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The balancing act: combining higher level study with work and family life

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Abstract

This research investigates the strategies employed by part-time postgraduate students to overcome the challenges associated with undertaking study alongside full-time teaching careers and busy family lives. Using purposeful sampling, qualitative data was collected via telephone interviews with participants on two masters' programmes in the UK, both primarily aimed at school teachers. The findings strongly suggest that students were able to overcome the perceived challenge of balancing the demands placed on their time and energy to achieve a work-life-study balance by developing specific time-management, personal organisation and self-reward strategies. Similarly, a range of support mechanisms, both formal and informal, were utilised or constructed with particular value placed by the study's participants on the collaborative networks and discussions that they were able to have with fellow students. These collaborative encounters are represented as communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) in this paper. The strategies and mechanisms identified through this research are offered as a heuristic to other students who are invited to consider them as possibilities in navigating their own way through similar, challenging terrain. There are also implications for educators supporting part-time postgraduate learners which, again, are offered for heuristic consideration.

> Keywords: work-life-study balance; part-time masters', CPD, learners' motivation

(Abstract word count 199)

Introduction

The disparity between students in respect of the ease with which they negotiate their studies is not peculiar to part-time masters' programmes, as is evident in the work of others such as Klenowski et al (2011) and Bowyer (2012). Balancing study with part or full-time work and, for some, family life, is likely to present a challenge for anyone

trying to undertake all three and engage in any other activities simultaneously (Dowswell et al, 1998). Such challenges are well documented in the literature but, as lecturers and programme leaders involved in part-time postgraduate provision we, the authors, observed significant differences in the 'felt' difficulty that learners experienced in respect of juggling the competing demands on their time and energy. Whilst some seem to manage without trying very hard to do so, others protest that they do not have the time to complete the course work and require substantial assistance to navigate their way through their masters' degrees. As Kember (1999) notes, students begin their studies with varying degrees of competing demands on their time from work, family and social sources, yet the extent of these demands on individual learners is not necessarily mirrored in their levels of 'felt' difficulty. Neither does it appear to be reflected in their capacity to achieve a work-life-study balance which enables them to complete their course of study successfully.

'Work-life-study' balance

Since the launch of a major government campaign in 2000 (*Changing Patterns in a Changing World*, DfEE, 2000), 'work-life' balance has been widely discussed. It is based on the notion that paid work and personal life should be seen as complementary and equally important rather than as in competition with each other (Manfredit and Holliday, 2004). In reality though, this involves constant juggling (Bell et al, 2012) and whilst 'work-life' balance may have received a considerable amount of attention in academic publications, there is a paucity of literature that brings studying into the equation. If balancing the demands of the workplace and personal life is a difficult task (Hill et al, 2001), it seems safe to assume that introducing the additional dimension of study will render such balancing even more of a challenge. The potential magnitude of such a challenge therefore begs the questions 'what motivates people to undertake part-time postgraduate degrees and how is that motivation sustained?'

Motivation to study

In the context of this study, motivation is understood to be influenced by an individual's beliefs and values, and constructed through their prior experiences. The motivation or intention to learn is taken to mean 'a person's tendency to find learning activities

meaningful and to benefit from them' (Wlodkowski, 1999: 4), although the learner may not be aware of their own intent (Segers and van der Haar, 2011). Also accepted by the authors is the idea that 'individual people are microcosms of their social environments' (Fook and Gardner, 2007:15). It follows therefore that what motivates individuals to learn will be driven by what is generally perceived to be important or desirable within their specific socio-cultural context. If activities associated with professional development are valued, people are likely to be motivated to participate in them. Ediger (2011) argues that both newly qualified and experienced teachers should be 'well-educated to provide for all pupils in the school setting' (2011: 850) and recommends participation in masters' degrees for the enhancement of school-place teaching. This view echoes that of the last and previous Labour governments whose initiatives to encourage teachers to undertake masters' degrees included the provision of funding for both of the programmes completed by participants in this study (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007).

The current government also emphasises the importance of professional learning for teachers (Department for Education, 2010 and 2011) but makes explicit their expectation that teachers should take responsibility for their own continuing professional development (Burn et al, 2010). As Opfer et al observe...

> Professional development is largely considered an individual teacher's decision ... the effectiveness of professional development activities is therefore dependent on teachers' perceptions of professional learning activities (2012: 4).

Although teachers may depend upon the support that they receive from supervisors, tutors, family, friends and colleagues during their studies (Haggis, 2002), it is ultimately their own responsibility-taking that enables them to complete their masters' degrees. Their motivation to begin and to continue postgraduate study is also associated with its perceived value as a form of professional development. It is therefore interesting to note Anderson et al's (2008) conclusion that individuals' motivations to complete their courses of study are largely intrinsic, rather than being rooted in the more extrinsic goal of career advancement.

A further influence on student motivation is investigated by Jamieson et al's (2009) research into the benefits of part-time higher education study. The central focus of this work is the significance that is placed on the perceived increases in three areas of *capital* - human capital, identity capital and social capital. Jamieson et al conclude that identity capital in particular is greatly improved through the achievement of academic qualifications. Although such achievement may also enhance human capital by increasing employment opportunities, this is not perceived to be as important to students as the impact that their achievements have on their sense of self or growth in self-esteem (Anderson et al, 2008).

It appears, then, that a number of motivating factors are likely to be at play when a teacher enrols on a part-time master's degree programme, many of which will remain influential throughout the course of study. What is less clear in the literature is the impact of motivating factors on individuals' perceptions of their 'work-life-study' balance.

Balancing strategies

Opfer et al suggest that ....

> The choice to participate in any professional learning activity occurs at the intersection of individual orientation to learning and school orientation to learning (2011:20).

In other words, a teacher is able to commit to a course of study if they are confident that they will be supported in their endeavours by the school and by their colleagues. As already inferred, other important sources of support are family, friends, peers and the academic staff attached to the chosen programme of study (Haggis, 2002). Support might take the form of encouragement, mentoring, supervision or the provision of a 'sounding board'. In other instances, support might mean that others take on some of the student's tasks and responsibilities, either at home or elsewhere. Kember (1999) identifies this as a renegotiation of social status or position that enables study time and space to be created. Kember also notes the need for the student and others, such as their families, to make some sacrifices during the period of study. He concludes that those who do not adopt coping mechanisms are less likely to complete their course of study,

but he does not consider how the learning environment or programme staff might contribute to or assist with the development of such mechanisms or strategies.

In our work with teachers engaged in part-time postgraduate study, it became evident that contact time with others who were further forward with their studies and happy to share their experiences was greatly valued by those students in the early stages of their programmes. Undertaking research is frequently a solitary activity and, in this respect, it contrasts significantly with the more interpersonal nature of teaching (Cordingley, 2008). Given the research focus of the two programmes at the centre of this investigation and the extent of independent study involved, this contrast may explain something of the value placed on such contact time. Further, Cowan (2012) argues that communities of practice are highly effective in maintaining participants' engagement and achieving high levels of completion of masters' programmes. The opportunities afforded to students that enable them to spend time with other, more experienced programme participants mirrors the *peripheral participation* of newcomers that is generally to be found in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). In time and as their competence and confidence develops, the newer students move from peripheral to full participation and find themselves sharing their own experiences with others in the early stages of their respective learning journeys.

The rationale for this research

Anecdotal accounts and more formal evaluations from our own students indicated that what they found particularly valuable was hearing how others had approached the challenges associated with undertaking part-time study whilst working and attempting to maintain something of a personal life. It was with this work-life-study balancing act in mind that this research was undertaken: we wanted to understand better how we could help to facilitate both local and wider sharing of experience and balancing strategies. This study therefore brings together accounts from past students who have all managed to complete a part-time postgraduate programme successfully whilst working and maintaining a family life. The intention is to develop a better understanding of how students manage to achieve a 'work-life-study' balance and to offer some ideas which others, both students and educators, might find useful. Specifically, we focus on:

- The challenges students experience when combining study with work and family life
- How students are able to sustain their motivation throughout their period of study
- The strategies and mechanisms that students employ and utilise to overcome the challenges they face
- The implications for educators working with students in similar situations

Unlike similar studies, this investigation acknowledges the situated and complex nature of learning and the unique and individual experiences of learners (Anderson et al, 2008) whilst adopting a pragmatic approach that aims to offer a heuristic to other part-time learners and their educators. Any such offerings are given cautiously and there is no intention to establish universal truths: instead, our conclusions are presented for each learner and educator to consider and adapt.

The research context

This study was conducted in an education faculty and brings together the views and experiences of participants from two masters' level programmes: the Masters in Education (MEd) and the Masters in Teaching & Learning (MTL) programmes. Participants in the study were full-time teachers who had all successfully completed their respective masters' programmes at the same university within the previous two years.

Given the apparent significant differences in the felt difficulties that learners experienced in respect of achieving a work-life-study balance, it seemed clear that gathering data from past students who had all managed to successfully negotiate a part-time master's programme whilst working and maintaining a family life, would provide some useful insights for current and future students, both on our own and other part-time postgraduate programmes.

The participants

Ten former postgraduate students were purposively selected (Cohen et al, 2011) to engage with this study based on the following criteria:

- They had successfully completed their masters' studies
- They worked full-time during their studies
- They had families (with either shared or sole responsibility for their children)

Clearly, there are limitations associated with purposive sampling and with using such a small sample: it could certainly be argued that the views collated here can only make a modest contribution to this area of research. Nevertheless, as researchers we align ourselves with Holst's (2009) position that those engaged in research should avoid philosophical ignorance: we have had lengthy conversations about what does or does not constitute a truth and accept that an individual's reality is just that. By adopting a pragmatic approach and focusing on usefulness (Giacobbi et al, 2005; Baert, 2005; Bernstein, 2010), we believe that the qualitative data collected during this investigation enables some helpful conclusions to be drawn. It is important to note that this study does not lay claim to offering fool-proof techniques for maintaining a work-life-study balance. Instead, it offers some helpful possibilities for better balancing and a heuristic for consideration by those wishing to benefit from the experience of others.

Method and data analysis

Qualitative data were collated via telephone interviews using a pre-constructed set of questions. The semi-structured interview questions were open-ended enough to allow participants to express their perspectives freely whilst still allowing for the generation of comparable data (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2013). The interviews sought to elicit participants' views and feelings regarding their higher-level study, in so far as what they found challenging, what motivated them to continue studying and what strategies they employed that enabled them see their studies through to a successful conclusion. Participants were also provided with an opportunity to speak freely about their experiences and raise any additional points which had not been addressed through the pre-set questions.

Data generated from the interviews were thematically coded and analysed using the first three areas of focus identified earlier: the challenges experienced by students when combining study with work and family life, the motivating factors that persisted

throughout their course of study, and the enablers, strategies and mechanisms utilised to complete it.

Findings

Theme 1: Challenges

The dominant factor cited by all respondents when asked what they found most challenging about undertaking part-time study was time management and having to juggle the competing demands on their time. This is illustrated in comments from different participants ...

> The most challenging aspect for me was juggling time. The stress of balancing home and work life and introducing study time into this as well (Participant C).

> Time management was a real challenge, as I had only just started as an NQT [newly qualified teacher] and was busy trying to get my head around the teaching job' (Participant D).

The act of juggling the competing demands on time was clearly experienced as stressful. This echoes findings from Arthur et al's study (2006) which identified that a lack of time, caused by having too many other personal and professional commitments, hindered postgraduate students in completing their assessment tasks. As will become apparent, students participating in this study were able to formulate strategies to manage this issue and their own associated feelings of being under stress.

A further challenge noted by more than half of the participants was their anxiety at completing academic work at masters' level. Some held concerns over specific aspects of writing at this level and/or not being sure of what would be expected of them. Others had been out of academia for some time and were anxious that they had forgotten how to approach academic work. The following extracts from interviewees' responses highlight these points:

> I was concerned that there seemed to be a big jump from undergraduate work to postgraduate (Participant A).

> Reading around the subject for the literature review part of the dissertation and understanding ethical principles associated within educational research was challenging (Participant E).

> I found it challenging initially to get back into higher level study after a break from academia. To begin with, it was tricky to know what was expected of me (Participant G).

In addition to the challenges associated with time management then, the other most frequently cited challenge lay in the students' own perceptions of their levels of academic competence.

Theme 2: Motivating factors

(i) Support from others

One of the recurrent themes that emerged from participants' views on what had helped to maintain their motivation during their studies was the instrumental role of the tutor in this. All respondents made reference to the level of support received by their allocated university tutor and the significant extent to which this had helped them to remain on track and complete their studies. This is demonstrated in the following contributions from interviewees:

> Regular tutorials with my tutor were a motivating factor as I always came away with a new focus to work towards (Participant B).

> Face to face tutorials were invaluable as they helped me not to feel isolated as a distance learner (Participant D).

> I found the goal setting element of tutorials helpful, as I came away feeling accountable and the fact that I had to commit to producing something by a particular date was certainly motivational (Participant H).

> Having email contact with my tutor at key points was useful as it kept me going in the right direction and prevented me from just 'floating out on my own' (Participant J).

However, it was not just tutor support that featured highly on participants' lists of motivational factors. The majority of respondents (eight out of ten) acknowledged how important the support received from others had been in helping them to stay focused and on track. Participants mentioned a range of support networks that they had drawn upon whilst completing their masters' level studies, with the most common being family

members, friends and work colleagues. One respondent, for example, noted how it was hugely beneficial to know that another teacher at their school was also working on a masters' qualification, enabling them to empathise and 'bounce ideas off each other'. There are parallels here with the findings of Anderson et al (2008) and Haggis (2002) who also identify the benefits of support networks in helping postgraduate students to complete their studies.

Support from family members was also highlighted by most respondents. As one participant commented, the on-going encouragement and support that he received from his wife and mother were significant motivational factors in helping him to see his studies through to completion.

Feeling supported by or receiving support from others appears to be an overwhelmingly significant motivational factor for participants in this study. All respondents made reference to this and most cited the support network available to them through the University as being particularly beneficial in sustaining their focus and drive:

> The Masters' Practitioner Days were a life-line. The chance to connect with others and be in an environment that was mutually supportive was very motivational (Participant B).

> The support days at the University helped to keep me on track. It showed me that the masters was possible and manageable to do as others had gone through it and survived (Participant F).

> Some of the presenters at the Practitioner Days who had completed their dissertations and shared their experiences were really helpful. A real motivator was those who explained how they had tackled their work. I went away thinking 'I can actually do this!'(Participant H).

As these comments demonstrate, having opportunities to discuss research ideas with other students (former and current) was perceived as extremely motivational. This corroborates Tobbell and Donnell's findings, highlighting that ...

> The necessity for wider relationships in the new community was emphasised by nearly all participants; they discussed the need to spend time with fellow students and seek their experience and advice (2013:132).

Both Tobbell and Donnell's research and this study support Cowan's (2012) assertion that communities of practice are highly effective in maintaining participants'

engagement in and completion of masters' programmes. The Practitioner Days referred to above are semi-facilitated weekend sessions that bring together students at varying stages of their studies: they create a forum for peripheral and full participation in a community of practice. The data from this study emphasise the value that the participating part-time students place on face-to-face contact with peers. Although all of the participants in this research had access to a virtual learning community, none explicitly mentioned this as helpful in maintaining their motivation to complete their studies: only face-to-face conversations and networking are identified as valuable. It seems evident then that educators who are leading such part-time programmes consider how best to enable and support students to engage in 'actual' collaborative conversations and communities of practice. However, it is also worth noting the absence of reference by participants in the study to virtual or digital learning communities. Our students might be 'digital natives' or 'digital immigrants' and there is clearly a need for us, as educators in universities, to familiarise ourselves with the complexities associated with scholarly virtual network participation (Berman and Hassell, 2014). As Smith (2012) points out, sufficient research is still not in place to enable us to fully understand how technology can best address the range of students' needs and this is particularly evident in respect of scholarly, virtual communities of practice.

(ii) Having something 'to prove'

Seven out of ten participants in this research mentioned that their desire to prove something to themselves or to someone else was critical in helping them to maintain their motivation to complete their course of study. The following example of one participant's determination to succeed is representative of a number of similar responses:

> What motivated me was the fact that I'd started so I told myself that I would finish. I had reached a point where I had invested so much time that I didn't want to give in (Participant C).

Other participants described how they were driven by their determination to prove something to others, as well as themselves:

> When I was at school in 1983 my form tutor told me 'university isn't for the likes of you'. I wanted to prove this person wrong! (Participant F).

> I messed up at school and university. I wanted to show that I could apply myself and achieve academically. I wanted to get a 'monkey off my back' (Participant I),

These articulations of the personal significance of demonstrating academic capability and the associated implications for increasing self-worth and self-esteem support Jamieson et al's (2009) 'identity capital' theory of what motivates students to learn. Participants who had previously seen themselves or been labelled as academically deficient were driven to prove to themselves or others that this was not the case by successfully completing their masters' degrees.

(iii) Professional development

Less frequently commented upon but still worth mentioning here is that four of the ten participants in this research experienced studying something that they perceived as highly relevant to their own practice as very motivational. One person stated that...

> The direct impact of my studies in my own classroom was very motivational. I could see that what I was studying and applying was making a difference to the children, parents and colleagues (Participant B).

This view is also echoed in the following response:

> Studying for my masters had such an immediate impact on me as a teacher and my own self-confidence grew out of this. I was able to choose a research focus that was directly relevant to my own practice (Participant C).

The emphasis placed on practical application and professional development in comments such as these does not specifically challenge Anderson et al's (2008) conclusion that career advancement in itself is not a significant motivator for students. However, it is evident that relevance to practice and a corresponding growth in confidence in the classroom were perceived as motivational by some participants. It could therefore be assumed that such professional development will, in turn, have implications for the future career advancement of the individuals in question, should their increased confidence levels lead them to seek such advancement.

Further, if practical relevance is seen as significant in maintaining motivation to complete masters' studies, it seems evident that students should give careful consideration to the focus of their research during their studies. Where there is freedom of choice in research focus, as there is likely to be for most masters' programmes to a greater or lesser extent, students (and their tutors) might question both the extent to which practical relevance is important to them and how it is likely to be facilitated by their research focus.

Theme 3: Enablers and strategies employed by students

Participants in this research were asked about the strategies that they had employed to manage the different demands on their time whilst they were studying and, by implication, minimise the potential detrimental impact that these competing demands might have on their motivation. In response, all participants made reference to the importance of organising their own time, citing a range of strategies which included blocking out time to study, setting time limits for study and breaking work down into 'manageable chunks'.

Most participants explained how they had used the strategy of 'blocking out time to study' to enable them to make progress and, ultimately, complete their dissertations. For example, one person explained how she tried to make every minute count by getting up early, before her children and husband were awake, and making a concentrated effort with her studies for a couple of hours at the beginning of the day. A number of participants mentioned using school holidays to write as their work demands were reduced during these periods.

Kember suggests that 'negotiating sanctuaries of time or space for study' (1999: 109) is a useful mechanism in helping part-time students to successfully integrate study with work and family life. This was highlighted by several of the participants in this research who felt that setting aside specific periods of time for studying and/or identifying a study 'space' helped them to differentiate study from family life and work commitments. One person talked about the importance of 'booking days in the diary for study work and sticking to them' and others mentioned their 'study table' or their 'quiet room' in the house or making use of the university library.

Strategies to avoid feeling overly daunted by the work associated with their masters'
degrees were employed by most participants in this research. For example, some people
described how they had found it helpful to break the work down into chunks. It enabled
them to feel like they could accomplish the work and went some way towards
reassuring them that the final dissertation was 'feasible' and 'manageable'.

Other aspects of personal organisation were also identified as helpful in maintaining
motivation and momentum. For example, two participants made particular reference to
the usefulness of devising and using a Gantt chart (see Portz, 2014) to enable visual
monitoring of their own progress:

> I found using a Gantt chart very helpful. Tasks did move and needed to be
> revised but the chart gave me a focus. I also found it motivating when I could
> change a task from 'red' (still to do) to 'green' (completed)' (Participant D).

> I devised a Gantt chart and really stuck to it. I found having clear deadlines
> helped to provide me with short quick wins and kept me focused (Participant B).

A further strategy for maintaining momentum that was mentioned by almost half of the
participants was their use of rewards as a means of helping them to complete their
studies:

> I organised quick wins for myself and little treats e.g. coffee with a friend when
> I had written x number of words (Participant B).

> I rewarded myself with family time on Friday and Saturday evenings
> (Participant D).

> I created landmarks/milestones e.g. 1000 words written and then I rewarded
> myself by going out for ice-cream, for example! (Participant F).

Finally, the support provided by family, friends, colleagues and university tutors has
already been discussed as a key motivating factor. What is also worth highlighting is
that all of the participants in this study took advantage of the support offered by others
and actively sought support when they required it.

Conclusion

This investigation utilised purposive sampling with ten participants in a particular context to determine the challenges that these students experienced when combining study with work and family life. It also explored how they were able to sustain their motivation throughout their period of study and the strategies and mechanisms that they employed to overcome the challenges they faced in order to achieve a work-life-study balance. The implications of our findings, both for ourselves and for other educators working with students in similar situations, are also touched upon.

The limited sample size and contextualised nature of the research dictate that the findings cannot be offered as representative of all part-time postgraduate degree students. Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the study's methodological limitations, we believe that the reflections and perceptions of the participants shared through this research present some helpful insights for consideration by other students entering into postgraduate study faced with a work-life-study balance to negotiate. These insights are offered as a heuristic: they are possibilities to be considered that might assist part-time students in achieving such a balance. Each student is invited to consider which strategies will particularly suit them and how they can best utilise the support that is available to them. Participants in this study identified that such support might be accessed through university provision, both in the form of their tutors and through entering into communities of practice with fellow students or colleagues who have previously undertaken similar courses of study. Additionally, other practical support offered by work colleagues, family and friends was also found to be helpful in maintaining motivation. Strategies for personal organisation that have been identified here and can be considered by others include carving out time and space, breaking work down into 'manageable chunks' and making use of tools such as Gantt charts. Personal determination to succeed is also identified as a critical contributor to motivation levels for many students, as is the use of self-reward.

Participants in this study particularly valued the time spent with fellow students in communities of practice where collaborative discussion, networking and shared reflection had taken place: both students and educators alike might question the adequacy of current provision in this respect. For students, investigating what is on offer and making best use of it is likely to prove fruitful. Similarly, educators might question

the extent to which entry into comparable communities of practice is facilitated, encouraged or provided for in connection with their respective programmes. What is also apparent from this research is that virtual learning communities were not particularly valued by the participants as a source of support to help maintain their motivation levels. This tentative conclusion, together with the dearth of relevant literature (Smith, 2012), points to a need for further research to investigate what, if anything, might increase the efficacy of virtual communities of practice in the provision of motivational support to and for students.

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