NHS so, NHS ethics took much longer than I anticipated. I think it took about eight months

from start to finish, there were some amendments in the middle.” – P 9 - School Nurse

Those who had previously been through the process in a professional capacity were better prepared than those who had not. P 7 described how useful her previous experience was in helping her plan her project timeline:

“So, I had to go to a full ethics committee. So, just understanding how long it is going to take before you can start working with patients is really helpful and having done RS forms before... I can’t remember what RS stands for it is essentially the NHS ethics process, it is an incredibly lengthy form as you know university ethics is. So, that was really helpful.” – P 7 - Nurse

However, not all the participants had experience with the process before in their practice. Where this was the case, they described how invaluable it was having someone with the experience they could draw from, this could be professionally or academically. P 9 explained how one of her supervisors had experience going through the process, and this supervisor was able to provide her with invaluable advice on what she needed to do. P 8, who used strong language to describe her experience going through the NHS ethics process, also highlighted the importance of having someone with experience of the process to draw upon, although in her case it was not one of her supervisors, but rather a peer:

“The NHS ethics process was horrific. I didn’t understand it. I read all their website, spoke to people. It is only because there was someone at the time who worked in another research institute where we are based who literally showed me her entire ethics folder, like her master file and then gave me documents and I just basically followed it step by step. It took months. Months.” – P 8 – Nurse

Achieving an understanding of how the process was supposed to work did not prevent unforeseen challenges from arising. In the aforementioned case of P 9, she found the process was further complicated as the reality was different from how the process was meant to work:

“another thing was, because I had three different study sites. So, although they are supposed to have changed the processes, so it is all streamlined. Each R&D, so

research and development centre aren't supposed to do their own thing, but actually they still do their own thing. So, you kind of get approving from HRA [NHS Health Research Authority] and that is supposed to be enough to satisfy each R&D site, they might do like a capacity assessment to see if they can actually give staff the time off to come and see you to be interviewed, but actually they all still wanted you to go and present or send in this form or can you send us a protocol. Yeah, that took a lot of time.” – P 9 - Nurse

Just like in the other descriptions of the transfer milestone, some of the participants described their project as being more robust due to having gone through the stringent NHS ethical process. P 8, who earlier described the process as horrific, felt she was forced to think about things deeper due to seeking NHS ethical approval:

“But going through the ethics process made me really think about my project which is not a bad thing. So, I have... and actually if I see the PhD as a learning process it is best to learn and make mistakes when you are a PhD student and doing the NHS ethics, than when you are like officially a researcher and having to try and work it out then.” – P 8 – Nurse

Even though it was a tough challenge, P 8 was able to reflect on the importance to her learning and understanding as a researcher.

5.2.4.5 - Practitioners have to balance their potential learning experience with their other commitments

In the previous description, despite finding it a challenging experience, P 8 viewed going through the ethical process as a vital part of her learning journey in *becoming* a researcher. Nevertheless, for some students, they had to balance opportunities to learn with practical realities. P 1 described how she would have liked to have gone through the NHS process. However, she felt she had to sacrifice this part of the learning journey within the PhD due to the demands her practice and other outside priorities placed on her.

“I have missed out on that experience. I kind of wanted to go through the NHS ethics to learn how do you do it... ...it came down to almost working part time and I had just had the baby and there is practical feasibility and timeline that came in. At the end of the day when you are trying to interview people about their practice, actually it is the

conversation that you want or for what I was asking anyway. It might have been nice and if I have had more time, maybe I would have done some of those other elements, but those are things I can continue on and go back to ethics and continue on post doc afterwards” – P 1 – Senior in nursing

This highlights how, for some students, there are moments where they felt they had to prioritise getting the PhD finished rather than using it as an opportunity to further their learning.

5.3 - Learning and support during the PhD are not limited to what is provided formally by the University

This section presents findings on the second invariant constituent - *Learning and support during the PhD are not limited to what is provided formally by the University*. The students in this study described how informal support formed an essential part of their PhD experience. This section reports how peers form a vital source of support for students. The findings demonstrate the importance peer-support can have on student wellbeing, and where strong peer support is absent, it can lead to a deterioration of wellbeing. The findings reveal that peer-support is not limited to physical relationships. Digital communities can also provide meaningful support. The final part of the section will report findings which demonstrate the importance of informal networks in the development of student learning and becoming a researcher. Along with the supervisor, peer support was found to be a crucial element of support for PhD students during their learning journey.

5.3.1 - Informal support

Along with the formal support and researcher development mechanisms embedded within PhD programmes, students also described relying heavily on informal support. This section will focus specifically on peer support. The main form of support described by the participants concerned peer networks. These are typically fellow PhD students or departmental colleagues who have formed an informal group. The exact nature of these relationships differed from one participant to the next, but the groups tended to offer emotional, as well as pedagogical support.

5.3.1.2 - Peer networks play an essential role in student wellbeing

"The other thing that has been really helpful is peers. So, I have kind of collected, if you like, a group of peers around me, mainly clinicians. One is a health psychologist, who has never practised clinically but we meet up like every three months and just chat about where we are and what we are doing." – P 7 - Nurse

One of the support mechanisms students adopted was the use of peer support to support their doctoral journey. Unlike formal support networks put in place by the university, such as supervision, the peer support described by the participants was rarely facilitated formally by the university. Participants described their relationship with other doctoral students as vital to their emotional and mental wellbeing, as well as to their learning. Peer support and informal networks were described in many of the interviews. Where a participant did not talk about peer support, there was an increase in descriptions of isolation and loneliness.

P 1 described how informally talking to other students helped to mitigate the isolation of doing a PhD. She believes as the PhD is an independent project, the structure of the degree means feeling isolated is part of the process.

"But the whole point of level 8 is it is independent ... you spend lots of time out there on your own, you check in with your supervisors but I think for a lot of people, just talking to people, what has been really helpful has been peer support. So, we have a kind of informal, I wouldn't even say group ... and we have coffee or just the other day we were chatting in the hallway, so it wasn't planned but you get that support."

– P 1, Senior Lecturer

P 3 echoed this and described how peer support has aided in the emotional journey of the PhD. She described how her peer group used to meet in a formalised manner to look at each other's work, but in between those organised meetings she used the group in a more informal way when things got too stressful:

"But in between times, we just use each other informally as well and also, they help alleviate stress too. And reassure each other and say, it is alright, I stopped crying last week, you know, stuff like that together." – P 3, Deputy Headteacher

In extreme cases, the peer network has stopped students from dropping out of the programme altogether. P 9 described how she considered dropping out in her second year.

She was struggling to balance work and the demands of the PhD – including teaching commitments attached to the PhD contract. She had a formal meeting with the University to discuss what would happen if she left and they tried to dissuade her and suggested she visit a counsellor. P 9 described how she did not find this formal meeting helpful, and she did not feel their advice was what she was looking for from the meeting. Instead of seeing a counsellor as suggested, she turned to her peer network for advice from someone who was further into the PhD than she was:

"then I spoke to my friend. He is like six months ahead of me and to be honest he is probably the person that kept me in the program. He was like, no, you have just got to power through, this is the dip." – P 9 – School nurse

P 9 was able to draw upon the experience of her peer network to understand her feelings at that time were not atypical. This allowed her to stay in the programme and eventually leave the dip she described.

In another example, P 4 described how he asked someone from his peer network to attend a progression meeting with him. By having another student in the meeting, he was able to be sure the critique he received in the meeting had crossed a line.

Joe: *Did your support group help you through the period where you were struggling with the supervisors and the PRP2 and things like that?*

P 4: *Oh, completely, yes. They were very supportive. [Name of student in peer network], like I say ended up accompanying me to the PRP2 and yes, you know, just to kind of get the affirmation that it wasn't just you.*

The examples above show the different ways PhD students use their peers to support their emotional movement throughout the PhD. What these examples have in common is that these peer groups were developed informally by the students themselves.

In one case, a participant described how her supervisor aided the development of a peer network. P 7 described how having a common supervisor has been a gateway to allow her group to come into being. Crucially the group is also helped by the members having other shared characteristics - in this case, all being clinicians and new to qualitative research.

Although the supervisor has not explicitly set up the group, his working style and the research culture he has cultivated has acted as a facilitator.

"the thing with [main supervisor name] he always says he works for people he likes, and he is... so, you can see throughout his professional career he has kind of built communities of research and professional practice. He works well in that kind of environment where you always kind of spin off each other. So, I think we have almost learnt that. He didn't explicitly say go away and have this group, we set it up ourselves." – P 7 - Nurse

This example demonstrates the supervisors can have an important role in facilitating the development of peer networks.

5.3.1.3 - A lack of peer support can exacerbate other issues with the PhD

In some of the interviews, peer support was absent in the participants' descriptions. Instead, these participants descriptions focused more on their feelings of isolation and loneliness during the process. P 12 described how those in her personal and professional life have been unable to support her during the process:

"I realised that I am very much on my own with it and that is quite a lonely place to be. I mean, bless him, my Husband tries to understand but he doesn't get it. My mum is not interested. My colleagues wonder why I am doing it. Senior management seems suspicious and resentful and there just appears to be a bit of professional jealousy around it. All of this makes me less eager to do it, but I just wonder why that is there." – P 12 – FE Teacher

P 12 had already described how she lost her original supervisory team and the impact this had on her project. Without any peer support to compensate for the lack of supervision, she spoke about a growing sense of being alone with the PhD. She described how she has come to realise the PhD is a test of character. In order to get to the end, she had to be tenacious and resilient, which is something she did not realise at the start of the process.

Another participant who described a lack of peer support spoke about using her experience to try and change the research culture at the University. She is the postgraduate student

representative, and through this position, she has been able to make changes which have benefited her experience.

Joe: *How have you found the experience not having fellow PhD students to interact with?*

P 10: *So, it has been very isolating. ... I do not like just working on my own in an office, I find it very claustrophobic and really isolating. For that reason, we have put into place things like group study rooms, we have been creating group events and talking across campus about things like that. But those things have come out of... I won't say purely me, but those things have come out of... these were the experiences that people were feeling.*

Having a structure in place which is willing and able to listen and respond to student feedback is an essential way of improving the PhD student experience.

5.3.1.4 - Digital networks can help students working remotely or those who failed to build physical peer networks

Not all networks described by the participants were conducted in a physical space. Some of the participants also spoke about their use of digital communities which have played a part in supporting them during their studies. P 6 struggled to integrate with other PhDs in his department as he found the work culture unresponsive to a new team member. He felt the department was hierachal, and everyone was suspicioius of each other. This was not a conducive environment to speak to colleagues about your research in a supportive way.

As a way of reaching out to a broader community of academic peers and PhD students, he took to the social media website Twitter.

"Twitter has been very useful reaching out to different academics in the area where... that has been very... and even in practice as well. I have got really good friends now who are quite senior in child protection in the voluntary sector and they have been really useful in terms of informal feedback and supervision." – P 6 – Health Visitor

He feels the structure of the website broke down normal hierachal restrictions of academia. He spoke about how he interacted with emeritus professors and esteemed colleagues within his field, which in some cases led to face-to-face social interactions.

"So, yeah, I have probably met people on Twitter that I would never have met before. But of course, everyone's Twitter profile is identical, there is no sort of hierarchy on Twitter. The only hierarchy you have got now is if you have been approved... you know, you are certified... the little tick next to your name, that is about the only hierarchy that exists on it." – P 6 – **Health Visitor**

He also feels online communities are particularly helpful for practice-based PhD students as it offers the chance to speak to other students, which is lacking when you are studying part-time.

"I think the problem with practice related PhDs is that they are generally part time, they are NHS funded, they don't come to the faculty or the office very much because they are working full time and they would rather work from home. So, you end up reaching out. Twitter is even... you can use at any point, that is the great thing." – P 6 – **Health Visitor**

Another participant spoke about the inverse of meeting people physically after interacting with them digitally. P 7 explained how she had met fellow PhD students at a course run through the health foundation, and due to the group coming from various geographical locations they had stayed in contact through Twitter.

"Also, the Health Foundation runs some schools. So, I have met quite a few people through that who are doing something similar and often are in a similar situation. So, have had to come out of clinical practice and are feeling quite isolated. That is where Twitter has come in handy because they come from all around the country, so you can't just go and have a coffee. So, we tend to sort of tweet each other with inspiring messages." – P 7 – **Nurse**

This is an example of how long-term peer networks can become primarily digital.

5.3.1.5 - Peer networks can help to develop the researcher

In addition to offering emotional support, peer support also offered some of the participants the opportunity to learn and develop as researchers.

P 1 described how she was a member of two Special Interest Groups (SIGs), a Sustainability group and a Grounded Theory group, and the impact being a member of these groups have

had on her learning. The Sustainability group she uses for content, while the Grounded Theory group has been supportive for methodology reasons:

"I mean, they have both been fantastic. But they have been fantastic for different reasons. So, the sustainability one was really good for my content ... But I think what it does is it gives a sort of protective space where you can feel you can ask a stupid question, has anyone had this on ethics or just practical things." – P 1 – Senior Lecturer

And

"Then the grounded theory one has been absolutely brilliant for the methodologies and the methods." – P 1 – Senior Lecturer

She explained how the Grounded Theory one has evolved over the course of her PhD. At the beginning it was very formal. They used to have guest speakers either attend in person or via skype to give lectures about Grounded Theory, and the meetings would be a few times per year. However, this changed to meeting every four to six weeks, and different members of the group would present their work, and the rest of the group would critique.

"We just did one a couple of weeks ago and the physio who is at the early stage of his studying, he just had ethics approved or he is about to... so, he is not data collecting yet. So, he presented for ten minutes and just said this is my research question, this is my method, it is almost like a mini viva, maybe not as strong as a viva but you have got to give a summary and then we have lots of discussion around it. So, all the way through your studies you are talking about things and being able to defend it and defend your choices. I think those kinds of groups are really, really helpful for supporting that." – P 1 – Senior Lecturer

P 5, another participant, spoke about a similar grouping of researchers working within the same field banding together. Like P 1, in her description, she spoke positively about being able to speak freely within the group about struggles with work:

"Yes, I mean, I that I am lucky in that the group that I am working in, because there are quite a few people doing resilience themed PhDs, are quite social, in terms of like not going out outside of the course but they will approach you if you are working

here and ask how your project is going. Go for a coffee, talk about how things are going and also, they are very honest. So, I found that there wasn't a kind of pretence that they weren't experiencing difficulties which I appreciated because I was able to say, look I don't even know what this topic is about or I didn't understand that paper and have a conversation.” – P 5 - Teacher

She also described using digital resources to share their work between the group. She feels this provided her with a knowledge base to work off when she initially began:

Also, people were quite collaborative. So, we created an online sharing space and we shared out things like literature reviews and methodology chapters which weren't the same as what other people were doing but were very similar. You know, I inherited a literature review based on resilience which was a very small part of my literature review, but I only had to update the content of who they had referred to rather than going and seeking out all those sources by myself. That saved me masses of time. So, yes, I found those things helped, the peer group helped.” – P 5 - Teacher

P 3 described being part of a similar group. In her description, she described how they use digital communication to support the learning community. As a distance learner this group helped her feeling isolated from the university and supported the development of her thesis.

“We help each other out. Like in my last chapter I have just done, I have said, oh my God, I have just realised five years down the track I haven't defined mechanisms properly, have you guys got anything. We e-mail each other, because obviously I am away from the campus as well, so that is quite isolating too. But we Skype each other, e-mail each other, phone each other and we all support, help each other. Which is great. Otherwise I think it would be really isolating.” – P 3 – Deputy Headteacher

However, examples such as P 3s were less numerous than the emotional support element of peer support for those who were studying part-time. This might be due to the sharing of work happening in more formally developed peer groups which have disciplinary or methodological relationships, such as the Special Interest Groups highlighted above. However, these groups typically meet at the University and during work hours. P 1

described how she initially found and is able to access these groups because she works at the University.

"But I kind of stumbled across these groups and just informally things happened. That is in an advantage for those of us as staff members, I really felt for people who aren't staff members. I have seen this with the MRes students and with the PhD students who aren't staff or who have not been given protected space. I think the full-time students...They are kind of almost treated like staff but people who are working professionals they come in and do a part time PhD, they are not part of, like I am doing this because I happen to be at work and so I am getting some PhD support actually while I am at work. If I was not in that job I wouldn't be getting that support." – P 1 – Senior lecturer in Nursing

This is not always going to be possible for those who are practising professionals.

5.3.2 - Support from employers

This section of the invariant constituent focuses on support from employers. As this group of PhD students are all practitioners, they relied on their employers to be supportive of their PhD endeavours. The results here discuss the varying levels of support and the impact this had on the participants' education.

5.3.2.1 - Support from employers at the time of deciding to do the PhD

All but one of the participants had to negotiate with their employers about reducing their previous workload to allow time to work on a PhD. Those who were intending to do the PhD on a part-time basis also needed to reduce their work hours to allow time for the PhD. None of the participants described meeting resistance from employers when they initially suggested doing the PhD or reducing their workload. Based on the participants' descriptions, employers were initially supportive of having a staff member do a PhD. An example from P 3:

"I had support of the senior leadership team here too. With a really creative thinking Headteacher at the time, who was like, great, great, let's do it. So, I had the support. Kind of my own motivation and my support of people at work as well and it just went from there." – P 3 – Deputy Headteacher

For a small number of participants doing a PhD would mean giving up their existing full-time employment altogether. Those who received funding found this meant giving up their work which was a big personal decision, as for some, such as P 5 and P 7, it meant a reduction in their earnings. Having initial support from employers was an essential factor when deciding to undertake a personal financial sacrifice. P 5 explained how her employers adjusted her contract to accommodate her PhD:

"My job at the school have been very understanding, what they have done, is they have... in order to give me continual... whatever it is called... continuous service or something like that, they have employed me on like one hour a week contract or something ridiculous. Then the agreement is that on inset days I go and deliver an update on what I am doing, on my research." – P 5 - Teacher

P 5 went on to explain this also allows her to return to work at the school at the end of her PhD if she wishes. This future security was important in her decision.

Not all the students who received full-time funding (funding for these participants included money intended for living costs as well as tuition fee) gave up their employment. P 8 and P 9 received a scholarship as part of a clinical based PhD, where junior practitioners who wanted to practise and research could be trained. This was a new programme at the university they were enrolled at, and it meant they received funding for a four-year, full-time PhD but also required they keep working. They found their employers were initially supportive of this move and happy for them to go ahead.

In the case of P 8 she had only just qualified as a nurse when she began the PhD.

Joe: How junior were you when you started the PhD?

P 8: I was only a few months in.

Joe: A few months in?

P 8: Yeah, yeah.

Joe: Was that not a concern when you went for the interview for the PhD?

P 8: No, because the whole point was that they wanted to build these people into the system, into the NHS that had always done research.

While her employers were initially supportive of this move, her junior status meant she was still learning to become a nurse while she was learning how to do a PhD. Something which went on to present a significant challenge she did not fully appreciate at that stage of the process. This is addressed further below.

5.3.2.2 - Support from employers during the PhD did not always meet the participants' initial expectations

Despite feeling their employers showed initial support when they proposed doing a PhD when talking about their experience of starting the degree around half the participants described support from their employers as inconsistent. The standard description was how employers did not fully understand the PhD and the demands it placed on their workloads and time, or the demands it placed on them personally - such as mental exhaustion.

Participants described how their employers and managers prioritised the day-to-day running of the organisation over the needs of the participants PhD study.

In some cases, participants found the time allocated for the PhD which they had formally agreed with their employers did not result in their workload being reduced. Instead, they found they had to do the same work in less time.

We don't have any back fill, like I took my three months off for a three-month study leave it is a sort of informal agreement that the head of school gives us. It is not really a sabbatical, but it is like a mini sabbatical. But the expectation is that there is no back fill for you. So, what that says to me is that normally what you do in twelve months you are now doing in nine. – P 1 – Senior Lecturer in nursing

Participants commented that while employers may have granted formal approval and support for the PhD, those with immediate line managers found their line managers were less inclined to consider the requirements of the PhD when allocating work. P 8, who despite being on a PhD programme specifically designed to enable clinicians to undertake a PhD, found her line manager did not have regard for the time constraints the PhD was placing on her, despite this being agreed in her contract.

"I don't think my ward sister cares that I am doing a PhD. You know, she just wants me on the rota which is fair enough because we are severely understaffed all the time." – P 8 - Nurse

Instead of making allowances for the PhD, P 8's line manager was primarily concerned with achieving her own professional responsibilities relating to keeping the ward running. Similar attitudes came across in other interviews. Participants described how their employers main concern was the day-to-day running of the organisation. Thus, findings suggest that managers and employers viewed the PhD as a personal endeavour undertaken by the participants. This tended to be the case even where the PhD was having a direct benefit on the participant's professional practice. As P 12 explains:

"Then I wanted to go to a conference in [name of place] on reflexivity, a couple of years ago now. The Head of HR, who completely helps me in terms of backing the funding for the PhD, turned around and refused to pay my travelling costs of £50 on the train to get down there on the basis that it was more to do with my course and less to do with my teaching. But practising reflexivity as a professional teacher is a key part of my role it has a huge impact. So, it has all been a little bit awkward really, when it is only enhancing my professional role and it is something that is going to help my progression and benefit the college because you know, I am seeing the kids in a whole new light now since doing this PhD." – P 12 – FE Teacher

P 12s experience led to her feeling isolated at work, and this has impacted on her ability to do the PhD.

5.3.2.3 - A lack of flexibility with working hours means students are unable to be full members of the PhD community

Some students felt the lack of support from their employers meant they were unable to access all parts of the PhD experience. For example, due to the demands of their job, they were unable to attend events which PhD students are expected to attend as part of their learning journey. The participants described how events the university arranged for PhD students were always in the week and during working hours. This meant they were unable to attend events designed to help them with their studies.

"Often a lot of activities that help PhD students in the department are held during the week when I am working. So, I can't access them." – P 6 – Health visitor

Not only did this impact on the participants' ability to receive the training and support designed to assist PhD students learning, but it also meant they were unable to feel full members of the PhD community.

"I think the thing is that when you are a clinical person, you can't be at all the meetings, you can't be at all those events to meet people in the same way because you don't work [on the PhD] Monday to Friday, you work... I mean, especially in that first year, I was working nights, weekends, everything. So, I couldn't really be part of that community in the same way." – P 8 - Nurse

Thus, students who are unable to access the full range of events and training in their PhD programme have a fundamentally different experience to that of full-time PhD students who are not in paid employment. An experience which - as we shall see - comes with different challenges and coping strategies to compensate for missing out on this crucial part of the PhD.

5.3.2.4 - Reaction from colleagues can also affect how supported students feel

It was not only management the participants spoke about when discussing if they felt supported by their employment during the doing the PhD. It was common for participants to describe how colleagues reacted to their doing a PhD. The reaction reported by the participants from colleagues ranged from initial support and curiosity, through to suspicion and outright hostility. A lot of the participants felt their colleagues did not understand the PhD or what it entailed.

In one extreme case, the participant felt colleagues reacted with aggression to them being allowed to do a PhD. P 11, who is a senior nurse with management responsibilities, described how staff she was responsible for reacted by shouting and crying to the news she was going to be taking time to do a PhD. She felt colleagues could not initially understand the benefit the PhD would bring to the practice:

"So, initially when I was like I am going out to do my PhD, it was a lot of anger that I wasn't only there delivering clinical care all the time to everybody. It took a good two years for people to go, oh, actually it has been really helpful. Actually, we have learnt quite a lot. Actually, [P 11 name] has been able to help us with projects and different things and actually she is able to think about all these different outcome measures.

So, at the beginning there was a lot of animosity, a lot of anger, everyone was really cross that I was kind of allowed to go off and do something when I was supposed to be with them. People want me to do my fair share of clinical work and seeing patients.” – P 11 – Senior nurse in NHS

The reaction from her staff members eventually resulted in her dropping out of her first attempt at a PhD before she returned to start the PhD study for a second time.

5.3.3 - Personal relationships can also provide emotional and learning support

In addition to discussing their peer networks, some of the participants also spoke about the role their networks outside of the PhD process have had on their experience. Although this was less described than the peer networks discussed above, for some outside networks played an essential part in maintaining their wellbeing.

P 8 struggled with anxiety and felt her mental health deteriorated because of the demands the PhD and her employment were putting her under. During her interview, she described how important her partner's support was in supporting her emotional wellbeing. She explained how he has no higher education background, and she feels he does not fully understand the things she describes. However, through listening and making an effort to understand, it provides a level of support she needs.

“I have got a partner who is very, very supportive. So, he himself has never gone to university himself. So, I feel for him poor bloke. He is like the most supportive person ever even though he doesn’t get it, in some respects he always tries and wants to understand. He is happy whenever something... I just tell him this happened, this happened... don’t know what that means but I am happy. He is the one who is really like you have got to look after yourself first... But no, he has had to look after me when I have been very, very anxious. I wouldn’t honestly have been through it without him.” – P 8 - Nurse

Several of the participants described how their partners were taking more responsibility within the relationship to allow time for working on the PhD. P 3 described how she had always been unwilling to sacrifice time with her child for the PhD but felt this was necessary as she was approaching the end. She explained how she felt guilty putting her degree temporarily before her family, but felt it was an unavoidable course of action:

"So, I think after Christmas I had to stop going to my son's football training on Saturday mornings, oh what a shame when it is the middle of winter. But I said, to my ex-partner and my new partner, you three boys are going to football, I need to use Saturday morning, just for this term, to get my PhD done. I need that little bit of extra time up my sleeve. I don't feel too guilty about it because like I said it is winter, but I do as a mum, I have always gone to football training. So, I have had to kind of sacrifice that. But to get on and get my PhD done, so that it is finished and then I can crack on with having a life again" – P 3 – Deputy Headteacher

P 1 also described how she had to make sacrifices with family commitments in order to get the PhD finished. As in the above examples, she had a supportive partner who was able to take her children away on holiday to give her space to work on the PhD. She explains how her husband being willing to go on family holidays without her facilities bursts of productivity:

"If he takes the kids literally to another country, they leave, I get more done in that week than I will for four months or something. I blitz it and that is like eighteen-hour days I am just... you know, you just get into the groove of productivity." – P 1 – Senior Lecturer

Without this support from an outside actor, the participant in the above example may not have been able to find the time to undertake the PhD alongside her professional responsibilities.

5.4 - Supervisor relationship is the primary source of interaction between student and the University

This section presents findings from the invariant constituent *Supervisor relationship is the primary source of interaction between student and the University*. PhD students are supported throughout their programme by the formal mechanisms the university has put in place. The primary form of support is the supervisory team. While the supervisor relationship remains key to the success of a PhD candidature (Lee, 2008), it is not the only form of support which is in place to support PhD students. Universities run training programmes, writing workshops, lectures and seminars all to support students through their candidature. However, these forms of support are usually in the daytime and during the

working week, when part-time PhD students are unable to attend due to other commitments. This can lead students to rely further on other forms of formal support, such as the supervisor, or to find other informal methods to make up for the lack of opportunity to avail themselves of the full range of support on offer. This section will report findings of how the practitioner researchers who took part in this study used the support on offer by the university.

All participants spoke at length about their supervisors and their relationship with them when discussing their PhD experience. All the participants in this study had more than one supervisor, at the start of their PhDs – seven participants had two supervisors, and the remaining 5 had three. One of those who had two supervisors gained a third one during the process, while another who started with three went down to two.

5.4.1 - Participants did not know what to expect from their supervisors at the start

A frequent comment from the participants was that they did not know what to expect from their supervisors when they started, or if the supervision they were receiving was bad, regular, or good. P 8 summed up her feelings towards this as thus:

Joe: You didn't get any say in your supervisory team?

P 8: No and again I didn't really know PhD, what it meant, what that word meant.

What does it mean to have a supervisor? What role do they have really? It is only kind of now that I can look back and go, if I had to do this all again, this is what I would expect, this is what I would... not demand but this is kind of what I would put forward as what I need and what I would like from my team.

Part of the student naivety towards the PhD in the beginning means not understanding the role of the supervisor. The result of this means the power balance at the start of the programme is weighed against the student. The setting of expectations leans heavily on what is expected of the student without the student realising they should be able to have a say in what is expected of the supervisor/s. They are encouraged to accept advice or situations which, only in hindsight they see, are not suitable for their circumstances. The length of time it takes to readdress the balance of power of expectations can play an important part in the relationship between supervisors and student throughout the whole degree, and even the successful completion.

P 8 attempted to change what was expected of her from her supervisors. Despite the fact she was on a clinical academic programme, she felt they were too demanding and were not factoring in the reality of her professional commitments. She wanted her supervisors to be more flexible in their demands on what events she could attend. She requested her supervisors and her employers get together to discuss the demands on her time and try and put some structure in place. While her employers agreed to this, she met with resistance from the supervisors who refused.

P 8: I was seen as a nuisance and I was told, well, you know, you are so lucky to be in this position. You have just got to get on with it, you are so lucky, you have got this opportunity, blah, blah.

Joe: They were literally words that were used? What were you trying to achieve?

P 8: I was trying to achieve more balance and actually structure because I... to be structured is important to me. They want outputs, I need structure to get it done.

That is what I wanted. So, actually moving to this new clinical area I ended up doing it for myself, basically.

This led to P 8 changing clinical areas due to her supervisors being unwilling to meet with her managers to discuss a different working pattern. This is one example of how a student must put their own strategies in place to manage their PhD if the support they hope to receive is not forthcoming. However, P 8 feels her relationship with her supervisors has changed since that point. It took 18 months to realise they were not able to support her emotionally since then she has tried to focus on what they can bring.

One-way students can discover if the supervision they are receiving is similar to the supervision other PhD students receive is through discussion with other students. For example, P 9 described how she interacted with other students with the same supervisors to see if they were having any issues:

P 9: But of course, our supervisors are often shared because they do give their supervisors quite a lot of students. So, I have got friends who have the same supervisors. So, we would kind of compare notes I suppose.

Joe: Did that help comparing notes?

P 9: Yeah, I think so, definitely because you feel like you are not the only one who is experiencing the issues.

Through this interaction, it helped her discover if her feelings about the supervision she was receiving had any genuine basis.

5.4.2 - Negative experiences with supervisors, the issues it can cause, and potential strategies to deal with it

A small number of the participants had such a negative experience with their supervisors it shaped their whole PhD experience. This was particularly the case with P 4, who repeatedly came back to the theme of supervision in his interview. At one point during our interview, when discussing his supervisors, he stopped his current point of discussion and said he had been looking forward to this interview has he felt it was an opportunity to get things “off his chest”. He felt he had been unable to discuss with anyone the issues he had faced with his supervisors and how it had impacted his experience.

Like the participants shown above, P 4 placed much trust in the advice his supervisors were giving him at the beginning of the project. He feels this came from a position of his naivety and trust in the advice they were giving him:

“They kind of basically said that is not a good idea [his original project plan] and at that point you have total trust in your supervisors that they know what they are talking about. It is only retrospectively I see that they don’t. Didn’t.” – P 4 – Therapist

His relationship with his supervisors gradually got worse as his project went along. From his descriptions, his faltering relationship can be attributed to his growing feeling of mistrust with this initial advice. As the relationship deteriorated, he felt detached from his supervisors, complaining they were unengaged with the project until problems arose.

“overall what I feel is to my mind, as supervisor should like have a helicopter view of the whole thing from beginning to end. Yes? And you know whilst they kind of let you go through the process of it, they have really got their eye on you. I didn’t feel like that with them and never have really. I kind of feel like as we come up across problems they are coming up, like down here with me. You know, it is almost like they

have not done a PhD before. It is sort of... because they have with several people." –

P 4 – Therapist

A small number of the participants described losing or changing supervisors and the impact this had on their PhD. For the participants in this study, the reaction to losing a supervisor, or supervisors, depended on the stage they were at in their learning journey, their level of intellectual ownership over the project, and their self-confidence.

P 12 described her supervision as being in constant flux during her PhD. In the four years she had been enrolled, she had had two lead supervisors and three second supervisors. Her initial second supervisor left during her first year, and the initial main supervisor left in her second year - just after she had passed the ethical clearance milestone. P 12 was happy with her initial supervisory team and did not get a say in who replaced either of them. While she now feels she has a good relationship with her lead supervisor, this has taken time to build. She described how she lost time and direction during this transition:

"she [the new lead supervisor] left me alone for six months because she didn't know what I was doing, and her workload was so wide, neoliberalism again, that she had about twelve FE students. I think while she was finding her feet and settling in, she was prioritising them and I just felt really sort of side-lined at that point. I think I lost a bit of time and direction." – **P 12 – FE Teacher**

She went on to say the relationship with the new supervisor only improved after she completed the annual University feedback form. On this feedback form, she gave strongly worded negative comments on the quality of the support she had been offered:

"I started seeing her... you know, I had to do a questionnaire, you know, a questionnaire about how I was feeling at the university and kind of let rip, following that interestingly she started scheduling appointments." – **P 12 – FE Teacher**

P 6 was another student who also lost his principal supervisor. However, in his case, this came within the first week of the project starting. He had been given the scholarship to do a PhD which was attached to a project run by the person who was due to be his lead supervisor. When it transpired the supervisor was leaving, he was then given the freedom to set his own project but with little guidance:

"Then the supervisor left within the first week starting, so I then had a clean slate to try and work out what I wanted to do which was quite hard because if someone told me back then that you should pick topics where there are appropriate supervisors as opposed to picking a topic with no appropriate supervisors. That was quite difficult."

– P 6 – Health visitor

He was given a lead supervisor who was a theorist who had no background in research, while the second supervisor was a nurse who only knew applied research. P 6 described how this new supervision team did not know how to support the planning of a PhD project.

"So, I think I started to begin to notice that having a nurse academic who wasn't particularly research centric, they didn't think that a PhD was a planned project in the first six months as opposed to, oh don't worry about it, no that is fine. That... I actually could have done with a lot more structured supervision rather than slightly woolly stuff." – P 6 – Health visitor

Like the experience of P 12, P 6 found this period troubling, and he reported losing time as a result. However, unlike the previous experience, P 6 never developed a good relationship with his supervisors as he felt they lacked the experience he needed to advance his project. This was a common problem for the participants and something I will address further below.

P 1 had a different experience of losing her supervisor to the two experiences I have described above. Whereas P 12 and P 6 were in an early stage of their PhD, P 1 was at an advanced stage. She lost her lead supervisor towards the end of the PhD. Like P 6, the replacement came from a different disciplinary background than the field she was working in. However, due to the advanced stage of her PhD, P 1 found this to be beneficial as it gave her the opportunity to defend her work to fresh eyes:

"It has been great having somebody who knows nothing about your topic, though, because at this stage I needed to be able to defend it with anybody." – P 1 – Senior Lecturer in Nursing

This suggests losing a supervisor at an advanced stage is not as problematic and can even be beneficial if the student is confident in their research.

5.4.3 - Supervisors subject expertise in relation to participants expertise in their field

As already touched upon, the issue of supervisor expertise and background was raised by several of the participants. In the UK, it is typical for the student not to select their supervisors. When the students in this study did not get to pick, there was sometimes a sense of dissatisfaction at their assigned supervisors' level of expertise.

As previously discussed, P 4, who was self-funded, described a troubling relationship with his supervisors. One of the core elements he cited as initially leading to these troubles was their lack of knowledge in his subject area. This presented a problem from the very beginning as he felt they pushed the whole project down a theoretical and methodological avenue he had not chosen himself. He believes the avenues they wanted him to take was based on their area of expertise. P 4 is a psychotherapist, and the lead supervisor he was given was an arts therapist.

"Yes, I mean, I have basically got an arts therapist which sounds similar... But it is not the same and she is not really in touch really with that world or that research world."

– P 4 – Therapist

P 4 described how both supervisors were experienced and had successfully put through many students, but he felt they always recommended the same methods and methodologies to achieve this:

"Basically, everyone they have had they sort of do IPA with them, interpretative phenomenological analysis and that just seems to be like the go to thing that they have" – P 4 - Therapist

He described how, in the beginning, he did not know any better and felt he had to trust the supervisors to give him the correct advice. However, he was uncomfortable with the direction they were steering him towards. This resulted in him reaching out for external advice from an expert in the field of the methodology his supervisors wanted him to use. He asked this expert if the project, as he imagined it, fit with this methodology, and she felt it did not. This encouraged him to challenge his supervisors and change the methodology. Whilst this demonstrates the student taking ownership of the project, P 4 felt by challenging his supervisors in this way, it led to an irretrievable breakdown in the supervisor/supervisee relationship.

P 6 also explained how his dissatisfaction of his supervisors was born out of frustration at their lack of knowledge in the practice environment of his topic. His PhD focused on vulnerable children, and he felt his supervisors lacked the policy knowledge to understand his work. He felt the relationship with his supervisors went from him being the novice to becoming the expert without the gradual evolution:

P 6: I think annoyingly I went through being quite... knowing nothing to going through a period of not knowing much and my supervisor going from I am the expert, I am helping you through this to I don't know, you are the expert in this now. So, it was almost as if he jumped from that sort of... that initial growth to suddenly you should tell me what it is. I kind of felt that was one of his weaknesses.

Joe: You don't think that that is the way it should go?

P 6: It should go that way, but I think it went a bit too... it wasn't... there should be a few more steps in between.

P 9, who is a school nurse, was another participant who felt strong dissatisfaction with one of her supervisors who did not have a background in her subject. One of her supervisors did not have a background in health research or working in the NHS. Instead, his background was in architecture research. P 9 found he was not engaging with her work and ascribed this to his lack of knowledge in the subject area:

"I mean, he is very, very intelligent, not to talk him down or anything. But obviously a lot of the language is nursing related... So, I think that probably is a bit more difficult. Whereas my other supervisors are very familiar with the world of nursing, so a lot of it makes instant sense, I think" – P 9 – School Nurse

As will be explained further below, P 9 found the supervision style of this supervisor to be troubling, and her experience with this supervisor had a detrimental impact on her project.

The three examples above demonstrate having one or more of your supervisory team without experience in the area of study can lead to a breakdown in the relationship with the supervisor or supervisors. In these examples, each of the participants never recovered their relationship with their supervisors, and in each example, it formed a significant part of their interviews.

5.4.4 - Styles of supervision

When discussing their supervisors, the participants spoke about the style of supervision they received. The most unambiguous indication of this came when the participants were describing how involved their supervisors were. Several of the participants used the term hands off to describe a supervisor whom they perceived to have taken a laissez-faire approach.

"I think, basically I feel like I have hands off supervisors. That is what happened to me." – P 4 – Therapist

This same style of supervision was found in other interviews but described in different terms.

"So, I had one that was a Professor of Psychology who was very much at the back, I will read your thesis at the end, I am sort of managing the supervisory team." – P 6 – Health Visitor

As well as describing the style of supervision they received, discussing it also allowed participants to reflect on the style of supervision they would have preferred. P 4 spoke about how he would approach supervision if he had to supervise someone:

"I suppose as you reach the end of your own journey, you begin to kind of... you know, if some asked me to supervise someone's PhD, how would I do it. I just feel like it would be completely different, and it would be hands on. Not in a way that I was controlling or writing the thing for the person, but like, oh yes, you have got to watch that hoop and to get through this hoop you need to do this that and the other. That kind of thing." – P 4 – Therapist

In this extract, he is describing a very different style of supervision to which he received. As has already been discussed, P 4 had a bad relationship with his supervisors, and this caused issues with his PhD project. Although it may be hard to organise or put into practice, when supervision teams are being assembled, it is worth considering different working styles in order to ensure the smooth operation between all members of the project. Student naivety about what to expect from supervisors, as well the natural power imbalance between

supervisor and student, particularly at the beginning, means it is unrealistic of the student to be able to negotiate the terms of how the supervisory relationship is going to work.

It is also crucial that supervisors are happy to work with and know what to expect from their co-supervisors. In some instances, the participants reported there were clashes of styles within the supervision teams. P 9 described the difference between her two supervisors as hands-on and hands-off. She defined the hands-on style as micromanaging the project and providing extensive written feedback. Whereas the hands-off style did not contribute to the planning of the project and did not read the work she submitted. These two opposite styles created tension between the supervisors, which P 9 could sense during her supervision sessions. P 9 found that both styles of supervision came with issues. With the hands-on supervisor, she would have liked this style to have evolved as the project, and her experience, developed:

"I think that is good at first, especially because I had never done a master's or anything, I didn't really know what I was doing. But as time went on I felt that maybe she could just step down a bit." – P 9 – School Nurse

However, she found the supervisor continued in the same manner throughout. Gatfield's (2005) research into supervision styles highlighted how supervisors should be nimble and ready to adapt their style at different stages of the project. His research did not address supervision teams, and the impact different styles of supervision within a team can have on the candidate and the other supervisor/s.

P 3 used different language to describe similar contrasting supervisory styles between her two supervisors. She described her supervisors as being "like a mum and dad", unlike P 9 she saw this as a positive relationship where both supervisors were complimenting each other:

*"One is quite laid back and quite... this will be okay and *dadida*. Whereas the other one is like, no this isn't good enough and this need changing *dadida*. I couldn't stand having two of the same kind of personality or character because I need to be pushed and I need to be organised and be told straight up the guts about where I stand. But I also need someone that is not going to really stress me out and think, oh my God, so I am rocking in the corner." – P 3 – Deputy Headteacher*

The difference between the experiences of P 9 and P 3 is how the supervisors were working together. In the case of P 3 they were working as a supervisory team, and she was able to bounce off each of these styles when she needed them. Whereas, as we have already seen, P 9 described a tension between her supervisors which may have caused both supervisors to amplify their supervisory styles.

5.4.5 - Contact with University support was limited for this type of students

As previously discussed, the participants in this study were a mix of part-time and full-time students. This created a variety in the amount of contact they had with the University outside of the supervisor relationship. On the whole, the participant descriptions of their contact with the university were limited. Some explained that because of their age and professional status, they did not feel they needed to use the services offered by the university. P 7 named the services her university offered but explained how she has not personally felt the need to use them as she feels she has been supported both academically and pastorally by her supervisors. She also explained how living away from the university she decided not to base herself there to do her work, instead preferring to work at home. She feels if she needed to use the services and support on offer at the university she could:

"I think I have very much not wanted to tap into that [the services the University provides for post-graduates] because my supervisors are so great, so I feel very supported pastorally and academically....

...I have not felt like it [working away from the University] has been an issue because I feel like it is a choice that I have made and if I wanted the university support, I would have been able to do it." – P 7 - Nurse

As it would be expected, those who were doing the PhD full-time tended to be around their university more than those who were not doing the PhD full-time. This was an issue for most of the part-time students who felt the university did not consider their needs when planning events. P 3 described how she was based two hours away from her University and would often see events advertised which she could either not justify travelling to due to the distance.

"that is one of my big gripes is that, you will get an e-mail through an hour or a two hour workshop, which looks absolutely blinding. I am not going to drive two hours to

Brighton and two hours back to sit in a room for an hour or two, that is a complete and utter waste of my time. I can't get time off work. I can't afford the diesel, whatever it might be.” – P 3 – Deputy Headteacher

She attempted to see if she could skype into seminars and lectures but felt this was blocked by the University:

“I did mooch on a few occasions, could you not like video Skype me in so I am just there watching and part of it. I can just dial in and dial out, job done and that was kind of like, wow. I think they put me on speaker phone one time, so I could listen and write notes, but that was about it. It was either you come to us or it is tough.” – P 3 – Deputy Headteacher

P 3 felt there was an expectation from the University that if you were undertaking a PhD then you lived locally, and you were studying full-time. P 8 feels since she began the degree that there have been changes at her university (which is a different institution to the one described by P 3) and they have recognised the different needs for students who are practising/clinicians. However, she feels as this type of student are not the majority they are treated as a separate, minority grouping.

Research training was one particular aspect of support offered by the university, which most of the participants described. This will be discussed in more detail in a future section as it concerns how the participants learned during the PhD. However, what should be raised in this section is the descriptions were mostly positive when describing the quality of training offered. Where there was negativity, it was in describing how they had to negotiate their working patterns to fit in the researching training required.

“Literally I have only had these monthly one to ones [supervision]. They have started I have noticed in the last year, putting a load of online tutorials things on. But again, they are always at times when I can't make because I am teaching.” – P 12 – FE Teacher

Students who were unable to attend these training opportunities had to rely on other forms of support.

5.5 - The PhD is only one part of the students' lives and must be managed alongside other parts

This section presents findings from the invariant constituent *The PhD is only one part of the students' lives and must be managed alongside other parts*. Studying for a PhD does not happen in isolation for any doctoral student, and every student has a life outside of the PhD. This is particularly acute for doctoral students who are researching their professional practice as there is a direct overlap between the two. Many of these students also have significant professional workloads which impact how much time and mental space they can dedicate to the PhD endeavour.

5.5.1 - Conflicting priorities

This section will present findings where the participants discussed managing their conflicting priorities. As most of the participants were studying alongside their professional practice, this section will show how this can cause issues for the PhD process. As previously discussed, employers tended not to be supportive when it came to allowing time and space for the PhD to flourish. This section will present findings which suggest the University also has a crucial supportive role in allowing students to balance their professional practice and the PhD.

5.5.1.1 - *Undertaking the PhD part-time whilst working can be a struggle*

This section reports on the struggle some students felt balancing their professional practice with the PhD. It has previously been reported, in the 'support from employers' section of the results chapter, that participants who were still engaged in their professional practice struggled to attend events during the working day, and this left them feeling like not full members of the PhD community. However, feeling they were missing out on the full experience was not the only impact balancing practice and the PhD had.

Ten of the students in this study were still in paid employment during their period of study, and they found juggling their professional practice and the PhD to be challenging. For example, P 4 articulated how his practice interferes with his studies.

"...[doing the PhD] part time which means that I am working here as well. That can be difficult because I find that I am working on my thesis over at home and like maybe in the flow, it is all good and then I have got to leave because I have got

clients in the evening or in the morning or in the afternoon. So, that is kind of quite... the stop, start type way of doing it, part time. Where you can't really immerse yourself as much as a full timer can I imagine." – P 4 - Therapist

P 9, who was enrolled on the clinical academic pathway, found juggling work and doing the PhD over four years too challenging. She eventually had to change her employment and the structure of her PhD to accommodate this balance better. P 9 was the named nurse at a school contracted to work half the week, and the other half was for her PhD.

"I found it difficult. I found it very difficult to balance and I was working kind of half my week with school nursing, half my week with PhD." – P 9 - School Nurse

She explained how the expectation of being a school's named nurse is you are always there during school opening hours. This meant she was still receiving phone calls and requests when she was not at the school. P 9 found this balance was impacting her ability to do the PhD. She felt there were periods when she needed to spend more time with her PhD, and there were other periods where she needed to spend more time with work. This was something other participants also reported feeling. P 9 eventually asked if she could move to do the PhD over three years, a move which meant she could afford to stop working at the school.

During the interview with P 4 he described how he developed a habit of using the time in-between clients to complete written work relating to his PhD. This was one of the more practical strategies the participants adopted to juggle work and the PhD. This was found in a small number of interviews, where participants described how they had to carve out their own time and space during the working day where they could do PhD work. This might be between clients or during lessons, something P 12 describes:

"If the kids are writing an essay for an hour or whatever. Because it is A Level it is quite involved anyway, so if I can find...If I can find pockets of time, things like transcribing was done in my lunch time. I had thirteen students that I was researching. So, that was thirteen quotations that I had to transcribe. But, in school things like that I found that I could do on the loose so to speak. Like I could do at lunch times or if I have got an hour in between teaching breaks, I could use that. So, it has been harnessing pockets of time really." – P 12 – FE Teacher

These are informal strategies students develop to balance employment and study. This is not something which would be possible for all professions. The nursing students for example, would struggle to find time during their working shifts.

5.5.1.2 - University did not appreciate the demands practice placed on the students

While the participants in this study found that their employment did not appreciate the time and mental demands of the PhD, some also found their PhD supervisors did not appreciate their professional commitments. In the case of P 9, she explained how her work and her supervisors had different, conflicting priorities:

"Some weeks you feel like you need more time on the PhD, some weeks you need more time at work. I think I have always felt quite alone in trying to manage that because like I said, my work will prioritise, or practice area will prioritise day to day running of a service because that is what they are concerned about. The university is concerned about me meeting my deadlines and getting good quality publishing out there." – P 9 – School Nurse

In this example, P 9's supervisors were unable to see how facilitating a better work-life balance would have benefited their goal of seeing P 9 through to successful completion. P 9 felt neither of her supervisors had the necessary desire to help with the issue.

In another example, P 3's supervisor suggested she work on weekends, and she had to explain to her supervisor this would mean neglecting her child, something she was not prepared to do:

"Like one of my supervisors said to me, obviously not the laidback one, can't you just put your son in front of TV and say there is the telly on Saturdays and Sundays. Well, no I can't because I am a mum as well and I absolutely will not be that kind of parent. My PhD is the last of my priorities, not the first. It is the first of yours to get me through it in this role, but it is the least of mine and you need to understand that. So, I have had to like really balance that a lot." – P 3 – Deputy Headteacher

Without support from either employment or from the university, students had to find their own strategies to overcome the barrier of conflicting priorities. As well as finding snatches of time during the working day, which was highlighted in the previous section, some of the

participants drew upon their professional and personal experience to deal with conflicting priorities. P 1 described how, as a nurse and a parent, she has learnt to juggle different priorities:

"I think nurses as a profession, what is that phrase, jack of all trades master of none. Nurses in a lot of jobs, I know I do work in intensive care, but actually as a nurse particularly in this country you end up doing loads of different things all the time. We are constantly juggling, constantly." – P 1 – Senior Lecturer in Nursing

Drawing upon these experiences can unsettle the delicate identity work involved in the transformative process of becoming a researcher. This will be covered in greater detail in the next section, 5.6.

5.5.2 - The PhD can cause issues within a student's personal life

This section will showcase moments where the PhD has caused a significant impact on some of the students' personal lives.

As previously presented elsewhere in the findings, some of the participants described how the PhD caused them to prioritise the PhD over spending time with their family. P 3 described how, as she neared the end of her degree, she has had to use the time she would normally spend with her son in order to reach the finishing point:

"So, I think after Christmas I had to stop going to my son's football training on Saturday mornings, oh what a shame when it is the middle of winter. But I said, to my ex-partner and my new partner, you three boys are going to football, I need to use Saturday morning, just for this term, to get my PhD done. I need that little bit of extra time up my sleeve.

She referred to this as a sacrifice which was necessary in the short term to gain control of her life back in the long term. Three of the participants described having to skip family holidays in order to create free time to focus on their PhD.

Even when participants did not sacrifice spending time with their family, the PhD can still impact on the quality of personal interactions. P 10 described how the PhD had impacted her ability to enjoy the time she spends with her family to the full.

Joe: How has the whole experience impacted your personal life?

P 10: Well, massively. Is that not what everybody says? Is that not one of the big issues? It dominates your thinking. Even if you say, oh I am going to take a break, your brain is constantly working it never kind of goes away, so that... it means that everything else becomes like almost routine and a chore which in lots of ways they shouldn't be. So, for example, tonight I will take my daughter to horse riding and I am going to take my other daughter to guides and then they have become chores rather than enjoyable experiences. That is because I have got stuff to do and I have got things to and all I will be doing whilst I am watching my daughter horse ride is be thinking about the thesis and the stuff that goes on. As opposed to being in the moment with her and watching her horse ride, which is not nice.

Another participant articulated a similar feeling which she referred to as 'the tunnel'. This was where her mind was clouded by thoughts of the PhD and blocks out all other thought.

Not all those with families found the PhD a burden. Two participants described how doing a PhD had had a positive impact on their family. P 7, who was the only participant in this study to completely give up her practitioner role during the period of the PhD, compared the flexibility of the PhD to her previous practitioner role. She described how the PhD allows her to work from home and be flexible with her working hours, something which was not possible previously.

"So, they [her children] are nine and seven. Yeah, nine and seven. So, like today, this morning I went and did the school trip and came to see you. Then I will work in the evening. So, you have got that flexibility you don't have as a clinician because you can't say to patients can you come and see me at nine o'clock at night type thing." –

P 7 - Nurse

She also described how prior to starting the PhD there was a conflict between her husband's job and her own when it came to childcare. Although she concedes her husband does not understand her PhD and struggles when she speaks about it, he can see how it has improved the family's work/life balance.

"But he appreciates the benefits it has for our family life because there were times where you know school would ring us to say, your kids are sick, and I would be like I am clinic and he would be like I am meeting a chief executive and it was like whose

job is more important type thing. So, just having that flexibility where I can be like, well, I will just go and get the kids and stick them in front of the TV while I carry on with my thesis has been great.” – P 7 – Nurse

P 5 also felt the PhD came with these flexible benefits compared to her previous position as a teacher¹¹. She described how it has allowed her to stay at home with her son two days a week:

“I have sustained two days at home a week with my son and on those days, I work in the evening. Then three days I do it full time as if it was a job. Then approaching a deadline, I will work extra evenings and the weekend if I need to. But apart from that I haven’t really noticed an impact on my life apart from the fact that I am more tired. I think I am just finding time in the evening and then doing that rather than sacrificing other things I have committed to.” – P 5 - Teacher

She further described how she had to balance PhD commitments with day-to-day family commitments. She has to stop working to make dinner and for the child’s bedtime routine before she is able to return to the PhD work.

Two of the participants complained about feeling they had fallen behind their social peers due to doing the PhD. They both felt they were perhaps missing out on things their peers were achieving. For one of the participants this was career related. P 6 feels had he focused on his practice he would be much further along the pay scale than he currently is. He described this in terms of seeing his friends go on expensive holidays which he cannot afford to go on. He was also concerned about his long-term prospects, mentioning the years he is not able to contribute to his pension pot as the scholarship he is on does not include pension contributions.

While for P 9, it was personal reasons which she was concerned she was missing out on, rather than career advancement. She was seeing her friends beginning to have families and felt she has had to delay this due to her PhD.

¹¹ P 5 remained contracted to her previous employment, but her working hours were reduced to delivering training at the school once a term. Effectively this means she was only working on the PhD

"I am at the age I suppose... so, I am nearly thirty, so a lot of my friends have started to start families. So, I have not... I have had to put off having kids which is a major one, which is fine." – P 9 – School Nurse

She says this was not something she considered when she started the PhD, but it had become an issue during the process. Perhaps highlighting how she did not fully understand what an undertaking it would be when she began.

5.6 - Doing a PhD irreversibly changes the way students view their profession

This section presents findings from the invariant constituent *Doing a PhD irreversibly changes the way students view their profession*. Studying for a PhD causes evolution in one's professional identity.

5.6.1 - Professional identity

This section will submit findings related to how studying for a PhD can impact a student's professional identity. As professional practitioners, they found the professional identity they had previously developed was under challenge. This happened in two ways; firstly, their professional status was suddenly different as they were now also students. Secondly, due to their research, they were viewing their profession from a different perspective. The section is split into two parts; the first demonstrates how a change in status – from senior practitioner to student – can challenge professional identity. The second part shows moments when the participants tried to import their professional way of working into the PhD.

All the participants spoke about their professional identity and the impact the PhD had on this. It should be noted that the participants bond to their wider profession did not change depending on the role they had taken on within the wider field of the practice. For example, despite no longer practising as a nurse, P 1 still identifies as a nurse:

"I always like to say I am a nurse and I think that is a personal, philosophical thing. Like, when people say what do you do, I always say I am a nurse. I have noticed some of my colleagues would say, I am an academic or I am a lecturer. Not that there is anything wrong with either one, but I have noticed that over the years. There is just

something about me that, I have also thought no I am a nurse, whatever job I do, I am still a nurse.” – P 1 – Senior lecturer in Nursing

P 1 had to give up practising as a nurse during her PhD. Before this, she continued to practise while also lecturing in nursing.

5.6.1.1 - Becoming a student can threaten professional identity

As many of the participants in this study were experienced practitioners, they found their status challenged by becoming a student again. Some of the participants felt the professional capital they had built up in their career counted for nothing when re-entering academia.

“...bearing in mind that I am quite senior in my job. So, it is quite... so, what I find really hard is to be treated like an idiot student when you kind of are the lead services in the NHS.” – P 11 – Senior nurse in NHS

Another participant, P 4, described something similar when he was speaking about how he felt when after he submitted his transfer document at the midway point of his PhD. In order to continue in the PhD programme, his document had to pass through a review panel, during this review panel he felt he was subject to critique which crossed the line of what he considered acceptable. In his description of the incident, he referenced his professional status when commenting on the harshness of the review:

“Like [reviewer 1] and [reviewer 2] it was like a dynamic duo, it was horrible. I mean, I actually felt quite resentful about it because, I am a professional therapist in my late forties and I am being subjected to a kind of inquisitorial kind of process. I just think this is bullshit. Either you are going to let me continue or you are not. This kind of process of trying to humiliate me, humble me, what the fuck is this about.” – P 4 – Therapist

From his description, P 4 feels the incident was a direct attack on his identity and status as a professional. If the student has a strong self-conception of their previous professional identity when entering the liminal space of the PhD, they struggled more with being treated as a novice. Whereas for someone like P 8, who was very junior in her role as a nurse when beginning the PhD, she had less attachment to existing professional identity and did not find

this identity being challenged in the same way as the more senior participants. Instead, she found the PhD was interrupting her professional identity formation, which led to her feeling emotionally stretched.

“So, I am trying to negotiate who am I as a nurse, what kind of nurse do I want to be, where do I want... all of that, the emotional impact of seeing a patient who is very poorly dying, all of that going on. On the one hand and on the other hand, you are sitting there trying to do a literature review. You are thinking what is the point, because on the other hand you have real people in front of you and night shifts, and then you think I don’t want to have supervision after having done a string of night shifts.” – P 8 - Nurse

Slay & Smith (2011) see professional identity being transformed by career transitions after the initial socialisation in the profession. However, for P 8 her transition was occurring before the initial socialisation had finished. This was causing a challenge in both her professional development and her PhD development.

5.6.1.2 - Professional identity and professional knowledge do not necessarily translate to the PhD

Some of the participants described attempting to draw upon their previous professional understandings in the PhD. P 5 found replicating her methods of working as a teacher were not compatible with the PhD. As a teacher, she was used to doing much work in short time periods. In the first year, she attempted to replicate this in the PhD by cramming in as much as she could without stopping to digest the information.

“like in the first year I think I was just... I had gone from such a fast pace in school with such high expectations of what you can cram into a small period of time, that I had replicated it at PhD level and then it was completely different.....So, I realised that I had to adapt my pace for the level of work that I was doing. That was my learning curve really.” – P 5 - Teacher

It was not until the second year that she had adapted to the needs of the PhD. Other participants spoke about how the PhD process was causing them to challenge their professional understandings. For example, as a nurse making a mistake can be fatal, but some of the participants found failure to be a vital part of the learning process in the PhD:

"It was just really helpful because from the start he [supervisor] said it doesn't matter if you get things wrong. As a clinician it does matter. It is not like I cover up mistakes, you are transparent about mistakes you make, but if you make a mistake clinically it can kill somebody. So, it is very hard to go from that mindset where you don't want to make a mistake because the mistake can have devastating consequences to an environment in which mistakes are almost encouraged because you do most of your learning when you get things wrong which is really hard I think" – P 7 – Nurse

And

"I think you have to let go of perfection especially in nursing because you want everything to be... everything has to be perfect if you are looking after somebody because you can't really make a mistake can you. So, I think a lot of nurses probably come in with that perfectionist quality and probably a lot of people who do PhDs have been used to some level of achievement in their lives. I have definitely had to let go." – P 9 – School Nurse

This was a direct challenge to their professional identity and their socialisation in their profession. Another participant, P 4, struggled to fit his professional identity within the framework his profession sits within academia and the PhD.

I mean, in a way what I am saying is why did the study, the research... or why does counselling and psychotherapy research have to fit into a social science mould. You can do a PhD in English literature. I think I would have like to have done a PhD in counselling and psychotherapy that was more like a PhD in English literature... You see, because I suppose I am of a view that counselling and psychotherapy is more of an art. I am not, I don't think that counselling and psychotherapy need to present itself to the world as a science. To me it is an art. So, I suppose there is something where doing it through the social science lens lost something. So, it is not academia, it is more I suppose scientific or social scientific academia" – P 4 - Therapist

Having to position their work within an academic framework is a vital part of the PhD. If their professional identity is interrupting this, then moving from a professional mindset to adopting an academic identity could be viewed as a conceptual threshold which practitioners have to cross in order to progress in their PhD learning.

5.6.2 - The Impact of PhD study on professional practice during the degree

This section focuses on how the PhD has changed the participants' individual practice *during* the PhD. The first part of this section details how the participants in this study found their own practise changed because of the PhD. The second section deals with the implications for the broader practice, whereby those who were in a position to enact change did so.

5.6.2.1 - Studying for a PhD has an immediate impact on the students' professional practice

All the participants spoke in a positive manner about how their practice has changed as a result of doing the PhD.

P 4 explained how he initially viewed the PhD as a theoretical exercise, one which is not designed to improve his practise as a therapist directly. However, he feels it has had a direct benefit to his practise. Through the process of doing the PhD he feels he has a much deeper understanding of therapy, and the PhD has accelerated this process of learning his profession:

"Obviously, you are always learning stuff. But I think through doing a PhD I have had to accelerate my learning far more than I would have done without it. So, I kind of feel like I know... it does translate into the practice, I mean, I feel like I know what I am doing more than I did before and that is from a theoretical place but also just feeling more confident and understanding all the different views people have about how therapy works and stuff. I think it fits quite well." – P 4 - Therapist

This was something other participants also felt. P 2 described how the further he got in the PhD the more he was recognising the theories he was using in his work.

"...work has informed the PhD and the PhD is informing the work. They are working together, becoming closer and closer basically." – P 2 – Council worker

P 1 also felt it had a direct impact on the skills she uses in the workplace.

"I think having done the PhD for that research element of it. Also, the content the stuff that I have been looking at, the way I am able to critic research now, is just so much better. So, it does feel like it really does enhance you" – P 1 – Senior lecturer in nursing

One thing that was consistently coming out of the interviews was the ability to have a more research-informed view of practice. The participants described how, prior to the PhD, they did not engage with research to inform their practice. They found they were too involved with the day to day experience of the job, but through doing the PhD, they have gained the skills to allow their practise to become more evidence based.

P 10 explained how she sees academic research as being stuck in a bubble and does not actually reach the classroom. She feels that teachers have too many other commitments to engage in new research fully. What research does filter through comes via the prism of what senior leaders in the school are interested in, or things teachers pick up through word of mouth or industry magazines.

"I think that one of the things for me being in school and researching teachers and teaching is an awareness that there is so much stuff, like so much stuff that does not even enter the realms of actual practice. It is untrue." – P 10 - Teacher

This was a common observation, P 6 described how his colleagues continue to reference research they read years ago, which continues to inform their practise, even if the research is no longer relevant:

"I think most people go into like the NHS not wanting to be researchers, they want to go and help people and they get a lot from that. Then they just get their research from their like CPD events they attend. Then they will quote that piece of research forever. I mean, I have got colleagues who had a piece of research they printed off and had in their desk for twenty years and they still referred back to it. That is great, but research has moved on since then." – P 6 – Health visitor

This is important to understand how professionals learn and engage with research in the workplace. The nurses in this study spoke about how knowledge is handed down from mentor to student, and knowledge is acquired on the job.

"So, nursing, I mean a lot of it is evidence based. But a lot of it is sort of passed down from mentor to student and then sometimes it gets a bit lost. People kind of do stuff because that is the way it has always been done." – P 9 – School Nurse

And

“Because you draw from this clinical experience or you draw from the clinical experience around you. What really interested me recently is that people are far more attuned to what their colleagues think than they are of NICE guidelines [National Institute for Health and Care Excellence]... - So, the NICE guidelines can say whatever they want people will do what their colleagues do, right. So, there is that whole sort of informative... what informs your practice?”

P 1 – Senior Lecturer in Nursing

The PhD represented a direct challenge to this way of obtaining knowledge about the profession. P 8 described how she spends time trying to promote research to her nursing colleagues, and this is having an impact on how they view her doing a PhD.

5.6.2.2 - Those who were in a position to enact change within the wider practice did so
The participants who were in a management position to enact change in practice while they were still doing the PhD did so. P 11 found there was a level of animosity from the colleagues’ whom she managed to these changes:

“The reason being... do you know what the truth is, people don’t like to think about what they are doing too much in the NHS. They like their tasks and they like their day and they like their routine. Whereas they don’t like me... what I have learnt with my PhD is that I was forced to think about what we are doing, how can we do this better, how can we do this differently, are we doing what we are supposed to do, are we doing the right thing, do we have to do this at all. People don’t like that very much.”

– P 11 – Senior nurse in NHS

P 11 found the culture within the NHS hostile to change. Her belief that people do not like their work questioned was in direct conflict with what she was trying to achieve so this was met with resistance. Staff felt as if the change was being forced onto them. Conversely, P 3, a deputy headteacher, used a more inclusive method of attempting to embed change into practice. She explained how she set up a collaborative enquiry group within the school that went right across the hierarchy, from the cleaners and cooks through to the headteacher.

“They all... they contributed really well and we ended up... like our actions that we agreed, one of them was as simple as putting a laminated copy of the resilience framework on our laps because we have a daily debriefing as you can see here and

we would refer to that. Say, such and such has had a good day today, I have tried doing x, y, z as strategies from the framework that seemed to be working really well or that didn't really work that well. I will change that. People kind of chip in with different ideas, all contributing together.” – P 3 – Deputy headteacher

This suggests there may be cultural differences within different practices to change. Or it could be that staff need to feel involved in the research to be able to see the positive difference the changes can make.

5.6.3 - Long term impact on practice & Post-PhD

What a student thinks might happen after the PhD can also play a part in the PhD experience. As the length of a PhD is a significant period of time, it is likely a person's professional priorities, motivation for undertaking a PhD, or hopes for what they can achieve, have shifted by the time they reach the end of the process. This can cause their focus or motivation to shift during the process. P 6 explained how he had shifted in his thinking since beginning the PhD.

Joe: You touched upon it earlier when you were talking about colleagues and things, but you don't... you don't consider the PhD to be an end in itself?

P 6: No, not at all. I mean, I guess I used to. I used to think that, but now I... having got very... people who I admire a lot who are very research centric professors it is very much not the end, it is the start. That is quite exciting really and it has made me realise... I think by realising that it has made me feel like the PhD is just something that needs to get done now rather than focusing, spending years on it doing it and then stopping.

Post-PhD focus can be guided and limited by practical considerations. P 5 spoke about the financial burden she was feeling as her PhD was nearing its conclusion. She admitted she no longer wished to return to her previous position as a teacher:

“Because I didn't do this PhD to change my career, I hadn't thought about not working in schools, I just thought I would do it and then go back to school in a different capacity.” – P 5 - Teacher

When we had our interview, she was in the final six months of her degree, and crucially her funding. She spoke about the increasing pressure she was feeling to finish the PhD on time and find a job.

"I am financially really keen to... in terms of finances really like sort of desperate to secure employment. It has been really difficult because although I get stipend payment that... it was quite a big pay cut compared to my previous earning. Then having to kind of... I couldn't necessarily make cut backs because it was the family that I was looking after and they already have clubs and places to be taken to, rent at a certain level. There wasn't much flexibility about changing my lifestyle to suit my means. So, that pressure has built up and I have felt that pressure of like, you have got to find a job we can't carry on with you being a student for much longer. So, there is that pressure." – P 5 - Teacher

Her desire to be finished and find work was beginning to eclipse other considerations. She admitted as her deadline neared the pressure might mean she has to take a position she would rather not. P 10 described something similar when asked what she wanted to do with her research after the PhD. She responded by saying it depends if her future allows her to do anything with it:

"Right now, I am not sure if I am totally honest. I have got lots of different ideas, lots of different things and a lot of that will I think depend upon what happens with circumstances and what sort of storm you are swept up in... But in six months' time my stipend finishes and then the reality of the world will push in and I will need to have another job. I will be swept up in whatever that other job is. Now, if that other job allows me to work on and develop and post doc my work that I have done with this, well, then that is what will happen. If my other job, doesn't allow me to do that, well, then I am probably unlikely to do anything with it." – P 10 - Teacher

The majority of the participants were unclear, even at the advanced stage of their degree, what it could lead to after. P 5 described how no one had ever spoken to her about her career prospects of what having a PhD could lead to. She felt the focus was very much on her project being a success as the detriment of developing her employability.

"Also, I didn't really... I wasn't really aware of things that I should have been doing in my PhD to make me more employable. So... and I am not that minded, not that practically minded. So, I would have really appreciated someone saying to me look you have got to publish because otherwise when you finish and you haven't published that will hold you back. Whereas at the time, I think probably because I had so many other things going on and they needed me to get to the end of the PhD the focus was very much on like my project." – P 5 – Teacher

None of the participants described the university engaging in career planning with them. There was a general tone from the participants that due to their professional status, this was not something which the university was concerned about.

5.7 - Summary of Chapter

In summary, this chapter has presented the findings of the research project. Consistent with the descriptive phenomenological methodology of Giorgi (2009) and Todres (2005), this was achieved by presenting and explaining, through the use of participant descriptions, the five invariant constituents identified in the analysis phase.

The next chapter will look further at these invariant constituents compared to the relevant literature identified in chapter two.

Chapter 6 - Discussion

It [the PhD] is teaching me about not just research but nursing, how I want to be a nurse, what kind of nurse I want to be. – P 8 - Nurse

6.1 - Introduction

This chapter critically discusses the findings presented in the previous chapter and how they relate to the literature. The invariant constituents introduced in the findings section make up the essence of the phenomenon. These invariant constituents are the elements that bind the participant descriptions together. Some of the aspects within the invariant constituents may be familiar themes of the PhD experience for all students. However, there are aspects of the findings that help us better understand the process of studying for a PhD in one's field of professional practice.

This discussion will focus on some of these aspects. It will argue that developing a strong understanding of the PhD is a conceptual threshold which students must cross before they can move onto the complex research tasks in the PhD. This period of discovery is a crucial liminal state in the learning journey of the PhD and should be carefully encouraged and managed by the supervisors. Without careful management and nudging students can allow their motivation for undertaking a PhD to fill in the gap of their knowledge of what a PhD is.

Further issues can arise for practitioner researchers if they are simultaneously having to discover what a PhD is while also managing the merging of their professional sphere with this new academic sphere. For those researching their field of professional practice, there is no separation between the boundaries of these two communities of practice. The data shows student's contact with the university is limited, and their supervisors tend to be the primary contact they have with the broader university ecosystem. This means that supervisors are required to act in a more direct way than they may be used to.

One way the students react to an overreliance on their supervisors is to develop and interact in peer communities. Peer support is vital for student wellbeing and can also play an important part in student learning and development as researchers. Although, often, the development of peer communities was left to chance. Peer groups were created informally and unintentionally without direct facilitation by the university. Increases in the use of social

media and digital communication technology have allowed the connection between students to continue even if they are not physically able to meet at the university.

Studying for a PhD in one's field of professional practice leads to a transformation in professional and personal identity. The way students view their profession is transformed by their exposure to other perspectives of viewing their practice. This has an impact on their day-to-day practice, even during their period of study.

This chapter is divided into six sections. The first five sections critically examine each invariant constituent – Understanding What a PhD is, Learning and support during the PhD are not limited to what is provided formally by the university, Supervisor relationship is the primary source of interaction between student and the university, The PhD is only one part of the students' lives and must be managed alongside other contexts, and Doing a PhD irreversibly changes the way students view their practice and themselves - and compares them to existing literature and concepts. The final section discusses the tensions between these often-overlapping aspects in the experience of PhD students who are researching their field of professional practice.

As a reminder, the guiding question for this research has been **What is the experience of PhD students who are researching their field of professional practice?**

6.2 - Understanding what a PhD is

PhD students begin the process unclear precisely what a PhD *is*, this creates an immediate barrier to developing doctorateness which must be confronted before they are able to begin with the practical work of the research project. As a research degree, the PhD is unlike other academic degrees where students learn material followed by an assigned task or test.

Instead, the PhD is an independent research project and is very different from taught degrees, but this difference is mysterious. The meaning of '*What is a PhD*' encompasses a wide array of different elements, both practical and conceptual.

Almost all participants in this study reported not having a good understanding of what a PhD was when they reflected on the beginning of the process. Developing this understanding takes time, and this period can be troubling as it coincides with a period when decisions as to the shape and scope of the project need to be made. Developing a

clear conceptualised understanding of how the degree functions and what they can achieve needs to be viewed as a conceptual threshold.

As they were unclear what a PhD was when they began the degree, the descriptions from the participants suggest their motivation for wanting to undertake the degree contributes to shaping their early understanding of what the PhD is. This can be troubling as a misinformed understanding of what a PhD is can cause a delay in the development of the research project, as well as the researcher. When students begin their PhD, they come with their own motivations and goals of what they hope to achieve, both with their research and on a personal level. It is common for student perceptions to change, previous research has found in professional doctorate programmes that original motivations for doing a doctorate are different from perceptions of the degree once the student has completed (Drake & Heath, 2011). This was also something the participants in this study described, and the outcome of this means original motivation is not a healthy way to fill a void of understanding. If students later discover there is a mismatch between their original motivation for study and the reality of what can actually be achieved during a PhD, it could cause friction in the process. ‘Achieved’ means both through the actual research outcomes and more practically – for example, due to other commitments or the length of time of their degree.

When motivation fills any void in understanding, it creates what can be labelled a student’s *initial expectation*. This initial expectation is what the student expects to get out of the degree - professionally and personally -, how the degree operates, and what can be achieved scholarly through the degree. It has been found that PhD students are more likely to succeed when their expectations have been met (Bair & Haworth, 2005). Therefore, it is vital that expectations match the actual reality and, as a result, it is essential that expectations are managed within the formal PhD curriculum at the beginning of the process. However, in the data, there was a lack of descriptions to suggest supervisors or other elements of PhD programmes were helping to shape these initial expectations at the beginning of the PhD. It is evident from this study that defining initial expectations at the beginning should be an integral part of the first meeting between student and supervisors. If this is not achieved, it can cause long-term issues throughout the process.

It has been found previously the relationship between professional practitioner doctoral students and their supervisors can break down due to different expectations or conceptual

understandings of what PhD research is (Malfroy, 2005). There was some evidence – such as those reported by P 4 in the results chapter (See 5.2.1.1), of supervisors helping to set the parameters and direction of the research project. Early direction from supervisors on research methods and potential methodologies before the student has begun to develop an understanding of the exact qualities of what a PhD is, what can be achieved, and what is required can lead to the student making, or agreeing to, decisions they do not fully understand. The student must begin to reconcile any tension between their preconceived notions – shaped by their motivation - with the reality of doing a PhD. Without careful discussion between supervisors and student around the management of expectations, it can leave the student in a state of flux and unable to begin moving forward with the project. This task becomes more challenging for those who are part-time students, who are not able to dedicate themselves to the socialisation of doing the PhD in the same way as their full-time peers.

Doctoral research training has become a key part of the pedagogisation of doctoral study (Lee & Boud, 2009) and a core component of the doctoral curriculum (Gilbert, 2009). Despite a long push to improve training for PhD students (Roberts, 2002), only one participant mentioned the training they undertook as being compulsory. Based on the descriptions of the participants in this study, research training for doctoral students is patchy and not uniform. However, for those who had been in practice for a long time, it was vital to their development in understanding how to do a PhD. The training helped to demystify aspects of academic theory and terminology. By attending initial research training, practitioner researchers were able to begin to plan and conceptualise their research projects.

Overall, research training was also not an ongoing process for the students. In the descriptions, training was mainly frontloaded at the start of the project. Some of the students commented on how they wish they had done some of the training later in the programme when it would have been more useful. Where ongoing training was available, the students discussed how they were unable to attend ongoing events due to their workloads or personal commitments. These events are typically at times when professionals would be unable to attend. From the data, it is also hard to find evidence to suggest students view attending seminars and guest lectures as part of the research training.

Instead, the data points to these being viewed as optional luxuries which were unnecessary unless they could immediately relate it to their project (See 5.4.5).

If students only see training as an initial activity, they might then struggle when they meet challenges later in the process which they have not been prepared for, or for which the training came too early in the process. For example, writing at the required level was viewed as a challenge and something they had to master. When discussing it, they spoke only in terms of working with their supervisors. For example, none of the participants spoke about attending writing workshops or similar services provided by their university. If research training becomes weighted to just the very beginning of the degree, it means a lot of the further pedagogic work within the doctorate is having to be taken up by the supervisors (I will address this further below in section 6.4) or through the informal curriculum. Research councils have begun to address this - the ESRC encourages flexibility in the timing of training in order not to frontload research training into a master's year before a student undergoes a "transfer" to PhD. They feel spreading training out throughout the process means delivery matches actual need (Economic & Social Research Council, 2015). Yet there was little evidence this is happening currently for the students in this study.

If students are not availing themselves of training opportunities, it begs this question of whether these students are developing the required competencies and skills as part of their doctorate. Whereas in the past it may have been seen as acceptable or even desirable for the normative doctoral student to have to figure out how to do research for themselves, this model does not fit different type of students (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2006). There have been calls for a more interventionist pedagogy to reflect the changing doctoral intake (Crossouard & Pryor, 2008). If liminal phases are to be encouraged as a space of creativity, then there needs to be careful consideration given to ensure students are not arriving at unintended stuck places.

If a PhD is meant to be a degree of advanced research training, then it needs to be a learning process which encourages failure. Research is often a messy process, and learning occurs at the boundaries between success and failure. One of the common descriptions from the health participants was how they found acceptance of failure a challenge to their professional subjectivities which they had to overcome. Whereas in their professional life failure can be fatal to a patient, they found within the PhD it was a place of learning. This

barrier not only changed the way they thought about failure but also how they viewed themselves.

6.3 - Learning and support during the PhD are not limited to what is provided formally by the university

Within the field of Doctoral Education, there is much focus on the formal support mechanism put in place by the university. However, as shown in the findings, much learning and support occurs outside the formal learning provisions provided by the doctoral training programme. This forms part of the hidden curriculum (Elliot et al., 2020). The student perspective of social support is an under-researched area of doctoral education (Mantai, 2019).

One of the strongest themes to emerge from the findings chapter was the importance the participants placed on peer support during their PhD, both for wellbeing and in their learning journey. As the participants tended to be part-time and spent little time physically at the university, these informal networks - which they developed throughout the process - helped to bridge the divide between themselves and the university.

There were two forms of peer support evidenced in the data. Formalised peer support – that which had been facilitated by the university in some intended manner, and informalised peer support – that which the students founded themselves without intended facilitation by the university. The formalised version is defined as interventions which are planned to create long-term peer interaction. Students meeting in a training workshop and forming a long-term peer relationship would not be defined as intentional - it is a by-product. Whereas supervisors facilitating students who are studying the same topic area meeting and bonding, as described in the case of P 7 (Section 5.3.1.2), would count as formalised. Informalised peer support was the most prevalent form found in the participant descriptions.

Prior research has found evidence that strong social support – family, friends and peers - is linked to doctoral success (Ali & Kohun, 2007; Martinsuo & Turkulainen, 2011; Gardner, 2008; Jairam & H. Kahl Jr., 2012). However, there are disciplinary differences. Those who work in research teams are more likely to be satisfied with their social support, and this creates disciplinary distinctions as natural science students are more likely to work in teams

compared to social science, health or humanities students — those who make up the participants in this study and the majority of practitioner PhD researchers.

The findings presented in this study contradict the findings of Gardener & Gopaul's (2012) study on the experience of part-time PhD students in the United States. In their study, they found little evidence of peers playing a supportive role in either an emotional way or pedagogically. Gardner (2008) has previously found part-time students rarely interacted with peers due to their part-time status and felt they were missing out on the full PhD experience as a result (Gardner, 2008). Whereas all the part-time participants in this study spoke extensively about the support they received from fellow doctoral students. What Gardner highlights, though, is evidence that PhD students understand the importance peers play in the feel of a vibrant research environment. Mantai (2019) also reported mature and part-time students placing greater value on technical support and academic advice over social interactions or engaging with the wider academic community. The difference in findings between the findings presented here and the Gardener & Gopaul (2012) and Gardner (2008) and Mantai (2019) studies may be partly cultural as they occur in a different education system. Alternatively, for some students, the impact of simultaneously operating in *overlapping* professional and academic spheres creates a greater desire to find other students in a similar position if they feel their supervisors or work colleagues cannot empathise or understand.

Some of the students in this study described how their peer network helped their learning journey. They discussed sharing and critically discussing each other's work. However, the students who spoke in this way tended to be more based at their university. These peer groups were more formalised than some of the descriptions about peer networks being used for emotional support. They tended to be built and facilitated through the university, such as university Special Interest Groups, which may explain why students who were not based at their university did not discuss this as much. Mantai (2019) found that such groups are important in developing student belonging and becoming, and their burgeoning academic or researcher identity. However, Mantai also found the inverse. Students who are unable to participate in these groups feel actively excluded by the university, and this has a negative impact on their sense of identity.

Prior research has highlighted the possible negative consequences of such peer groups causing increased anxiety or peer pressure (Boud & Lee, 2005; Mantai, 2019; Jairam & H. Kahl Jr., 2012) but there was no evidence of this within the data. Rather than increasing feelings of jealousy or competition, students exhibited feelings to suggest their peer group helped them feel they were all in it together and a sense of community.

Where there was an absence of descriptions about the positive aspects of peer support, the student lamented the lack of peers and community. Not having a network of peers can lead to other issues with the PhD being exacerbated. One student in this study described how a lack of peers only became a problem when she was struggling with other parts of the PhD process. Without other students to talk through the issues she was having, in this case, participant recruitment, she found the office she was working in became isolating and claustrophobic. This feeling was not present, at least consciously, before she started having issues with her research plan. Arriving at a stuck place heightened her awareness of her lack of peer support. As students may only see their supervisors on a monthly basis (or even longer), they require some form of regular interaction when problems occur. Without regular interaction, it can cause motivation to dip and lead the student to question why they are doing the degree. As shown in the findings (section 5.3.1.2), students who considered dropping out turned to their peers for reassurance before speaking to either their supervisors or other support systems within the university.

The student in the claustrophobic example referenced above was one of the small number of students in this study who were doing the PhD full-time while only doing a limited amount of professional work. This meant, unlike most participants, she was based at her university during the week, and she made specific reference to the poor research culture at her university (something she attempted to change). Unlike the participants who were primarily studying for the PhD away from their university, it is possible those who are based at a university with a limited research culture struggle to make or maintain external contacts as a result. Ironically, those who have limited access with the university may find it easier to hold bonds with other students who are in a similar circumstance.

In their book 'How to get a PhD', Phillips & Pugh (2010) write about the importance the research environment can have in the successful completion of a PhD. They claim being situated within a vibrant research culture offers two benefits: Firstly, being around

colleagues who are research active provides motivation, and secondly, through tacit learning which occurs when working around others who are producing research. When this vibrant research culture is absent, they feel the PhD student should work to seek out interactions with other researchers. They write “the lonely single researcher has a much harder path to reach the PhD and the chances of success are lower” (Phillips & Pugh, 2012, p. 48). This then presents a challenge to practitioner researchers who tend to be part-time and isolated from the university environment. Regardless of what the actual research environment was like in their university, if they are unable to act as full members of the PhD community due to their other commitments, then they cannot enjoy the benefits of whatever research environment exists. It is well known that isolation within the PhD process is an issue for PhD wellbeing (Metcalfe et al., 2018; Cantor, 2019).

When students cannot access the full package of doctoral education, many students are forced into creating their own research environments. Wisker et al. (2017) use the theatrical metaphor of ‘backstage’ to describe those who influence the PhD outside of the supervisors (the frontstage actors), within this they include critical friends, family, and university administrators. They posit that this metaphor “makes visible that doctoral education cannot be reduced to the individual endeavour of the doctoral student nor the dyadic relational work between a supervisor and a student” (Wisker et al., 2017, p. 535). The findings from this study support this and highlight the students’ reliance on informal support networks during their period of study for both their wellbeing during the process and for the learning journey.

One possible explanation of the difference between the experiences found in this study compared to the Gardner (2008) and Gardner & Gopaul (2012) studies compared to the work of Mantai (2019) is the rise in digital communication in that time frame. Students in this study spoke about communicating with their peers regularly via messaging services such as WhatsApp or by using video calling software such as Skype. These services offer greater opportunities to interact as they do not require a physical meeting. They also allow for group communications whereby a number of students can interact with the community at the same time, or even at a time convenient to them.

The findings also suggest that peer support is not only limited to networks of peers who have physically met each other. Increasingly students are turning to *digital first* communities

as a form of support. Several of the participants in this study spoke about how they use Social Network websites to speak to other students. This can be an effective strategy to overcome a lack of physical research culture. On the social media site Twitter, there is a vibrant culture of doctoral students from all disciplines interacting with each other through hashtags such as #phdchat. McPherson et al. (2015) have found Twitter is beneficial for building networks both locally and globally, enhancing information flows and inspiring thinking (McPherson et al., 2015).

Branching out also allows students to communicate with more experienced researchers within their field. The most obvious benefit of this is increased ease of opportunity. Whereas in the past to interact with certain members of a field, students would have had to either be enrolled at the university where those academics worked or met them at conferences or other organised events. By communicating on social media, students have access to a far greater number of academics who are accessible whenever it is convenient. This is particularly important for practitioner researchers due to their reduced ability to attend conferences or seminars because of their professional commitments. Therefore, digital communities create a far broader opportunity of networking for this type of student than would otherwise be possible.

A further benefit is the levelling effect of communicating digitally. One participant spoke (see section 5.3.1.4) about how, through digital communication, it changes the nature of hierarchies within academia as everyone is equal on the website. While this may reflect the individual's own confidence to reach out to established academics face-to-face compared to online, it is also likely to be the case for a wider number of PhD students. McPherson et al., (2015) spoke about this 'flattening' effect of social media, commenting "There has developed within Twitter a community of practice where it is possible for all within the constraints and norms of Twitter, no matter level, status, or institution, to engage with one another rather than being guided by identified roles and status within the community."

Authority in terms of status is removed. Rather authority is comprised in terms of accurate content, information, and pedagogy for all to access" (McPherson et al., 2015, pp. 134-135). As the doctorate is a series of liminal phases, it is normal for PhD students to feel a lack of self-esteem and self-confidence during this period of intellectual upheaval (Keefer, 2015). For practitioner researchers this risk is potentially higher as they face challenges to both

their pre-existing knowledge of their practice and their status within the wider landscape of their practice. Maslow emphasised the importance of safety for growth (Maslow, 1958). By communicating with esteemed colleagues on social media students can test out thoughts and ideas with less fear than a physical encounter would produce.

In their study, Gardener & Gopaul (2012) found that the most important form of support during the PhD came from students' family. While this was discussed by the participants in this study, it did not emerge as strongly as peers. Jairam and Kahl (2012) concur with this position and consider the support offered by family and friends different from academic peers. As in the Gardener & Gopaul study, participants in this study spoke about their partners having to compensate by doing more of the domestic work during their period of study. The findings of this study suggest family, or personal, support is a form of ancillary support. Family support does not tend to directly provide support to the participants learning and development of the thesis. The participants in this study frequently referenced how their family members did not understand their PhD work and were not able to offer advice about the work itself. Instead, they had these conversations with their peers or supervisors. Labelling it as ancillary is not to diminish the importance of this support. It is necessary as it enables the student the time and space to work on the PhD, Jazvac-Martek et al. (2011) refer to this support as facilitative.

In addition to their family and peers, there was another group of 'backstage actors' often discussed in relation to informal support, this was their employers and work colleagues. I will cover this in greater detail in section 6.5.

6.4 - Supervisor relationship is the primary source of interaction between student and the university

The formal support offered by the university during the PhD is, by design, a significant part of the total PhD experience and this is not any different for those who are practitioners who are studying for a PhD in their field of practice. As discussed in the Literature Review chapter, PhD programmes have undergone significant change over the last two decades. They are now viewed as training programmes for advanced knowledge workers rather than solely focused on ensuring the production of the final thesis outcome. Part of this change has been as a reaction to the PhDs changing place in the world and the different type of

student who is undertaking the degree. However, as discussed in the previous sections, the student experience of training programmes and contact with the university is a limited part of their PhD experience. Instead, their descriptions were littered with reference to their supervisors and their relationship with them. It was a topic they returned to consistently, even when discussing other parts of the experience (see section 5.4).

From the perspective of the students, supervision is considered the main form of both pedagogical and pastoral support during the PhD. Although often there is a mismatch between students and their supervisors' expectations of one and other (Malfroy, 2005). One of the most significant challenges the students described concerned their supervisors not understanding external factors which were influencing their capacity to focus on the PhD. As the majority were studying part-time whilst simultaneously engaged in significant professional workloads, their PhD was often not their main priority. However, the students felt their supervisors did not appreciate these external demands and were not adjusting their expectations to compensate for this. Supervisors can find the emotional work required of them in the modern version of the PhD problematic and many draw strict boundaries between PhD work and the personal which they will not cross (Strandler et al., 2014). If this is the case, then it is possible some supervisors may be unable to countenance the impact professional commitments can have on this type of student due to the fear of crossing what they see as a necessary self-imposed boundary.

As previously discussed in section 6.2, when beginning the PhD students have a naivety to the process. The advice they receive from their supervisors in the initial few weeks is crucial to shaping the direction the research will take. Additionally, those who are returning to academia from practice after a long break are particularly prone to being reliant on the methodological advice and guidance from their supervisors. This creates a power imbalance which gives the supervisors greater control in setting the initial expectations regarding what they expect from the relationship. The naïve student is less likely to understand setting expectations should be a two-way endeavour whereby they can articulate what they expect of their supervisors. None of the participants described discussing with their supervisors what they expected of them.

Dialogue with past or present students presents an opportunity for students to reflect on their supervision experience. Through discussion, they can develop a more comprehensive

picture of the different types of supervision. This can help clarify if the supervision a student is receiving is typical and possibly contributing to the student's perception of how satisfied they are with their own supervision. The participants in this study tended not to work on their PhD at their university. Meaning there was less opportunity to speak to other students or departmental colleagues outside of any peer network they had developed.

Students' satisfaction with their PhD programme has previously been linked to their supervisor/s expertise in their research topic (Holdaway et al., 1995; Ives & Rowley, 2005). The issue of supervisors having a lack of subject expertise was raised in a significant manner (see section 5.4.3) in three of the interviews, while several other participants made passing comments to either their supervisors' lack of experience in practice or to the length of time they had been out of practice. In two of the significant cases where supervision expertise was raised, the participants were junior in their practice. This suggests they required professional subject expertise from their supervisors, as well as methodological and academic expertise. In contrast, more senior practitioners felt confident in their subject knowledge and required expertise in research methodology and applying their subject knowledge appropriately.

Drake and Heath (2011) feel that supervising practitioner researchers poses specific challenges compared to non-practice-based PhDs due to the different type of knowledge generated in a PhD based around practice. They anticipate a conflict between academic and professional knowledge to be played out through interactions between the supervisors and students. While Drake and Heath's work is based around the professional doctorate, they make a case which suggests this risk of conflict would be more acute for the traditional PhD. Drake and Heath use Bourdieu to argue the traditional PhD operates to reinforce and reproduce the dominance of the academy by legitimising what knowledge is legitimate (Drake & Heath, 2011). This conflict between academic and professional knowledge was indeed present in some of the transcripts, particularly amongst the more senior practitioners who resisted the suggestions and direction their supervisors were nudging them towards. It was common amongst these students to find remarks within the data which referred to the academia in disparaging terms. Whereas those who were more junior in their practice were more inclined to be open to their supervisors' suggestions.

6.5 - The PhD is only one part of the students' lives and must be managed alongside other parts

Studying for a PhD is not done in isolation students have other commitments and responsibilities. This is the case for all PhD students, regardless if they are practitioners, or studying full-time or part-time. What is different for practitioner researchers is the significant professional workload they tend to undertake during their study. The significant workload does not only refer to the number of hours worked but can also mean the mental/emotional strain the work can place on practitioners - this was particularly something the nursing participants in this study reflected on. The relationship between PhD students and their employment during their period of study is an understudied aspect within the field of doctoral education and requires further study.

As shown in the findings, initial support from employers was vital for students when deciding whether to undertake a PhD. None of the participants reported meeting resistance when they initially brought up the idea of doing a PhD with their employers. For those who were intending to continue practising, they all saw this acceptance from their employers as conferring an assumption of ongoing support during their period of study. However, most of the participants discovered that this agreement did not translate into practical support during their period of study. Students reported (see 5.3.1.2) wanting their employers to be more understanding of the demands of the PhD. They felt colleagues and management did not have a proper understanding of what is required in terms of the time commitment required to do a PhD, and what is needed emotionally and intellectually from a PhD student. Both factors will inevitably have a negative impact in terms of the students' capacity as to what they can give their practice during this period. Professional practice employment can cause students to miss out on the full PhD experience. Events put on for PhD students by the university such as research training, seminars, conferences, networking opportunities tend to be in the working day. Participants with full-time workloads lamented the fact that they were often unable to attend these development opportunities. It left them feeling as if they were not full members of the PhD community. When they did attend events, they had to do considerable 'planning ahead'. Often this would involve using their holiday allowance to attend PhD events which meant sacrificing this allowance for personal activities such as family holidays. Previous research has found students believe there is a disconnect between

individual needs and the support offered by the university and this is particularly the case for part-time students (Mantai, 2019) and this was also born out in the experiences of students in this study.

If events are organised with the intention of enhancing student learning, then by not being able to avail themselves of these opportunities professional students are missing out on potentially transformational moments of development. As the focus of the PhD as a degree has transformed from being primarily about the thesis output to one focused on equipping future researchers with transferable skills (Lee & Boud, 2009; Park, 2005) it is vital this section of students are not left behind. If students are missing out on development opportunities, they are at risk of being unable to reach the level required as evidenced in the thesis or graduating without the expected skills (Vitae, n.d.). PhD programmes need to offer more targeted training opportunities for this type of student, ensuring the scheduling of certain events in evenings and weekends, and ensuring the video recording of events are accessible to students unable to attend. Doctoral students are increasingly turning to informal digital pedagogies to supplement their learning (Guerin et al., 2019). This could be one strategy of compensating for missing out on attending development opportunities. However, Dowling and Wilson have found that doctoral students are cautious of blended learning, favouring face-to-face instructional and interaction (Dowling & Wilson, 2017).

The consensus opinion amongst the students in this study was the university side did not appreciate or take into consideration their other commitments. As discussed in the last section, the participants' primary contact with the university came through their interaction with supervisors and, as a result, their dissatisfaction at this was aimed at their supervisors. There was a mismatch in expectations between student and supervisors as to the allowances they make for students with professional commitments.

Further, it was clear from the findings that students can struggle with multiple identities. This is in line with the view of Watts (2008) who feels one of the main challenges for part-time students is "the strain of having to make the psychological adjustment of constantly switching from one mindset to another" (Watts, 2008). Participants spoke about the stress of switching between multiple hats. This was particularly the case for the nursing students who struggled with the mental burden of switching from dealing with sick patients to

working on their thesis. This constant change between identities impacted student wellbeing and led to students feeling burnt out.

Multiple identities are not limited to a duality between professional and student.

Participants also spoke about their other identities, such as being a mother/father or a wife/husband/partner. As practitioner researchers are likely to be older than traditional PhD students, it is more likely they have further commitments outside of their professional work and their academic studies. Given the demands of studying for a PhD, especially alongside a professional life, it was unsurprising to find students describing how it had caused moments of strain within their personal lives.

Vitae have identified different groups of post-graduate researchers who are at particular risk of developing poor mental health during the PhD. These include isolated PGRs, part-time PGRs, and PGRs with family responsibilities (Metcalfe et al., 2018). All the participants in this study fit in with at least one of these categories. Thus, demonstrating the importance of better understanding the experience of PhDs who fall into those categories. Amongst the factors which contribute to a breakdown in PGR wellbeing, Metcalfe et al. identify pressures of the PhD and supervisory relationship as the two most significant factors (Metcalfe et al., 2018). Cowling has also identified the supervisory relationship as being central to PGR happiness (Cowling, 2017). Again, this demonstrates why it is important to understand possible reasons which cause students to be dissatisfied with their supervisors.

One contributing factor the vitae study identified which was not found in this study was opportunities at the end of the PhD (Metcalfe et al., 2018). As professional practitioners, there was no evidence that this concern impacted the majority of student wellbeing in this study. Possibly suggesting they felt more confident with their career prospects due to their professional status. The majority of students in this study were not seeking academic careers, which differs from other types of PhD student (Levecque et al., 2017).

6.6 - Doing a PhD irreversibly changes the way students view their practice and themselves

The participants in this study found their perception of their practice transformed due to studying for a PhD. Rather than happening through a single lightbulb moment, this transformation was an ongoing process throughout their time studying. They found their

existing professional knowledge challenged as they were enveloped in a more research-informed view of their practice. In their report on Doctoral Learning journeys, Wisker et al. found studying a PhD to be a transformative experience which leads to an irreversible shift in perception (Wisker et al., 2010). The findings presented in this study show that this transformative effect is particularly focused when researching your field of professional practice.

It was typical for the participants to describe their professional working culture as a place where there is a disconnect between the reality of their day-to-day practise and academic or up-to-date research knowledge. They found on a personal level doing a PhD acted as a bridge between these two distinct spheres – practice and academic. This then allows them to develop a more research-informed view of practice. One advantage of this more research-informed view of practice is the impact it has on their own practice during the period of study. There was no lag between undertaking the research project and embedding it into their own practice. Wellington and Sikes argue the doctorate (they were discussing professional doctorates rather than the PhD) does not directly impact professional *performance*, instead it influences and impacts “professional attitude, disposition and confidence” (Wellington & Sikes, 2006, p. 724). While their latter point is something which is also born out in the data, there were examples where the PhD was having a direct impact on performance through the knowledge and insight they gained into the workings of their practice. These examples, such as the self-employed therapist (P 4) who felt he was more theoretically confident as a practitioner or the senior lecturer who felt it had accelerated her learning (P 1), tended to be in employment where the professional had a greater degree of autonomy.

It has previously been argued that a shift in identity is a necessary part of the learning process inherent in doing a doctorate, one of *becoming* a researcher (Crossouard & Pryor, 2008). This journey necessitates students entering a new community of practice. Moreover, from the viewpoint of the final product – the thesis, the fundamental goal of entering this new practice is to generate new knowledge. As these students are researching their field of professional practice - a field they are either still members of or have temporarily left during the period of study - this means generating new knowledge inevitably disrupts in some way their previous understanding of their professional practice. Therefore, this process of

generating new knowledge can cause students a period of intense stress as they break from the existing meaning frame of their practice.

This process inevitably requires a fundamental shift in how they view themselves in relation to their practice. Conceptual thresholds play a vital part in this process. Land et al. (2014) conceive these phases of liminality “as a state which leads to a re-authoring, whereby there is a reformulation of the learner’s “meaning frame” and a shift in their subjectivity” (Land et al., 2014, p. 201). This can be seen in the case of P 4, who was still struggling to adapt his view of practice to fit within an academic framework. His descriptions highlight ongoing frustration at this process. He exhibited signs of still being within a conceptual ‘stuck place’ which was holding him back from finishing his thesis, something backed up by his articulated frustration at the length of time he had been doing the degree so far. In this case, he was stuck in this liminal conceptual place which requires an ontological shift at how he views his practice to achieve the desired outcome.

In his later work on Communities of Practice, Wenger moved away from seeing participation in a community of practice as a one-dimensional move from the periphery of the practice to the centre as a full member (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Instead, he introduced different possible trajectories (Wenger, 1998). One of these, he termed a ‘boundary trajectory’, which spans the boundaries of multiple communities of practice and seeks to link them. Wenger specifically cautions on the difficulty this trajectory can have for identity, saying: “sustaining an identity across boundaries is one of the most delicate challenges” (Wenger, 1998, p154). This articulates the challenge some senior practitioner PhD researchers face as they are pulled between two overlapping communities of practice.

Examples of this can be found in the data from different ends of the practitioner seniority spectrum. Those who were more senior in their profession found their professional identity challenged by their new status as a student. The professional capital they had built up in their practice was suddenly eroded by entering a new community of practice where they were a peripheral participant. This can cause these students to retreat away from the academic sphere, as described by P 11 when she dropped out of her first PhD attempt.

The other example concerns junior practitioners. In the case of two of the participants, they had been practising for just a number of months when they began the PhD. They were

selected for the PhD programme deliberately with this in mind. This presented a different challenge to the other participants in this study as they were on the periphery of two communities of practice at the same time. Whereas the more experienced practitioners were already deeply embedded within one community of practice, these two students faced learning to become a researcher and learning to become a practitioner at the same time. This caused enormous mental strain, and both participants considered dropping out of the PhD.

For most students enacting change in their professional practice during the period of study was limited to their own practise. As Drake & Heath (2011) found, those who were able to make a change within the broader practice had to be in senior management positions. The rest of the students felt limited by the change they could realistically make within their wider professional practices, even at a local level. However, this did not seem to impact their motivation to continue with their PhD. Although it should be cautioned there is a survivor bias in the sample as those who were interviewed were all expected to finish, meaning the experiences of those who may have dropped out after they realised they could not affect more comprehensive change have not been captured by this study.

6.7 – Discussion on the insights and tensions which have arisen during the data analysis

So far, this chapter has looked at each of the invariant constituents in relation to the existing literature. This section will further explore the themes which have arisen in the above sections in relation to the general structure of the experience of studying for a PhD in your field of professional practice. The general structure has highlighted the tension between studying for a PhD and the status as professional practitioners as a key part of the experience for this type of doctoral student. This tension manifests in a multitude of ways which can cause friction in the process. This section will bring this tension to the fore and discuss the implications and strategies that doctoral students adopt to mitigate it.

6.7.1 - Motivation and required level of engagement in the PhD programme

The dynamic between workplace and academic context plays out in a myriad of ways - some of which can cause a chain reaction. The data presented in this study offers a unique portrait of what it is like to work at the intersection between practice and PhD study. While

it is true all PhD students have other facets of their life which will, at times, overlap or even come into conflict with the PhD, these facets do not typically represent an intersection where each element has a direct influence on the other. This is the key difference for those researching their professional practice and other doctoral students. For these students, the intersection is more than just another outside commitment which takes time and mental capacity away from their PhD study. Instead, the intersection for these students offers a space of creative opportunity as they fuse practitioner expertise and academic frameworks while delving into the very workings of their practice. It is also a potentially troublesome and confusing space which offers divergence from old ways of viewing practice and their place within it. As the issues it raises are not comparable to other conflicts, this intersection represents a particular challenge which is only faced by this type of PhD student.

As discussed previously, initial motivation plays a vital role in filling a gap in student expectations of what can be achieved in the PhD. Initial motivation can be informed by either their personal or professional motivation, or a combination of both, and it is shaped by the student's end goal, i.e. what they want to get out of the PhD at the end of the process. Again, this end goal can be personal or professional or some combination of the two. Typically doing a PhD has always been seen as preparation for an academic job (Lee & Boud, 2009), and this view has shaped the academic structure of the PhD. Therefore, when students with an initial expectation which does not conform to this view undertake a PhD, they risk being systematically disadvantaged as the programme has not been designed with their goals in mind. While this has been acknowledged by policymakers and changes made to ensure the PhD is more transferable, these findings suggest there is still a systemic issue. Their initial motivation comes into contact with the academic boundary of what is achievable in the degree at the point of starting the PhD. This can create an immediate tension between student and the university if there is not clear communication and agreement between both parties on the expectations each hold for the process and both sides goals. An essential part of this communication is articulating their initial motivation and where it sits in relation to their professional practice.

They may find through articulating their initial motivation it reveals a tension between workplace and academic fields and the level of engagement students can give towards the PhD while maintaining their place as a practitioner. For a practitioner researcher their initial

expectation may come into conflict with the reality of what is possible. The required level of engagement to complete a PhD is higher than what is required in an undergraduate degree. The work of Fenton-O'Creevy et al., (2015) on academic-workplace boundaries conceptualises undergraduate students as either tourists or sojourners depending on their imagined career trajectory and their level of participation with academic practices. Their reasoning is based on the imagined trajectories of undergraduate students who temporarily intersect with the academic world but with the intention of merely passing through it. They specifically mention how their model would not apply to PhD students, but their opinion on this is based on a normative understanding of a PhD student undertaking an academic apprenticeship. However, due to the different imagined trajectories of practitioner PhD researchers, their model can be adapted for this type of research student. Typically PhD students are viewed as travelling on what they refer to as an "inward-bound trajectory" (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2015, p. 44), whereby they aim to move from being a peripheral member of the community towards the inside, in this case, to become a full academic. Increasingly it can be argued this is no longer the case for a significant number of PhD students (Gardner, 2008), and especially so for those who are researching their professional practice. The majority of participants in this study reported they had no intention of pursuing an academic career, and their motivation was one of personal gain – such as a promotion - or a desire to improve their personal practise or their practice. Instead, their model can be adapted so this normative understanding of the PhD would be to view the student as an emigrant (see figure 6) who hopes to become fully encultured and assimilated into the academic practice as a permanent member. These students would treat the PhD as more of a complete academic apprenticeship, rather than a research apprenticeship and would have full participation in all parts of PhD experience. The aspiring emigrant would attend seminars, workshops, take opportunities to network and present their work, and gain teaching experience. They see the PhD as an opportunity to hone their academic skills with their imagined future at the forefront of their mind.

Imagined Trajectory				
		Inside community of Practice	Direction	
		Low	Marginal	Tourist
Participation	High	Research apprentice	Sojourner	
	Full	Academic apprentice	Emigrant	

Figure 6 - Forms of PhD participation in Academic Community of Practice

However, as demonstrated, practitioner researchers who remain practising during their period of study struggle to participate as full members of the PhD community. If they cannot attend events and workshops designed for PhD students (for example, if they are scheduled during the working day), they are unable to participate fully inside the academic community of practice. Meaning there is a ceiling to their level of participation in the programme relative to other PhD students.

The critical distinction between a PhD and an undergraduate degree is the level of participation required to be successful, regardless of imagined trajectory. Due to the intellectual demands of a doctorate compared to an undergraduate degree, one cannot expect to successfully complete a PhD with only the marginal participation of a tourist (Wisker, 2015). Therefore, being a sojourner is the minimum required level of participation with the academic community of practice to be able to complete a PhD. This presents a challenge due to the aforementioned limitations their professional demands make on how much they can engage with the PhD programme. As a result, they can be pushed into the status of tourist regardless of either their imagined trajectory or their best intentions. This can happen not only if their imagined trajectory does not include staying within academia but also because of the structure of the PhD degree, the research community for distance/part-time learners at their university, and the relationship they develop with their supervisors. An example of this tourist approach can be found in the descriptions of P 11, who dropped out of her first attempt at a PhD after she struggled with her supervisors' demands she should do wider reading. Instead, she felt they should provide her with the

exact material she needed to read which was tailored to her PhD as she did not have the time to search herself like “other students” (P 11). Rather than a flippant attitude or lack of willingness, her description made it clear she felt her professional status meant she did not have the time to engage further with the academic community. Therefore, she was pushed into this tourist status by her circumstances, and as a result, she was not able to proceed at this level of engagement which meant she had to drop out of the PhD.

6.7.2 - Academic-Workplace boundary

The Fenton-O’Creevy et al. model further sees trajectory journeys as crossing distinct boundaries as the student travels from one community of practice to another. Their model sees the transition between different workplace roles being supported by crossing into an academic practice before emerging and crossing into a new community of practice with the transformed role. This model cannot work for PhD practitioner researchers as it ignores the fundamental cohabitation required between the practitioner and academic CoPs, which are inseparable when it comes to researching professional practice. Unlike the undergraduate example, the university is not merely supporting a career transition via academic qualification and learning. To do PhD research in your professional practice there needs to be a constant intersect between academic learning and practices and ones’ professional practice. This creates a natural tension between the two spheres.

During their study then, the boundaries are not traversed at the beginning and the end, rather they become blurred as the two spaces intersect. For this intermingling is a two-way phenomenon, the practitioner role influences the academic work just as the academic work influences the practitioner, and this happens *during* the PhD. There are limitations to the extent either can influence the respective wider community of practices. What influence there is, certainly during the PhD, tends to be local to the individual (represented by the arrow in figure 7). The data shows (see section 5.6.2) their experience and knowledge of their practice influences the thesis, and their work on the thesis has an influence on their continuing work as a practitioner at the local level.

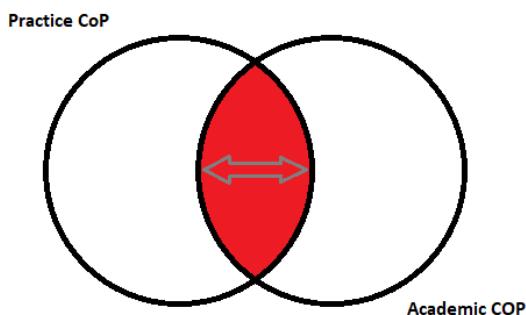


Figure 7 - Local academic-workplace boundary relative to the landscape of practice

There are opportunities to break through to the broader communities (both academic and professional), but these can be limited by the force one exerts on the other or through the limits of their professional influence. For example, participants reported how they found limited support from their employers to attend and present at academic conferences, which limits how much impact their work can have on the academic field.

6.7.3 - The role of identity work in the PhD

There is a link between the level of participation and the concept of doctorateness. As has been noted, doctorateness is a tricky concept to define. It is neither evidenced purely in a completed final thesis, but nor is it a prescribed set of characteristics or skills students must learn throughout their degree. Yazdani and Shokooh (2018) caution against placing too much emphasis on the doctoral thesis or original contribution when defining doctorateness at the cost of overlooking “the importance of characteristic formation of the doctoral graduate” (Yazdani & Shokooh, 2018, p. 43). Instead, doctorateness should be seen as the totality of the developmental and transformational experience students go through to reach the end of the process successfully. Someone with the low participation of a tourist is unable to go through the developmental or transformational process required to obtain doctorateness. There is also a link between motivation and doctorateness. One needs to be open to the possibility of development and transformation. If their motivation is such that they are unable to be open to the possibility of discovering something new about their practice, they will struggle to develop as a researcher. Therefore, for doctorateness to be achieved there needs to be a characteristic primer in place at the start of the process. This characteristic is the willingness to question and reflect on their existing understanding of

their practice. Without possessing this characteristic, it is unlikely that the student will undergo the transformational process needed.

The evidence for doctorateness can be found in the final thesis, it can be found in the viva and, for practitioner researchers, it can be found in the way they carry out their practise. However, it can also be found in the transformed way the students view themselves in relation to their practice and the wider world. In molecular biology, transformation is defined as the genetic alteration of a cell resulting from the direct uptake, incorporation and expression of genetic material from its surroundings and taken up through the cell membrane (Kokate et al., 2011, p. 200). Transformation then is not an instantaneous process, nor is it something which happens in isolation, rather it is a process of building on the previous state. Transformation during the PhD requires the student taking in new material, incorporating it into their existing meaning frame and practice, and then producing new material in the form of an original contribution and a new way of viewing their practice.

Trafford and Leshem have argued that 'doctorateness' should be considered as a threshold concept (Trafford & Leshem, 2009). As described at the beginning of this thesis (section 2.5.2), the concept of doctorateness has been hotly contested. Trafford and Leshem's (2008) steppingstones model - whereby doctorateness is achieved when students demonstrate within the thesis synergy between twelve research elements (see section 2.5.2). This synergy they describe could be viewed as a conceptual threshold, but to describe this as doctorateness requires viewing this concept as purely evidenced in an embodied way. The literature review section describes the lack of agreement within the doctoral education field around the meaning of doctorateness.

Rather than seeing doctorateness as a threshold concept, it is better viewed as the outcome of a series of thresholds students have crossed during the process and the development of their conceptual understanding. The liminal phases students enter, which are entered when students meet a threshold concept, lead students to undergo ontological shifts which change not only their understanding and view of the subject but also a shift to their entire meaning frame and, as a result, their identity. To see doctorateness merely as an outcome ignores the student and their journey of arriving at the outcome. Denicolo and Park (2013) consider the difficulty in defining doctorateness arising from the various qualities a person needs to possess or gain to acquire doctorateness. In this statement, they are positioning

doctorateness as more than demonstratable outcomes embedded within the thesis. Doctorateness then encompasses the development of the researcher and highlights the PhD as a developmental and transformational process (Yazdani & Shokooh, 2018). It is the job of doctoral training programmes and the formal PhD curriculum, primarily supervision, to help students manage conceptual thresholds they meet during the process.

In the transformation analogy, ones existing professional identity acts as the membrane through which the new material must penetrate. The findings show evidence which suggests that more senior practitioners struggled to adapt to their new role as a student. Due to their years of experience and their developed professional identity as senior practitioners, these participants saw being a student as a threat to their professional status. The research work required by the PhD also threatens their existing understanding and knowledge of the profession they are researching, which also is a threat to their professional identity. The result of this is their professional identity can act as a barrier – the membrane - in the intersection which stops the fusion of academic and practitioner knowledge (see figure 8). Therefore, the period of transformation is troubling for experienced practitioners. It requires crossing into a new practice which is likely to challenge what they thought they have known about their profession. It requires accepting a new professional status as they move from an experienced member of practice to be an inexperienced student. Furthermore, it requires being open to concepts which could potentially challenge long-held beliefs. Penetrating this barrier is the identity work required by the PhD.

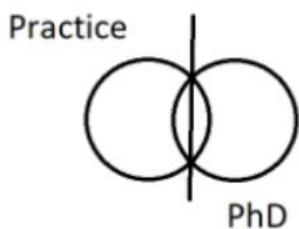


Figure 8 - A barrier in the intersection

Their openness to accepting community of practice multimembership can be influenced by their imagined trajectory. Fenton-O'Creevy et al. define the sojourner as engaging in identity work, but not with the aim of assimilation but rather accommodating the practices of the community in order to function within it (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2015). There were signs

this was true for several the participants in this study who could be classified as sojourners based on their imagined trajectories and level of engagement. These students tended to speak in a way which highlighted an underlying view that academic or research work was somehow lesser work compared to their practice jobs. Whether they themselves believed this or it was something they felt they had to defend against their colleagues does not particularly matter to their position as a sojourner. Either way, their position as PhD student was causing them to engage in identity work in relation to their professional identity.

Two of the participants in this study were enrolled on a PhD course specifically targeted at health practitioners who are new to their field. These two students were different from the other participants in they had not become full members of their practice community and had no developed professional identity when beginning the PhD. This caused distress in the process as they wrestled with forging professional identities while doing the PhD and reconciling their membership in two competing practices. Wenger (1998) emphasises the need for newcomers to embrace continuity when entering a new practice, but these students found their status as PhD students was viewed as the opposite by their colleagues. They both spoke about colleagues questioning their motives and asking if they were committed to nursing, while also referring to how doing a PhD was not part of the culture of the nursing profession. This could be a contributing factor as to why they both struggled and considered dropping out.

The intersecting boundaries of different communities of practice are often confusing and mysterious places. Kubiak et al. feel crossing a boundary or introducing an idea from elsewhere in the landscape can leave the individual vulnerable, potentially leaving them with feelings of inadequacy, failure or disengagement (Kubiak et al., 2015). Wenger considers reconciliation between membership in different communities of practice as a vital part of identity development. This fits within the definition offered by McAlpine & Amundsen which sees identity as “how individuals represent the (a) continuity of stable personhood over time and, at the same time, (b) experience a sense of ongoing change” (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018, p,27). Reconciliation is essential in being able to proceed and moving forward with the PhD and plays a part in the essential work of understanding what a PhD is.

Reconciliation is mostly invisible and personal, as the individual wrestles with their changing identity. Those supporting doctoral students need to be aware of this endeavour happening behind the scenes. This is a time of insecurity, and there is no guarantee the student will be able to achieve reconciliation successfully. However, this period of reconciliation is also a period of learning, and knowledge acquisition and development. For example, the nurses who commented on how failure is encouraged within the PhD found this to be a direct challenge to the form of accountability which is a big part of their professional identity. They needed to reconcile this new form and by subsuming this into, what Wenger calls, their nexus of identity. At the same time, they were learning things about the fundamental meanings of their practice which may have only been part of their professional subconscious before.

6.7.4 - Brokering boundary crossing

Although on the surface they may be similar, crossing a boundary should not be seen as the same as a state of liminality. Whereas the liminal states which students enter during the PhD are spaces of creativity and should be – carefully – encouraged, boundary crossing poses a potentially critical danger and requires brokering. Supervisors need to recognise the difference between these two -seemingly similar - phases within the PhD, and what their required role should be when each is encountered.

Working at the intersecting boundaries of different communities of practice often requires facilitators to broker connections between these multiple practices. It is the role of brokers to support boundary crossing - including the translation, coordination and alignment between different perspectives (Wenger, 1998). For PhD students researching their field of practice, this brokering role is one which should be taken up primarily by the supervisors. The data suggests supervisors represent almost the totality of the accepted formal support which is offered by the university for this type of student (see section 5.4). Even when students interact with other parts of the University ecosystem it is the supervisors who act as a gateway to these interactions. They are thus acting as brokers for entrance to this new community of practice. However, from the perspective of the student, issues arise when the supervisors role as brokers does not extend to facilitating movement between the students multiple communities of practice. For example, several students complained about how the ‘university’, i.e. their supervisors, were not willing to interact with their employers to find a

better working arrangement between their practice and their PhD. Supervisors may feel this is not their role or feel uncomfortable with entering what they see perceive as, a student's personal life.

If students who are researching their field of practice find their level of engagement in the PhD programme has a ceiling, it means they have different needs and require a different approach to supervision than other PhD students. Operating in the delicate level of engagement between emigrant and tourist has pedagogical implications as doctoral programmes are set up to accommodate emigrant students. Therefore, sojourners will require a more interventionist pedagogical supervision than other students, in order to compensate from being unable to act as full PhD members. There is a school of thought which suggests a hands-off style of supervision can be empowering for doctoral students (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2006) but there was evidence in the data to suggest students were receiving such supervision but reacting negatively (see 5.4.4). Receiving this sort of supervision only created a mismatch in expectations as the students wanted more of a pedagogical relationship with their supervisors, P 9 was an excellent example of this.

The first step of brokering the transition between communities of practices should be to set initial expectations about what doing a PhD entails, what can realistically be achieved and what student and supervisors should expect of each other. This is vital for two reasons. Firstly, it stops initial motivation filling the vacuum of naivety which seems to exist at the very beginning of the PhD. Secondly, it helps prevent a future breakdown in the relationship between student and supervisors, which can be detrimental to the entire endeavour, as evidenced in the case of P 4.

6.7.5 - The hidden curriculum's role in the PhD

The PhD students in this study tended to be resilient, and when formal brokering was not adequate pastorally or pedagogically, many of the participants in this study described how they turned to their informal support networks to compensate. This mainly happened through the use of peer support. As already discussed, peers can provide both a pedagogical and emotional form of support during the PhD journey. These dual forms of support mean peer networks can, and many times did, act as a supportive facilitator between the academic and practice boundaries, however, while peer support can act in this way it should not be seen as a substitute for supervision or brokering. Supervision has an essential

dimension of power which cannot be replicated by peer support. Students see their supervisors and the university as interchangeable, which confers a level of authority on the supervisors to act as brokers. This can be seen in the exasperation one student felt when her supervisors were not willing to engage with her employers to work out a better balance between her studies and employment.

Peer groups need to be encouraged and facilitated where possible by the university. The importance of the ‘cohort effect’ is well understood within professional doctorate programmes (Scott et al., 2004), and the same logic would apply for practitioner PhD researchers. Professional doctorate programmes benefit from having a taught element which precedes the research phase. This inevitably helps to foster a cohort which can then continue into the research phase if the student’s desire. PhD programmes do not have a taught element in the same manner and therefore no such natural way to engineer a cohort effect. This problem is exasperated when students are physically distant from the university or unable to attend research training events and workshops. Some students spoke about how they met other students through a shared supervisor facilitating the introduction. Another solution could be the creating of digital spaces where students can interact, such as a university wide doctoral student web forum. Putting ongoing social events in evenings and weekends is another possible solution.

Those studying for a PhD in their field of professional practice are not only practitioners and students. Their professional work and doctoral study do not operate in a vacuum which ignores their personal circumstances. Inevitably there are times when outside conflicts act as a barrier and disrupt the fusion happening in the intersection (figure 9). These times need careful management, and the pastoral side of brokering becomes important. Students who expressed a complimentary view of the pastoral qualities of one or more of their supervisors tended to be more satisfied with their supervisors in total. Students expect their supervisors to support them pastorally, but it has been found that this support varies widely (Metcalfe et al., 2018).

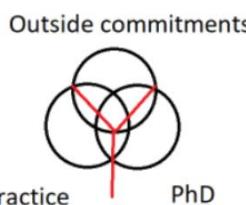


Figure 9 - Outside commitments can act as a barrier between practice and the PhD

Outside commitments are also involved in the delicate nexus of identity development which then influences the PhD. Personal identities outside the workplace such as mother/father, wife/husband, carer or provider all impact and continuously shape their world view. Their attachment to their profession and where it sits in their lives at any given time can change how they view their research. It is clear from the experiences of the students in this study there is a constant struggle to maintain synergy between all parts of their personal contexts when studying. When there is a lack of synergy, it causes a blockage in the process which needs to be overcome.

6.8 – Summary of Chapter

This chapter has critically discussed the five invariant constituents presented in the findings chapter. Using the existing literature on the doctoral student experience, it has analysed these invariant constituents to highlight the areas of the experience which are distinct for those researching their field of professional practice.

The final part of the chapter brought these invariant constituents together in a conceptual way. This part of the chapter argued that most practitioner researchers are on a sojourn in the academic community of practice. They are temporary members based on their intended trajectory. If they are continuing to practice during their doctorate, it is unlikely that they are able to be full members of the PhD community, so the level of engagement of academic apprenticeship is out of reach for many practitioner researchers. The demands of the PhD also mean a lower level of engagement, that of tourist, with the academic practice is not possible to complete the PhD. This means there is a minimum threshold of engagement with the academic practice. Where this threshold cannot be met, the result can lead the student having to drop out of the programme.

A student's motivation for undertaking the PhD has a strong influence on their expectation of what the degree is, what can be achieved, and how it functions. This motivation can fill the void in their initial expectations if clear parameters are not set early in the programme. Students need a clear understanding of what is expected of them and what they can expect from the university and their supervisors.

Practitioner research students are working at the intersection between academic and professional practices. Unlike undergraduate students who are temporarily moving through the academic practice to reach their intended trajectory outside the practice, the practitioner PhD student is in both fields at once. This is necessary to conduct the empirical research, but both fields are influencing the other during this intersection. Students found their view and how they engaged with their practice transformed during the PhD. This was only at a local level; the intersection creates a barrier to being able to influence either of the broader practices in a meaningful way.

Navigating the boundary between academic and professional requires brokers. As practitioner students are unable to participate as full members of the PhD community the role of brokering falls largely on the supervisors. Without attending seminars, conferences, and other events, the pedagogical work of the PhD is also largely reliant on the supervisory relationship. While students do gain pedagogically from their interactions with the hidden curriculum, this is mainly used for wellbeing purposes and does not compensate for supervision.

Chapter 7 - Conclusion

What is the PhD? The PhD is an opportunity for me to explore something that I am very interested in and it gave me the chance to step out of my own practice and look at it from a different level. – P 10 - Teacher

7.1 - Introduction

This research project aimed to explore the experience of PhD Students who are researching their field of professional practice. This was achieved through a descriptive phenomenological analysis of in-depth interviews with 12 doctoral students. The analysis revealed the invariant constituents - the characteristics which bind each of the individual experiences together to form the general structure.

As knowledge has become more valuable in society, so has the number of PhD students risen (Bogle, 2017). The degree is no longer strictly an academic apprenticeship undertaken exclusively by a normative student – someone who is young, professionally inexperienced, and studying full-time. The experience of non-traditional students has been neglected in the doctoral education literature. This research project has demystified this experience for a particular group of students – those who are researching their field of professional practice.

This final chapter summarises the research findings before it discusses the research question and goes through each of the research aims, this is followed by a clear statement of the original contribution this study has made and the limitations of the study.

Section 7.2 will review the experience of studying for a PhD in one's field of professional practice by summarising each of the invariant constituents. Section 7.3 will focus on the first two research aims by identifying the significant barriers and challenges and discuss how strategies students adopt to overcome these. The final research aim is addressed in section 7.4. The chapter then moves on to the strengths and limitations of the study. Section 7.5 articulate the original contribution knowledge which has been made in this work. Section 7.6 discusses the limitations of this study. The final part of this chapter, section 7.7, summarises the chapter.

At this point in the thesis, it would be helpful to return to the research question and aims as they were set out in the methods chapter (Chapter 3).

Research question: What is the experience of PhD Students who are researching their field of professional practice?

This research question was also informed by three research aims. They are:

- To draw upon participants' experiences to identify the barriers, and challenges, encountered during PhD study which focuses on their field of professional practice.
- To draw upon participants' experiences to identify how PhD students overcome the barriers, and challenges, encountered during PhD study, which focuses on their field of professional practice.
- To identify and critically discuss the support required by PhD students who are engaged in research which focuses on their field of professional practice

7.2 - Summary of invariant constituents

This section summarises the experience of PhD Students who are researching their field of professional practice, and the methods used to find this. The five invariant constituents make up the essence of this experience.

This research project used a descriptive phenomenological methodology, principally following the steps of data analysis outlined by Giorgi (2009) and Todres (2005). The data analysis attempts to arrive at the invariant constituents - those which make up the essence of the phenomenon. The invariant constituents are those which are considered essential if the structure of understanding the phenomenon would collapse without any of them.

The findings chapter (chapter five) presented in detail, with extracts from the participant descriptions, each of the five invariant constituents which make up the essence of the phenomenon. The first invariant constituent – Understanding what a PhD is – highlighted the gap in knowledge and understanding new PhD students have. Where there is a gap in understanding, their motivation and preconceived notions can fill this void. It was common for participants to say it took them 12 months or longer to understand what they were doing. In the interim period, they rely heavily on advice and guidance from their supervisors. This can sometimes cause long-term issues if the student feels this advice was against what they had hoped to achieve. Research training was essential for those who had been out of academia for a long time. Those who did not have professional experience in research found

the research training modules invaluable in the process of demystifying both research and the degree. The results also showed how students react to unforeseen challenges. Those with project management experience in their professional field exhibited greater resilience to overcome difficulties with the research project. Students found the day-to-day experience harder when they were having issues with their research projects. The practitioner-researchers found the work they were engaged in with their study was unlike their professional work. This particularly manifested in their writing, and they had to adapt to an academic style. The formal milestones in the PhD programme, such as transfer or ethics application, were significant moments for students which can have either negative or positive impacts.

The second invariant constituent - Learning and support during the PhD are not limited to what is provided formally by the university – demonstrated the critical role peer support provides in both student learning and mental wellbeing. These peer groups tended to be informal, rather than formal cohorts, thus exhibiting how peer support is a key part of the hidden curriculum. It often took students a significant period of time to develop these relationships. The findings also showed that students are turning to digital technology for peer support. Either through using digital communication tools - such as WhatsApp or social media - to further their existing peer networks or by developing digital-first peer networks. This is important for practitioner researchers as they tend to be part-time and not based at their campus, giving them less opportunity to interact with peers on a day-to-day basis. Digital-first peer networks can be exclusively based online through social media sites, or they can be primarily based online with occasional face-to-face meetups. Students are also using social media to interact with wider groups of researchers in more a more generalised amorphous manner. Students reported that digital communication flattens the hierarchical nature of academia and gives students greater confidence to interact with more experienced researchers. Other parts of the hidden curriculum were also found to impact the experience. Students reported how support from their employers was essential in their decision making when choosing to undertake a PhD. However, this support was less forthcoming when they began the degree, and there was a lack of understanding from employers and managers. A lack of flexibility from employers made it hard for students to act as full members of the PhD community. Additionally, some students reported they

received an adverse reaction from colleagues, and this had an impact on their experience. Students also described the importance their spouses had in supporting their PhD experience. This can be taking additional responsibilities in their personal life, which can provide mental space for the PhD student to flourish.

The third invariant constituent - Supervisor relationship is the primary source of interaction between student and the university – underlined the importance of the supervisor relationship for practitioner researchers. Those studying for the PhD part-time and those still practising tended not to base themselves at the university on a daily basis. This excluded them from attending events or development opportunities at the university. Research training was front-loaded to the start of the PhD, which meant their ongoing interaction with the university ecosystem was heavily biased to their supervisors. Practitioner researchers were pragmatic in how they used the time they allocated for study and for most this meant prioritising interaction with supervisors over other forms of formal support.

Similar to their lack of fully understanding the PhD degree, many students reported initially not being sure what to expect from their supervisors and what their role was. This is further complicated as students have more than one supervisor, meaning it takes time for the dynamics of the team to become apparent to all parties. Students reported talking to their peers to compare notes on supervisors as a method of discovering if the support they were receiving was regular. Problems with supervisors can cause issues with the research project, cause delays, and impact the students' motivation. When students lose a supervisor, this can also cause issues such as delays to the project. Losing a supervisor early in the project while the student is still unconfident can leave them feeling lost and jaded. Practitioner students want at least one of their supervisors to have expertise in their field. Students felt dissatisfaction with their supervisors if they felt their knowledge in the research topic was not adequate. Practitioner students also struggled with certain styles of supervision. They did not respond to being supervised as if they were a traditional normative PhD student.

The fourth invariant constituent - The PhD is only one part of the students' lives and must be managed alongside other parts – concerned the impact juggling professional, personal, and academic commitments had on the students. Almost all the participants were in paid employment during their study, and this impacted their ability to engage with the PhD fully. Students described informal strategies they developed to find time to work on the PhD

alongside their professional commitments. Students wanted more recognition from the university of their status as professionals and the demands this placed on how much time they had to invest in academic endeavours. Some students felt their supervisors were unsympathetic to these concerns, and this caused issues in their working relationship as a team. Students also described the heavy burden the PhD placed on their personal lives and the sacrifices they had to make.

The fifth invariant constituent - Doing a PhD irreversibly changes the way students view their profession – showed how studying for a PhD has a transformative impact on how students viewed and understood their practice. Students reported how their existing professional identity was threatened by becoming a student. The more senior the student was in their profession, the more they exhibited signs of resistance to changing their professional identity. Students reported attempts to draw upon their professional experience to use in their PhD work were not always successful, and these moments caused them to re-evaluate their professional identity. Studying for a PhD have a transformative impact on the students' own practise. They were able to adopt a more research-informed view of their practice, and this directly translated into their own work lives during their period of study. Most students were unable to enact broader institutional change, and they were realistic about what could be achieved in this area. Not being able to enact wider change did not impact their motivation to complete. Students who were in senior positions were able to enact more sweeping change to their local practice, but this was conditional on their power within the organisation.

7.3 - Barries and challenges

This section summarises the identified barriers and challenges which are especially relevant and encountered by PhD students studying their field of professional practice, and the implications of these barriers and challenges. It will also address how students overcome these barriers and challenges. These were research aims one and two.

Studying for any PhD is an experience which comes with particular challenges. This is to be expected as it is the highest form of academic degree. Some of these challenges – conceptual and practical – are universal no matter the form of study or the content of the research, while some apply to certain disciplines. An excellent example of this would be the

significant number of humanities and social science students who report feeling isolated during the PhD (Cantor, 2019). Alternatively, practical problems with research methods, such as the recruiting research participants, is another problem which would not be exclusive to any particular type of doctoral student. However, studying for a PhD in one's own field of professional practice does come with specific challenges and barriers which are particular for this group of students. Even barriers and challenges which may not be exclusive to this type of student can also have specific characteristics that amplify them to this group of students.

7.3.1 - Understanding the PhD

A significant barrier identified (and typically the first barrier students face is) for practitioner PhD students is understanding the PhD. Developing an understanding of what exactly is a PhD is a barrier to being able to move further with the research project, conceptually and practically. As practitioner students have typically been out of academia for a significant period, their understanding of the degree may be less than a normative PhD student who has gone straight through the academic system. Practitioner students also face having to allow new perspectives to penetrate their professional understanding and identity.

As learning exactly *what is a PhD* is one of the first challenges new doctoral students face, they must develop a clear conceptual and practical understanding of what is expected of them and what they can expect from the PhD programme, their research, their supervisors, and how the degree will function in relation to the other parts of their lives. Their early answers to these points are their *initial expectation*, but the participant descriptions show in the absence of any assistance in the development of their initial expectations' students allow their *motivation* to fill in the gaps. This can be troubling if their motivation is unreachable and incompatible with the reality of what is possible in the degree and how it operates. Students are more likely to succeed if their expectations have been met (Bair & Haworth, 2005).

Therefore, developing a full understanding of what is a PhD is a conceptual threshold which students must cross when beginning the PhD. Within the threshold concept literature, the liminal phase is a conceptual space which leads to transformed ways of thinking. Land et al. (2014) conceive it as a state which leads to a "re-authoring" (Land et al., 2014, p. 201).

There was evidence in the findings to show this was occurring. Some participants referred to having to adopt a different mindset from their practice. For practitioner researchers this initial liminal phase is likely to be of greater intensity than other doctoral students as they are challenging their potentially long-held meaning frame and subjectivities of their practice. Liminal phases are complex states which allow for counter-hegemonic thinking (Land et al., 2014) and should be encouraged for original complex thought to emerge.

While liminal phases should be carefully encouraged as they are a vital part of knowledge creation – a prerequisite for PhD level study – it should be acknowledged that liminal spaces are unpredictable and potentially hazardous. Therefore, if it is the case student understanding and expectations of the PhD are being formed in part by their motivation, then this early liminal phase of understanding what a PhD is may cause issues further down the line, potentially during other liminal periods if they discover their expectations do not meet the reality. Thus, understanding what a PhD is and what to expect is a conceptual threshold and developing this understanding needs to be assisted by the academic side.

While studying for a PhD is involves a lot of independent initiative and agency, students still require guidance and advice - particularly in the beginning. A positive initial meeting between student and supervisors is vital to forming a working relationship, but it is also the first opportunity for the supervisors to help demystify the PhD. To achieve this, there needs to be conscious recognition from supervisors that students may be struggling to formulate an accurate picture of what a PhD is and the importance having a clear understanding is for the long-term success of the student. There was little evidence in this study to suggest that supervisors were helping to manage student expectations in this way at the beginning of the process. Students require clarity of information that eclipses their motivation in the building of their initial expectation. It could be supervisors were doing this, but students were unable to comprehend or take in all the information provided at this initial stage. If this is the case, it needs to be repeated and a continuous part of the early interactions between the student and their supervisors.

7.3.2 - Professional identity and changed practice

The identity work required by those studying for a PhD in their field of professional practice proved to be a challenge. Studying for a PhD is a transformative experience; it transforms

the way a student views the topic they study. Therefore, those who are studying their field of professional practice unavoidably find their view of the practice changed. This then has inevitable consequences for their professional identity.

Professional identity acts as a barrier through which new information must penetrate. Those who were newer to their profession found accepting a changed view easier than those who were more senior. Accepting new ideas and ways of viewing their practice is a threat to their existing professional identity. However, the creation of new knowledge is also a prerequisite to achieving a PhD. This means there needs to be a willingness to accept a change to their prior professional meaning frame, which allows this new view of practice to flourish and become empirically or theoretically conceptualised. This is the key distinction between practitioner researchers and other PhD students. As they are researching their field of professional practice, their professional identity is acting as a barrier to the development of their academic endeavour.

For new knowledge about their field to be created, practitioner students must reach a certain level of engagement with the PhD programme. Those who were still practising during their PhD struggled to achieve the maximum possible level of participation. They were unable to participate as full members of the PhD community. Students who achieve maximum participation are identified in this study as an emigrant, someone who views the PhD as an academic apprenticeship. Although practitioner students may not be able to achieve this level of participation, there is still a minimum level required to succeed in the PhD. One cannot hope to attain a PhD if they are only able to participate to the marginal level of a tourist (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2015) - one who stays within their practitioner community of practice and does not cross the border with the academic. However, any level of participation above that of a tourist requires the student to engage in identity work. Not necessarily to achieve full assimilation of academic practices, but to be able to function within the academic space.

Functioning in the academic space inevitably causes the student to arrive at points in the study that present conceptual challenges (Wisker et al., 2006). Practitioner students were attempting to translate their existing knowledge and finding it did not work in the framework of a PhD. Developing as a researcher by crossing these conceptual thresholds are the moments that cause ontological shifts, another part of the identity work. Crossouard &

Pryor (2008) have argued a shift in identity is a necessary part of becoming a researcher, but for practitioner researchers this impacts their professional identity too. This is another distinct facet of practitioner researchers during the PhD (this is something which should also applies to professional doctorate students). The introduction chapter quoted Drake & Heath's argument that insider researchers must combine "understandings from professional practice, higher education practice and the researcher's individual reflexive project" to create new knowledge about their professional practice (Drake & Heath, 2011, p. 2). The identity work is part of the reflexive project - by becoming researchers in their field they are no longer submissive members who take for granted the way the practice functions. Instead, they are active participants who are reflecting and crafting the narrative of the field.

This particular barrier takes time for the practitioner students to work through - there is no quick fix. The findings suggest students were working through this identity work during their study by transforming their individual practise. They were taking their doctoral work and using it to evolve their practise, which was then further evolving their doctoral work. This back and forth was the identity work in process. Therefore, this is a necessary process which takes time to achieve.

7.3.3 - Engagement with PhD programme

A further key barrier identified in this research is the level of engagement with formal parts of the PhD programme for those researching their field of professional practice. Far from there being a uniform experience, the exact form of the formal curriculum is distinct at different institutions and even different disciplines. Nevertheless, across the sector, there are apparent broad similarities of what is contained within the formal curriculum: supervision, official research training programmes, seminars, and workshops (Elliot et al., 2020). Crucially these are all contained within the academic setting.

Students with professional workloads are unable to engage with the PhD programme in the same manner as a full-time student. The findings showed that research training tended to be front loaded into the initial induction period of the PhD. Once this period ended, the students contact with the university came from their interaction with supervisors. Other

parts of the formal curriculum, such as organised seminars and workshops, were inaccessible to students who worked professionally during the day.

Practitioner research students do not have the time (see section 5.5.1), and possibly the mental space, to engage fully as a student. Even if other full-time PhD students have casual work commitments, there is a qualitative difference between a professional role and other more casual forms of work that other doctoral students could take up. This is because professional practitioner research students tend to be more senior, which typically means more responsibility. Where seniority is not the case, the student is still learning to become a professional and their profession, which comes with an intense mental burden as evidenced by the experience of P 8 and P 9.

Leaning into the hidden curriculum (Elliot et al., 2020; Ward, 2013; Gilbert, 2009) becomes vital in mitigating the impact of a lack of engagement with the formal curriculum. However, as the name suggests, the hidden curriculum is not defined and therefore, its supportive components are not necessarily apparent to the student. Those who had the earliest success accessing the hidden curriculum for learning had some institutional help navigating the hidden curriculum. Induction events which promote and facilitate access to the hidden curriculum are vital at the start of the programme. Even just hearing the experiences of older students could help. This research suggests there is a small window of opportunity at the beginning of the PhD to help students understand the different avenues of support, formal and informal, which are available and will be needed before their contact with the university becomes limited.

Increasingly students are turning towards digital communications and communities to mitigate the barrier of engagement. Digital offers the opportunity for learning and research development. Online journals and ebooks are convenient and present opportunities for study outside the university environment and have long been part of the student repertoire. Further learning opportunities are increasing, such as instructional learning content on YouTube and digital academic forums. Social media sites give students the chance to interact with advance scholars from across the globe. Previously this would have only happened if they met them at a conference or event. This interaction contains the added benefit of being less fear-inducing and is less hierarchical than a physical meeting.

Digital also offers students the opportunity to build peer communities and interact with other PhD students, bridging the access gap if they are unable (or even unwilling) to be physically present at the university campus and attend events with other students. These communities, through chat forums or social media platforms such as Twitter, can be digital first where the students have never met but form bonds. They can also be more amorphous groups where students interact with different researchers in a broader support community without becoming personalised, an example of this would be through hashtags such as #PhDChat on Twitter or dedicated PhD forums. The final form would be where digital communications support physical peer relationships where students have already formed a bond but no longer see each other on a regular basis. An example of this would be WhatsApp group conversations.

The personal lives of research students are also something which must be managed and a potential barrier. As they tend to be experienced in their profession – although this is not exclusively the case - the age profile of practitioner research students is older than the normative image of a PhD student. As a result, they tend to have family or caring responsibilities. Of the 12 participants who took part in this study, only one participant did not mention having a spouse or a long-term partner, and the majority of participants had children. These responsibilities inevitably take both time and mental space away from the research endeavour.

This barrier suggests there needs to be more institutional thought given to supporting practitioner doctoral students. More focus should be placed on strategies which aim to facilitate access to the hidden curriculum. This should not be left to luck or happenstance that students are able to develop the support mechanism which can compensate for lack of engagement with the formal curriculum.

7.4 - Doctoral Support

This section addresses the third research aim - to identify and critically discuss the support required by PhD students who are engaged in research which focuses on their field of professional practice.

The support needs of practitioner doctoral students differ from regular students due to the particular challenges highlighted in section 7.3. Due to their professional status, practitioner

researchers require a different set of support from the formal PhD curriculum and may need to rely more heavily on parts of the hidden curriculum. The findings showed significant support coming from three different avenues – the university, peers, and other actors.

7.4.1 - Support from university

This research has found that those researching their professional practice have little contact with their university outside of their relationship with their supervisors. This means supervisors are relied on more than the role would typically expect. An example of this is some students expecting their supervisors to act as brokers between the intersecting boundaries between their new position in the academic community of practice and their professional community of practice. Students in this study articulated their reliance on their supervisors for both learning and development and for pastoral purposes, this sometimes led to a mismatch in expectations.

Despite a drive to improve research training within PhD programmes (Economic & Social Research Council, 2015), supervision remains the main form of pedagogy within the doctoral curriculum. This is particularly the case for the type of student this study has focused on, who are less likely to use other pedagogical systems within the PhD programme outside of their initial training. While any additional training they do receive is front loaded near the beginning of the PhD – which, as demonstrated, is a confusing time while they are still discovering what a PhD is. This leaves the pedagogical work throughout the rest of the degree to their interactions with the supervisors. Crossouard and Pryor (2008) have previously argued for a reconceptualisation to view doctoral supervision as a pedagogic relationship with the aim of improving the doctoral curriculum for doctoral students who do not fit the normative mould. Given the lack of engagement students in this study had with other parts of the doctoral curriculum, this argument carries weight. As supervision is the one area practitioner research students consistently find time and space to engage with, having a more interventionist supervision pedagogy offers a way to compensate for the lack of engagement in other areas of the doctoral curriculum.

However, supervision which is more directly pedagogical may be impractical or an unfeasible use of academic resources, particularly if students are unable to avail themselves of it within regular working hours. Although not always the case, those researching their

field of professional practice are likely to be studying part-time or at least have significant professional workloads. Due to the difference in the time they can dedicate to the PhD on a weekly basis, it inevitably means these students have different pedagogical needs compared to their full-time peers. At the same time, this research has found that practitioner researchers also have different conceptual challenges to other PhD students.

The changing shape of the doctorate to meet the challenges of the modern world has inevitably had consequences for the way the degree operates institutionally. These changes have led to a more managerial PhD system; one which focuses on completion rates, quality assurance, and time management (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2006; Andres, et al., 2015). This has led to a culture of supervision which is focused on outcomes at the expense of understanding the individual student's context and their development. This is somewhat ironic as the changes in the PhD have primarily been driven by forces intended to switch the PhD from being a degree primarily about the thesis product to an endeavour principally of advanced research training. It may be an unintended consequence or two different factors happening at once, but this more managerial or bureaucratic form of supervision goes against the perceived needs of the students, who wish for a more understanding and empathic form of supervision (Watts, 2008). The results of this research support this desire for supervision which is more empathic to their status as practitioner researchers.

The results also show that students believe their supervisors should be engaging with their professional practice to help demystify the PhD to their employers. Students often found the initial support from their employers broke down once they had begun the PhD. Much like the students themselves, they felt their managers and employers did not fully understand what a PhD is and the demands it places on them. Students wanted their supervisors to be more active in engaging with their employers but found their support in this respect was not forthcoming. They expected their supervisors' role as brokers to be one of direct action and were left disappointed when discovering this was not part of the role. Issues with employers became problems months into the programme. If the student had a clearer sense of what a PhD is themselves, they might have felt better equipped to negotiate and explain to their employers earlier in the process what their needs are during their period of study. This would have avoided the request for their supervisors to engage with their employers.

The above points demonstrate there is often a mismatch between practitioner students and their supervisors' expectations as to the level of support offered and the exact definition of the brokering role, something which may not become evident until later in the process. Defining the role during the expectation setting phase early in the relationship would help to stop any issues later in the process, which may cause a breakdown in the student-supervisor relationship. However, this requires university supervisor training to recognise the different needs of different types of PhD students and the difference in expectations those students might have of their supervisors. Therefore, a more empirical understanding of the student experience (which this thesis helps to address) can lead to more streamlined and targeted interventions of other support methods which can benefit both student and supervisors.

7.4.2 - Support from peers

One solution to the problems of accessing formal support covered in the previous section, is an increased focus on ensuring students can build peer groups during the PhD. One of the key findings from this research concerns the importance peer relationships have on practitioner PhD students learning and how beneficial peers are for improved wellbeing. Peer support can assist the student in coping with, mitigating, or overcoming challenges and barriers they face during their degree. The findings show students use their peer group to discuss problems they are having in the degree, both academically and pastorally. When students were at the lowest moments of their degree, it was often their peers they turned to for reassurance or support. Therefore, peer support can alleviate some of the emotional burdens which have become a part of the supervision process in the modern PhD.

The main form of peer interaction described in this study was groups who met without formal organisation. Groups tended to be small, limited to three or four people who would meet regularly or interact through the internet or smartphones. They would typically be other practitioners - suggesting participants were drawn to those who shared similar experiences rather than people studying other types of PhD. While some reported sharing work in these settings, in the main students either struggle or are reluctant to turn these informal groups into critical friends who share and evaluate each other's writing or work. This may be due to not wanting to disrupt the current equilibrium of the group, or it may just have been something they had not considered. For university administrators, it may be

worth considering if the university doctoral support systems can offer assistance in facilitating informal peer networks evolving into critical peer groups.

The other form of peer interaction was through engaging in formalised groups within the university. This was in the form of special interest groups or groups of PhD students with shared supervisors. These groups tended to be more about supporting learning than helping with the emotional side of the doctorate. However, these groups tended to be with those who were able to access the university during the working week and, consequently, were found less in the data. There needs to be careful consideration given to how to develop such communities to those who are not physically able to access the university during conventional hours.

Students without an established peer group reported greater feelings of isolation and drops in motivation. This not only highlights the importance students themselves place on being able to speak to other students, but it also serves to illustrate the importance of PhD programmes providing opportunities to facilitate students creating networks. By creating opportunities for PhD students to be in the same geographical space, through training workshops or other post-graduate research events, there is a tacit push to help aid the development of peer relations from the university. However, this is a barrier for those who are part-time or distant learners as they are less able to attend events or be active in the research community. This creates a potential paradox as the students who most need peer support are the ones with the least opportunity to develop these relationships.

Digital communication and learning offer a new way to engage part-time and distance PhD students. Many participants in this study reported to using digital technologies to interact with peers they knew face-to-face, but there were also instances where they spoke of digital only networks. Students reported using social media to bridge the divide between themselves and other researchers and further their networking. By using social media sites such as Twitter they were able to interact with other doctoral students across the globe. It also disrupts the hierarchical nature of academia by allowing students to interact with established academics in their field.

Prior work has highlighted the importance of a vibrant research culture to a successful PhD (Phillips & Pugh, 2012; Metcalfe et al., 2018). The findings here suggest in the absence of a

physical on campus research culture, students are able to use digital technologies to simulate this culture off campus. Further in-depth work should be carried out on this phenomenon to better understand the impact this has on completion rates and doctoral success.

7.4.3 - Support from other actors

In addition to formal support supplied by the university and the informal support of peers, there are other actors who provide support.

Firstly, students require and expect continued support from employers. Deciding to undertake a practitioner research PhD is a big decision, and the participants in this study all described how important the support of their employers was when making this decision. Yet, for many, this support was not forthcoming in a practical way once they started the degree. This can lead to frustration and cause the student to change their perception of their employers. Students also reported a mix reaction from colleagues, from curiosity to hostility. For many practitioners, they described being unable to talk to colleagues due to a professional disconnect to PhD level study. This was challenging to their professional identity.

Students lack of understanding as to what a PhD is and how it functions may contribute to the breakdown over time in the support their employers feel able to provide. If students were better equipped to understand what they will need from employers at the beginning of the degree, they could arrange this with their employers early on. However, as described one of the first challenges for these students is developing a conceptualised understanding of the degree.

Secondly, students are supported by people in their personal lives. Rather than supporting their learning and development as a researcher, this support was ancillary. The support provided created mental and physical space to allow work on the research and thesis to take place. This can be activities such as looking after the children, carrying out domestic work in the household, or simply not arranging social commitments which the candidate is expected to attend (such as a holiday). There was a positive consensus from participants that they received this support and it was valued.

The experience of the PhD students presented here seem to match findings of professional doctorate students experience with their employers presented in section 2.3.3. Davis & Frame (2016) highlighted the importance of synergy between workplace and candidate to the success of the endeavour. Their research showed it was often the case employers did not understand the degree, which matches the findings here. Even though there are differences to the structure of the degree, the profile of professional doctorate students and practitioner PhD students are alike so it should be expected there are similarities between the findings of research into the professional doctorate and the findings of this study. It is therefore likely the findings here are of relevance to those undertaking or running professional doctorate degrees and expands our understanding of how all professional practitioners experience doctoral education, regardless of the form of the degree.

Mellors-bourne et al state there is little robust evidence of the impact on professional practice within the professional doctoral literature (Mellors-Bourne *et al.*, 2016, p.77). This research has demonstrated the impact doctoral level education has on professional practice. The identity work required of doctoral level study will of course apply to professional doctoral students and the findings should be directly translated to professional doctoral students also.

7.5 - Contribution to Knowledge

This section addresses the contribution to knowledge this thesis has made. The original contribution this project makes primarily comes from an expanded understanding of the experience of students studying for a PhD in their own field of professional practice.

This research has addressed a gap in the existing literature on the student experience of PhD students, by highlighting the experience of professional practitioner PhD students. Over time the doctorate has had to change to meet the needs of the knowledge society. The doctorate has become a key tool in the training of advanced knowledge workers, and the degree has had to adapt to ensure graduates have the skills required by business and industry. The numbers studying at doctoral level have been increasing sharply since the 1990s, and new types of student have been undertaking the degree. One of the results of this massification has been the introduction of the professional doctorate aimed at mid-

career professionals. There has subsequently been much research on the professional doctorate and the experience of those studying it. However, there are a significant number of students who could be studying for a professional doctorate who have chosen, for the reasons outlined in section 1.1, to study for a traditional PhD instead. As discussed in the literature review chapter, while there has been some theorising of practitioner research PhD students, there has been little empirical research which has looked specifically at this group of PhD students. Therefore, this study fills a gap in the doctoral education knowledge base. It has explored the experience of these students to understand better the challenges and barriers they face and their support needs. This research forms the basis of ideas which could lead to development of PhD programmes in universities to better support students studying for a PhD in their field of professional practice.

The findings presented in this thesis further our understanding of practitioner PhD students and add to the wider doctoral education literature. There are five key areas where this is the case. Firstly, students who are researching their field of professional practice have different support needs than other doctoral students. Due to professional workloads, they have little ongoing contact with the university outside of their supervisors. Whilst research training is vital for students who have been out of academia for some time, it is front loaded at the beginning of the programme. Once this has finished, and students move onto the planning and practical stages of the research project, their interaction with the university becomes limited. In the literature review section 2.5.5.1, the work of Nancy Jane-Lee on professional doctorate supervision highlighted how supervisors did not distinguish between the needs of professional practitioners and other doctoral students (Lee, 2009). This research found evidence to suggest that this is also the case for professional practitioner PhD students. Students require empathy from their supervisors to the demands their professional employment placed on them and how this puts limits on their involvement with their doctoral study. This changed what students expected from their supervisors.

Secondly, peer support provides students with a crucial support system during this period of interconnectedness between their professional practice and academic community of practice. As students are unable to act as full members of the PhD community, the hidden curriculum takes on greater importance for these students. Previous research has found that peer groups offer students learning opportunities and improve mental wellbeing

(Mantai & Dowling, 2015). This research found evidence which suggests a lack of peer support becomes an issue when students arrive at stuck places. Students who have not developed strong peer groups find this absence can exacerbate the issues they are having with the PhD programme. This could be due to the length of time between formal supervision sessions for the students who are studying away from their campus and/or part-time. Without other avenues of support to turn to it can lead to a loss of motivation or for the student to consider dropping out.

This research also furthers our understanding of how digital technology is being used by practitioner doctoral students. For practitioner researchers who do not primarily access the campus space, digital communication enables them to interact with peer groups and feel part of a community. Teeuwsen et al. describe how part-time students feel disconnected to campus life and rarely interact with other students (Teeuwsen et al., 2014). Digital communication enables students to overcome this barrier, and peer groups can be sustained without physical meetups. This research also finds that some students are turning to digital-first peer networks – groups of students who have met and interact almost exclusively online.

Thirdly, this research finds understanding ‘what is a PhD?’ should be considered a conceptual threshold. Developing a fully conceptualised understanding of the purpose of the degree, how it functions, and what is expected is an essential part of the process of being able to move forward with the research project. This is the first conceptual threshold many students will meet and need to cross when they begin the degree. Moving forward with the project without crossing this threshold can have long term implications if motivation is left to fill a gap in their conceptual understanding.

Fourthly, studying for a PhD causes a student to re-evaluate and modify their personal practise during their period of study. This applied to students from different disciplines and practices. The findings show that students approach their practise in a more research-informed manner. This leads to an ontological shift to their professional meaning frame which is vital to the development of their research and thesis. However, enacting change to the broader practice during their study is limited by the power the professional has in the organisation.

Fifthly, this research builds on the work of Fenton-O'Creevy et al. (2015) and adapts it to explain the level of engagement of practitioner PhD students based on their imagined trajectory. The model is used to explain there is a minimum level of engagement required of a doctoral student, but the upper ceiling of an academic apprenticeship may be out of bounds to practitioner researchers due to their professional roles. Due to there being a minimum level, there is a danger students' can be pushed by circumstances to dip below to an incompatible level of engagement. If this happens there is a risk of dropping out or being unsuccessful in their research projects. The minimum level requires engaging with identity work, not necessarily to assimilate academic practices but accommodating the practices to function within it. This is vital to be able to translate practitioner knowledge and understanding into functioning research in the form of a PhD thesis.

This research project also makes a methodological contribution to the field of education research. The phenomenological methods used in this study are not typically used in the discipline of education. I have not found any other study in doctoral education which has used a descriptive phenomenological approach. Interpretive phenomenology is the more commonly used branch of phenomenological inquiry in education studies (Dall'Alba, 2009). Descriptive phenomenology is more typically associated with qualitative psychological (Giorgi, 2009) and health research (Todres, 2005). Phenomenological research is interested in the research participants lived experience of the given phenomenon and was appropriate for this research. Within the field of doctoral education, it has been noted there is a lack of student perspective in the literature: "Relatively little empirical work includes the perspective of students. They are increasingly regarded as cogs in the system and not 'key stakeholders' (Leonard & Becker, 2009, p. 71). Since Leonard & Becker wrote those words this has been increasingly changing as the student experience is now an active part of the doctoral research culture. It is hoped working with this methodology will help to add a further methodological tool which future researchers can choose to use to understand the experience of educational phenomenon better. The steps outlined in Chapter 3, offer a working framework for education researchers to use this method.

7.6 - Limitations of this study

There are certain limitations to this study which should be highlighted.

This research captured students in the final stages of their study. This offered practical benefits as students had experienced enough of the PhD to reflect on it. However, it also has a significant downside as students at this stage of their study have a survivor bias. They are the students who have come through the challenges and barriers. As they came through them, there may be barriers and challenges which they have not appreciated were challenges and barriers in their reflections. The voices of those who may have dropped out due to overlooked challenges and barriers are then absent from the study.

This is particularly the case with the issue of professional identity. The findings presented here suggest that more senior participants had a more robust professional identity and struggled with a transformed view of their practice as a result. If this is the case, there may be many students who fall into this bracket who do not successfully complete the PhD. This would be worthy of further study.

I was also limited by the time scale I had to work with. As a full-time PhD student who was researching other (primarily part-time) PhD students doing a longitudinal study over the course of the participants entire PhD was not possible. This limited the type of methodology I was able to use. Doing multiple interviews over the course of a year was also unpractical due to the time constraints the ethical procedure placed on me. A longer longitudinal study could provide further insights into the experience.

7.7 - Summary of Chapter

Through the use of descriptive phenomenology, this study has explored the experience of PhD students who are researching their field of professional practice. This chapter has revisited the research question and aims set out at the beginning of the study and explained how these have been met. How this study has made an original contribution to knowledge has been outlined. Finally, several limitations of the study have been identified and acknowledged.

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Appendices

Appendix A - UoB recruitment advert

Dear PhD Student,

I am doctoral student working at the University of Brighton, I am looking to recruit a small number of PhD students who would be willing to be interviewed. Participants will need to be doing a PhD (rather than a professional doctorate) involving research into their professional practice.

The aim of my research is to investigate the experiences of PhD students who are researching their professional practice. The interviews will focus on your experience and perspectives of knowledge construction during the doctorate. Each interview should last around 60 minutes. I have attached the participant information sheet which provides further information.

If you are willing to take part could you please email me at j.f.waghorne@brighton.ac.uk

Thanks,

Joseph

Appendix B - External Student Advert

Dear **NAME**,

I hope you don't mind me contacting you. I'm a PhD student working at the University of Brighton, I am looking to recruit a small number of fellow PhD students who would be willing to be interviewed as part of my study.

The aim of my research is to investigate the experiences of PhD students who are researching their professional practice. Participants will need to be doing a PhD (rather than a professional doctorate) involving research into their professional practice and in the writing up phase. I was browsing the **UNIVERSITY NAME** website and your profile suggested you might be ideal for my study.

The interviews will focus on your experience and perspectives of knowledge construction during the doctorate. Each interview should last around 60 minutes and I am willing to travel to you at a time and date which works best for you.

If you are willing to take part could you please email me at j.f.waghorne@brighton.ac.uk

Thanks,

Joseph

Appendix C - Participant Information Sheet

Research Participant Information Sheet

Title of study: "Postgraduate research in professional practice: processes, challenges, supervision, support, and success"

Researcher: Joseph Waghorne, PhD Candidate, Centre for Learning and Teaching, University of Brighton. J.F.Waghorne@brighton.ac.uk

Introduction

I would like to invite you to take part in the above research project. Before you decide if you wish to take part I would like to take this opportunity to explain the purpose of the research and what will be required from participants. You may take time to decide if you wish to partake in this study and are free to say no or withdraw at any time. If you have any questions not covered on this sheet please feel free to ask.

What is the purpose of the study/project?

This study aims to investigate the experience of PhD students researching their professional practice. The study will focus on current PhD students, as well as current PhD supervisors to investigate the pedagogic and supervisory practices which support, or hinder, the construction and transfer of knowledge from PhD study into professional practice, and how PhD students overcome barriers to this.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been invited because you are a current PhD student engaged in research in your professional practice. I will be interviewing around twenty-four PhD students and twelve supervisors in total from different universities. The supervisors **will intentionally not** be recruited to match their PhD students.

What is expected from participants?

Participants will be invited to take part in a single interview. The interview will take place at a time and location convenient to you. The interviews should last between 60 to 90 minutes and will be audio recorded for transcription.

Do I have to take part?

Participation is voluntary and any participant is free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason for doing so. If you choose to withdraw there will be no negative consequences for this and it is entirely your decision.

Will I be paid for taking part?

Participation is voluntary and there will be no financial compensation for taking part.

What are the potential disadvantages or risks of taking part?

It is possible we will discuss issues in the interviews which may bring up distressing reflections from your time as a student. Whilst this is not anticipated to happen the interview can be stopped at any time by the participant.

What are the potential benefits of taking part?

Whilst there will be no financial benefits for taking part you will be contributing to the wider understanding of doctoral research. This understanding can help staff better plan and prepare doctoral programmes to fit the needs of students.

Will my taking part in the study/project be kept confidential?

Your participation with this research project will be kept confidential and all data written up from your interview will be anonymised. Each interview will be given a number and this will be used when quoting e.g. Interview 1 said “...”.

Our discussion will be audio recorded and transcribed. In line with University research practice, the recording will be kept safely and securely on our personal online drive in a password protected file. It will be kept confidential with no one else except the researcher knowing your identity. When discussing the transcription with anyone (such as my Supervisors) I will not reveal the name of the participant. The recording will be destroyed after 10 years from the interview.

You must be aware that you may reveal certain information in the interview, which if the final thesis was read by people who know you they might be able to identify you, which is a limit to the confidentiality of this research. As you are a PhD student yourself you will no doubt have been through your own ethical process. It is my duty to remind you to be careful not to reveal private material from your own studies during the interview.

In the unlikely event you disclose illegal or criminal activity, I would be obliged to breach confidentiality and seek legal advice from the University's legal advisor, as outlined in the University of Brighton's Guidance on issues in research ethics document (2017, Annex D).

What will happen to the results of the project?

The results from the study will form the basis of my PhD thesis. A copy of the final thesis can be supplied to any participant who wishes to read it. I also anticipate producing a number of journal publications from the final thesis, as well as presenting the findings at conferences.

Who is organising and funding the research?

I am conducting this research as part of a PhD in Education. The University of Brighton is funding this study as part of a PhD studentship.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been granted a favourable ethical opinion by the University of Brighton's College Research Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences.

If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of the researchers or wish to speak to someone independent of this study please contact: Gina Whisker, Centre for Learning and Teaching, University of Brighton, G.Wisker@brighton.ac.uk

Appendix D - Participant consent form

This consent form is for those who are invited to participate in research titled “**Postgraduate research in professional practice: processes, challenges, supervision, support, and success**”

Please
initial or
tick box

I agree to take part in this research which is investigating PhD students who are engaged in practitioner research.

The researcher has explained to my satisfaction the purpose, principles and procedures of the study and the possible risks involved.

I have read the information sheet and I understand the principles, procedures and possible risks involved.

I am aware that I will be required to take part in interviews which may last up to one hour.

I agree to the researcher taking making audio recordings during the interviews.

I understand how the data collected will be used, and that any confidential information will normally be seen only by the researchers and will not be revealed to anyone else.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason and without incurring consequences from doing so.

I agree that should I withdraw from the study, the data collected up to that point may be used by the researcher for the purposes described in the information sheet.

I agree that data collected may subsequently be archived and used by other bona fide researchers.

Name (please print)

Signed Date

Appendix E - Interview schedule

Research question

What is the experience of PhD students who are researching their professional practice?

Research aims

- What are PhD students' perceptions on the factors which contribute to the construction of knowledge during doctoral study into their own professional practice?
- How do PhD students, who are researching their professional practice, overcome barriers to successful knowledge construction?
- How do PhD supervisors, of students researching their professional practice, support the construction of knowledge during the PhD Process?

Three phases of the interview

- Background
- PhD
- Future

Research questions:

Can you please tell me a bit about your professional background and how you came to be doing a PhD?

- Motivation for doing a PhD
- How did you select your PhD subject?
- Did you conduct your research in your own workplace?
- Has your professional position changed over the course of the PhD? If so how has this impacted things?

Can you please describe, in as much detail as possible, your experience of doing a PhD in your professional practice?

- Supervisors
- Relationship with supervisors – email, text, phone calls, face to face, informal etc

- Support networks
- PhD curriculum – training, hidden, enacted
- Professional conflicts
- Reflecting on your own experience, what do you think are the key factors which contribute to the construction of knowledge during the PhD?
- Again reflecting on your own experience, have you faced any barriers during your PhD, and if so how did you overcome them, if indeed you did? What have been the main challenges?

What do you plan to do after the PhD?

- With the research
- Professionally
- Do you see any potential barriers to embedding your research into practice?

Appendix F - Phase 4 of Data Analysis



Appendix G – Table of themes and sub-themes (Chapter 5)

Theme (Invariant constituent the theme falls under is in bold)	Sub themes	Page
Understanding what a PhD is		
Student Expectations & Motivation	Develop a full understanding of what a PhD is in order to move forward; Motivation for doing a PhD can shape initial expectations of what the student believes a PhD is and what can be achieved	
How students learn to undertake a PhD	Training modules are vital for those who had in practice for a long time; Training modules provided a bridge between practice knowhow and academic frameworks	
The day-to-day undertaking of a PhD	Unforeseen issues are likely to arise. Researchers thinking needs to be adaptable, and research plans need to be malleable; Students can draw upon their project management experience; Students can draw upon their project management experience; Participants found writing a PhD different from other forms of writing. Regardless of their writing experience or proficiency, thesis writing was a skill which had to be honed; Writing viewed as a way to regain control of the PhD	
Formal PhD Stages/Milestones	PhD milestones can have a lasting negative impact on the PhD experience; Practitioners can feel their reviewers do not understand their field; Review process can have a positive effect on work; Students researching within the NHS face a further, challenging, milestone; Practitioners have to balance their potential learning experience with their other commitments	
Learning and support during the PhD are not limited to what is provided formally by the University		
Informal support	Peer networks play an essential role in student wellbeing; A lack of peer support can exacerbate other issues with the PhD; Digital networks can help students working remotely or those who failed to build physical peer networks; Peer networks can help to develop the researcher	
Support from employers	Support from employers at the time of deciding to do the PhD; Support from employers during the PhD did not always meet the participants' initial expectations; A lack of flexibility with working hours means students are unable to be full members of the PhD community; Reaction from colleagues can also affect how supported students feel	

Personal relationships can also provide emotional and learning support		
Supervisor relationship is the primary source of interaction between student and the University		
Participants did not know what to expect from their supervisors at the start		
Negative experiences with supervisors, the issues it can cause, and potential strategies to deal with it		
Supervisors' subject expertise in relation to participants expertise in their field		
Styles of supervision		
Contact with University support was limited for this type of students		
The PhD is only one part of the students' lives and must be managed alongside other parts		
Conflicting priorities	Undertaking the PhD part-time whilst working can be a struggle; University did not appreciate the demands practice placed on the students	
The PhD can cause issues within a student's personal life		
Doing a PhD irreversibly changes the way students view their profession		
Professional identity	Becoming a student can threaten professional identity; Professional identity and professional knowledge do not necessarily translate to the PhD	
The Impact of PhD study on professional practice during the degree	Studying for a PhD has an immediate impact on the students' professional practice; Those who were in a position to enact change within the wider practice did so	
Long term impact on practice & Post-PhD		