

DOCTORAL STUDY FROM A DISTANCE: CONSIDERATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS, SUPERVISORS AND INSTITUTIONS

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KEYWORDS

Doctoral study; distance; rural; belonging; community; inclusivity; access to learning.

SUMMARY

In March 2025 I shared a presentation as part of the Strathclyde University Doctoral Showcase on my personal narrative of undertaking a doctorate at a distance. In this good practice case study, I will share from my presentation some of the considerations and implications for students, supervisors and institutions. This is particularly relevant for institutions when considering doctoral student enrolment and supervision across a rural area and the agency that distance doctoral study can provide.

CONTEXT

Doctoral students often “go to work” on their doctorate daily, weekly on a campus being easily visible to the institution. Due to living in a rural area this was not an option for me. Undertaking a doctoral degree at a distance from the campus which was also urban based became a different space to working on campus. This space often became a forgotten place and less visible to the institution. For doctoral students in rural areas there are challenges and opportunities to be considered about their spatial presence.

WHY FROM A DISTANCE?

Undertaking doctoral study is a big decision for any student involving committing years to a specific research project. Time for developing your personal growth but also recognising that it can also involve unpredictable identity reconfigurations. Living in a geographically rural or remote setting often face a proximity to an institution as a barrier that makes it difficult to study in any other mode than by distance (Candela et al, 2009). Taking up a distance study may also be necessary to accommodate busy personal lives e.g. caring or work related. There may be health considerations and financial. Whilst UHI has a real understanding of the needs of students at a distance it does not necessarily offer access to doctorate study in all disciplines. This was the case in my own journey where the Education Doctorate was not on offer within UHI. It is therefore important to seek a university who is willing to support a distance learning approach. There are important roles for the student, supervisor and institution to play in a successful distance doctoral experience

ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES?

STUDENT

The first step is to do some homework around what the institution offers and how this will work for you at a distance. Whilst in general consideration must involve access to lectures materials, subject expertise there are other

considerations. How do you build networks who will support your area of research? You will need to be proactive and be able to articulate the support you need at distance. Whilst the university may have many support systems you would be advised to also find your own online and locally. Podcasts, online writing groups, online seminars and workshops, writing retreats are necessary. Being distant can at times feel isolating and you need to find a “tribe” to support your journey. The following strategies supported me to be proactive and own my journey (McChesney et al 2024) worked for me:

- Be proactive about getting to know people
- Be proactive about self-care
- Be proactive in developing support networks
- Be proactive. Seek help if you are struggling
- Be proactive in seeking and connecting with learning resources
- Be proactive in instigating meetings with colleagues and supervisors
- Be proactive and know when you need support
- Be proactive in contacting people
- Be proactive and find your own opportunities
- Be proactive in making contact – email, social media, X, Blue Sky, Instagram, LinkedIn

SUPERVISORS

The ongoing relationship between doctoral students and those who support, mentor and oversee their work (supervisors) is a defining characteristic of the doctoral experience. Supervision needs to be explored as to what it looks like and feels like at distance. It may be helpful for the supervisors and student to initially meet face to face if possible. If this is not possible then initial discussions about each other as people need to be undertaken to begin to build a relationship. Start well by aiming to establish strong bonds early and then make the effort to maintain and grow these bonds across time. The majority of my supervision took place online over Zoom and was easily accessible. Many of the core functions of supervision e.g. thinking and discussing together, giving/receiving feedback worked effectively through the online meeting. Effectively using email as communication tool worked well for me too. It is important to discuss the modes of communication that might work for you and your supervisors. There were times especially in write up phase that in person meetings were conducted. This did involve me in a 6 hour round trip for a 45 min meeting but was beneficial. It is essential to have supervisors who are committed to your work being at distance. They need to understand your context and be supportive of your needs. However, this cannot happen if the student does not share their needs. It is important to cultivate a shared understanding across contexts of the institution and the student’s space. This may mean as a student you have to acquaint your supervisory team of your specific context.

INSTITUTION

It is necessary for the institution to consider how they support the distance students. In my experience there were low numbers of distance doctoral students. Whilst my supervision team were very supportive and worked well with me on supervision there were areas that did not work so well. Most of the taught support sessions were in person on the urban campus and there was little flexibility on these being hybrid delivery. This was an area I had to continue to be proactive

about and raising. Slowly there was a change, and more access became available for distance students. This is an area that does need to be considered whilst undertaking a distance doctorate.

DID IT WORK?

The EdD journey at distance worked for me. I learned to survive and thrive through the experience. I developed agency to shape own journey within the complex landscape of distance doctoral education. I treated my experience as normal and not something less. I celebrated what could be achieved at distance and was always keen to promote the positives that distance doctorate was giving me. This was an important aspect of social justice as all students have the right to an equitable educational experience wherever they are. The journey was not only about survival, but I felt very much part of an institute, and found a tribe both nationally and internationally. I have felt I belonged, seen and supported.

WAS IT WORTH IT?

My distance doctorate did not proceed as initially planned due to a variety of life challenges. These included a pandemic, retirement, serious illness of family member, birth of a grandchild and a house move. However, support was there to pick up again during each of these life happenings. The importance of the supervisors' relationship could not be underestimated and to pass my viva in March 2026 was an amazing experience.

HOW CAN WE EXPAND THE EXPERIENCE?

UHI is a university which is inclusive and where learning means more. We offer flexible and supported learning from access level to PhD. Where students can start where they need to and progress as far as they want, at a pace that is right for them (UHI Strategy 2030). This vision situates UHI as a key institution to support distance doctoral students. Achievements of distance doctoral students need to be celebrated and their journeys shared. If a distance doctorate within UHI is not available, then we need to be able to support our people to access one and be equipped with the knowledge on how to be proactive. By sharing my experience, I hope this will support many learners to take the next stage to doctoral journey and for UHI as an institution to promote the distance doctoral experience. In my experience I have strived to advocate that distance study has not been inferior, not too hard, not a lesser opportunity, not second best and by taking this route I needed to set my own compass and to rely on strategies to support my journey.

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