Case Studies

Throughout this book we have used real-life case studies to illustrate different aspects of the doctoral journey. These excerpts are drawn from our own experiences of doing a doctorate and supporting doctoral students. All names and where appropriate, some of the details in these case studies have been changed. The case studies are presented here in alphabetical order and we have indicated in which chapter(s) they appear.

# Alfredia (features in chapters three and nine)

Alfredia is a senior lecturer undertaking a part-time doctorate in her home institution. The faculty where she works has a policy whereby academics can apply for funding for a six month sabbatical to support writing up their doctoral thesis. Competition amongst academics to secure this funding has increased over the last few years. Funding is only available for only one or two sabbaticals each academic year. Certain checks and balances are in place and acquiring this support is not guaranteed. One of the factors influencing the allocation of funding is the student’s progress to their point of application. Alfredia was mindful of this during the early part of her doctorate and this was one of the motivators that kept her ‘on track’.

Some years later, Alfredia submitted her thesis and had her viva. Although she successfully passed her viva, Alfredia was initially disappointed to be given a year to amend her thesis. She had previously secured a six month sabbatical to write up her thesis and had used the time wisely. Alfredia now felt embarrassed that her thesis required further work and was frustrated that her supervisory team had let her submit work that required further attention. Alfredia and her supervisory team reviewed the required amendments and she then realised that they were not as extensive as she had assumed. Her supervisory team felt sure Alfredia had been given a year to make the amendments out of recognition of her extensive workload.

# Cora (features in chapters two, three, five, six and eight)

When Cora was deciding whether to embark on a doctorate, her family and friends were encouraging, as were some of her current and former colleagues. Cora raised the issue at her annual IPR but her line manager, Helen, was discouraging. Helen said Cora would find it too difficult, it would not benefit her career and that attaining a doctorate would also not benefit the team. Nevertheless, Cora pursued her doctorate and during the course of her studies, her line manager changed. Her second line manager was much more supportive and took every opportunity to offer encouragement. On completion of her doctorate, Cora reflected on many aspects of her experiences and remains hurt by the stance Helen took. However, Cora has rationalised this and now believes that Helen felt intimidated by the prospect of Cora working towards and achieving a doctorate.

Cora undertook a part-time doctorate. She opted to do this at an external institution. Whilst funding to an external institution was available, the head of her home institution’s doctoral college tried to dissuade her. He questioned the appropriateness and calibre of the external institution. Whilst Cora’s decision was primarily based on the subject-specialist knowledge at the external institution, she also felt being unknown would enable her to be herself and to some extent, to ‘reinvent herself’. This would therefore remove any ‘baggage’ associated with studying her doctorate at her home institution. The external institution was within walking distance from her place of work. Cora had sufficient control over her diary to be able to build-in walking time without compromising her allocated study time. She therefore lengthened her working day to compensate for the time she spent walking to / from the external institution. Cora also found this gave her invaluable time to think which she was unable to build in to any other part of her day.

Cora was not required to attend the taught component of the doctorate she was undertaking at an external institution. This was because she secured academic credit for her prior research activity. In some respects this meant Cora was more isolated than other doctoral students at the institution. Her supervisory team was concerned about this and ensured she was invited to relevant research-related meetings and events. Cora attended the events that she could, but this was difficult to build into her schedule. Cora’s supervisory team endeavoured to secure her a desk to use in the research office, in the hope that this would enable her to network with other researchers at the institution. However, this never materialised. Cora was nevertheless, unconcerned about being isolated. Instead this suited her as she felt that she was able to completely focus on her doctorate without distractions.

Cora had just one supervisor during her doctorate. She was not aware at the start of her studies that this was unusual. It was only when she talked to colleagues undertaking their doctorate at other institutions that she became aware that her situation was different. However, she was unconcerned about this. Cora felt that she had a good relationship with her supervisor and that she benefited from a consistent approach to her supervision. The doctoral college at the institution had a strong presence and Cora felt that she was aware of individuals she could go to if difficulties with her supervisor had arisen.

The approvals for Cora’s study required her to give prospective participants a minimum of 24 hours to decide whether they would take part. To identify potential participants Cora enlisted the help of Hesta and Claude at the study site. Cora ensured they were familiar with the study’s inclusion/exclusion criteria and were aware of Cora’s availability. Hesta and Claude made arrangements for Cora to meet with potential participants to discuss the study and to explain what taking part would involve. Cora returned to the study site the following day to see if the potential participant was willing to take part and where relevant, to take informed consent and arrange data collection. This process, including the involvement of Hesta and Claude was outlined in Cora’s study approvals. Fortunately the study site was a short distance from Cora’s place of work, so she was able to travel quickly between both places. Nevertheless during the participant recruitment phase, Cora was at the study site on numerous occasions, often daily and usually in the early evening after work or at the weekend.

As identified earlier, at the time that Cora commenced her doctorate, her line manager, Helen, was unsupportive. Helen questioned the value to the team and the institution of Cora achieving her doctorate. Whilst her line manager’s attitude was frustrating, it made Cora all the more determined to find a way to continue her studies and to ultimately succeed. Generally, Cora preferred to keep a low-profile at the institution regarding her doctorate and her line manager’s attitude enabled her to do this.

Cora chose not to have a mock viva. She had a viva as part of her Masters assessment and also when attaining her professional qualification. In addition, she regularly conducted viva with undergraduate students. Cora therefore felt comfortable with the process. Throughout her doctorate, she had close interactions with the small team of academics in the department of the institution where she was undertaking her doctorate. She was also required to present a summary of her doctorate to the team six months before she submitted her thesis. Cora therefore felt she had received the academics’ feedback and support throughout her doctorate. Rather than having a mock viva, Cora worked with her supervisor to identify potential questions and her likely responses.

# Davina (features in chapter four)

Davina has a long established career in academia. The focus of her research was an area she is passionate about and has spent the vast majority of her career working in. Some years into her doctoral research, problems emerged which revealed a complete lack of planning in relation her study. Davina had little idea of the most appropriate approach for her study and had muddled on, in spite of the pleas by her supervisor to meet up to discuss her plans. She often allowed weeks to pass by without engaging in her research. This was followed by a hectic period of collecting a copious amount of data without a clear vision of where she was heading and the desired outcomes for the research. Her problems were compounded when her supervisor suddenly left the institution in which Davina was registered. It took time to find a replacement supervisor, who did their best to try to help. However, following an unsuccessful viva which had to be convened due to Davina’s period of registration expiring, she quit her doctoral studies. She states the problems were insurmountable and the impact on her health and well-being was just too much to even think about trying to complete.

# Doctoral Forum (features in chapter seven)

The Doctoral Forum meets monthly on a Friday lunchtime and is specifically for academics undertaking a part-time doctorate either at the institution or externally. The forum provides a safe place to discuss issues confidentially. It provides an opportunity for academics to share their doctoral experiences and challenges and the strategies they have used. Guest speakers are sometimes invited, on other occasions attendees lead the discussion. Sometimes the discussion is more informal and the attendees appreciate that the Doctoral Forum gives them the space in which to do that. The forum recently moved online as a consequence of the covid-19 pandemic and it became an important way of combatting feelings of isolation. Attendees commented that fitting in the online forum into their busy schedule was easier than endeavouring to attend a face-to-face event.

# Floyd (features in chapter six)

Floyd was undertaking a part-time doctorate whilst working as a fulltime academic. He quickly began to find that maintaining contact with participants was much more time-consuming than he had initially anticipated. His concern about this was heightened when preparing for his next supervisory meeting. He became aware that he had ‘lost’ contact with two participants. He realised his strategies for record-keeping were inadequate and discussed more effective ways of doing this with his supervisory team. It was agreed that he would set up email alerts to himself at key timepoints to remind him to contact participants. He set time aside every Monday and Thursday to review the state of progress with each participant. On most occasions this review took only a matter of minutes.

Floyd felt the strategy he had developed to maintain contact with his study participants was successful. However, some months later the covid-19 pandemic had a sudden impact on his doctoral progression. All programmes at Floyd’s institution had to very quickly be reconfigured for online delivery. A unilateral institution decision was made about the reallocation of workloads. This meant Floyd’s academic responsibilities suddenly increased exponentially. All face-to-face research at the institution was immediately stopped. However, Floyd felt that he wanted to try to continue working on his doctorate. In consultation with his supervisory team it was decided that he ‘revisit’ his literature review during this time. Floyd found the best way for him to do this was to work on his doctorate 05.00-07.00 before the rest of the household woke up. During this time he read and annotated papers and created thematic tables for his revised literature review. With the help of his supervisory team, Floyd negotiated with his line manager that any study time scheduled during this period of reconfigured workloads would be carried over to a time when Floyd would be able to take it.

# Francis (features in chapter seven)

Francis is a lecturer and current doctoral student. He writes: if I had to say anything it would be please don’t feel guilty or beat yourself up. Whenever I start to analyse what I haven’t managed to do I then I find it harder to do anything at all. Don’t put yourself under any pressure to achieve anything in particular. However, if things are really difficult because of work or family commitments then just try to accept that now is perhaps not the time and no-one is going to blame you for that.

My message is do what you can when you can and forget about the rest….The one tip I have is to remember that this is an iterative process in which we all learn and grow. As with all growth it is dependent on what is going on around us and within us and may even direct us where we were least expecting. Hopefully and thankfully it is always towards the light, which may be flickering, dim or just embers but it will burn bright again soon…..this too will pass.

I think the one tip that springs to mind is to talk to others even if you feel behind or an imposter. The Doctoral Forum and attending one of the Post Graduate Researcher sessions earlier in the week have been helpful in creating a community and being able to listen to others.

# Harriet and Keith (feature in chapter nine)

Harriet and Keith are lecturers who undertook their part-time doctorates at the same time but at different institutions. They had known each other for many years and were members of the same professional organisation. Their doctorates were around the same broad subject area but they pursued completely different studies, using different methodologies with different study populations. On completion of their doctorates they realised that there was potential to combine their literature reviews and this ultimately resulted in a book which was published two years later.

# Hattie (features in chapter seven)

Hattie is an academic undertaking a part-time doctorate in her home institution. The doctoral programme required her to undertake the ‘in-house’ Post Graduate Certificate in Research. She attended the first few sessions of the taught component. However, she stopped attending because of her workload commitments. Hattie felt this was the right thing to do because in the sessions she had attended, she did not feel that she had learned anything new. Hattie felt comfortable with the requirements of the two assignments, both of which had to be passed before she could proceed with her doctorate. Hattie did not seek tutorial support from her supervisors and they assumed that because she had not asked for guidance, she did not need any support. When the results were published, Hattie was horrified to discover that she had achieved a borderline pass for one piece of work and had failed the other.

Having received feedback on her two assignments, Hattie met with her supervisory team. Initially Hattie felt embarrassed and then became antagonistic as they discussed her work. Hattie’s supervisors explained their feedback giving examples of areas needing development. Hattie was not receptive at this point to what her supervisors were saying. Consequently, the meeting ended abruptly and it was agreed that they would meet again the following week. By the time of the second meeting, Hattie felt more calm and had reflected on her prior assumptions about her level of knowledge, her critical thinking skills and her supervisors’ feedback. At this second meeting an action plan was agreed. This indicated both what Hattie would do and the support that her supervisors would provide.

# Karl (features in chapter five)

Karl had reached year four of his part-time doctorate when he secured a more senior post at an academic institution 200 miles away. Karl’s family therefore relocated. His new employer made it clear to Karl that he was expected to transfer his doctorate to his new place of work. Karl was happy to do this. However, he was disappointed that in order to comply with the new institution’s regulations, only one of his original supervisors was able to continue his supervision. His newly appointed internal supervisor was mindful of the potential impact of the transfer on Karl’s doctorate and put strategies in place to support him. However, looking back, Karl felt the transfer had put his doctorate back by at least six months. His new supervisory team needed this amount of time to gel and he also had to complete the procedural requirements associated with the transfer.

# Mary (features in chapter seven)

Mary, a lecturer and current doctoral student writes here about a technique she has developed which has helped her to ‘get words on the page’. I have started to record the chats and supervisions I have with my supervisors because I am much better at verbally articulating some ideas than writing them. I have then been simply transcribing some of this so that it gives me a basis for further writing and filling in the gaps with references etc. I find writing something I have already said word-for-word quite therapeutic, it makes me feel as though I have produced something and I then do not need to do the thinking process twice.

# Mercy (features in chapter two)

Mercy completed a part-time doctorate at the institution in which she was employed full time. After some time she was looking for a change in the direction of her employment to something that was more challenging. Mercy started to look outside of her institution as she was not aware of any internal opportunities but had little success. Some months later, a senior member of the management team who had attended a presentation of Mercy’s doctoral work approached Mercy and said she was keen to invite Mercy to join her team to work on a specific project. The secondment subsequently became a permanent move leading to much greater job satisfaction for Mercy.

# Ned (features in chapters five and eight)

Ned had thought long and hard about undertaking his doctorate and who might be best placed to supervise him. He had known Professor Davies for over a decade and they had previously worked together on a number of research projects. This meant they understood each other’s preferred ways of working and were comfortable discussing issues of a more personal nature that may impact significantly on Ned’s doctoral journey. This included the likelihood that Professor Davies would have to take a significant period of sick leave in the near future, as well as the breakdown of Ned’s long standing personal relationship and subsequently having to negotiate access to his children. Knowing each other well meant it was much easier to navigate these challenges and establish how supervision could be managed during these difficult times. As they both respected and trusted each other they were comfortable speaking openly and honestly about any concerns, including those related to Ned’s doctoral progress.

As the date for Ned’s viva approached, Professor Davies, said to him “you don’t want me to sit in on your viva, do you?” Up to this point, Ned had not realised that his supervisor’s attendance could have been possible. Ned initially felt obliged to say “no” but on reflection, recognised that he did not want his supervisor to be present and now believes that Professor Davies realising this, was making it easier for him to say so.

# Parveen (features in chapters three and eight)

Parveen attended the Post Graduate Certificate in Research at the beginning of her part-time doctorate in her home institution. This placed her in a cohort of academics from across the institution. Over the length of her doctorate she found the support provided by her fellow students invaluable. They maintained contact using social media and met up periodically to share their experiences. They also informed each other about doctorate-related events and activities that were occurring within and external to the institution. Parveen would have otherwise been otherwise unaware of some of these valuable learning opportunities. Through this contact Parveen gained an understanding of the needs and challenges faced by colleagues working in other disciplines. She also learned about the different research methods and strategies they were utilising, some of which she made use of herself.

Some years later, Parveen was very pleased that her supervisor, Ralph had agreed to attend her viva. They met before the viva and over a coffee they chatted about unrelated issues. They talked about their forthcoming holiday plans and films they had recently seen. Although during the viva, Parveen could not see Ralph, she felt his presence was a comfortable reassurance. As she answered some particularly challenging questions that they had previously rehearsed, Parveen felt sure that Ralph was smiling and nodding as he sat behind her.

# Peter (features in chapter two and nine)

Peter is a senior academic who became a parent a couple of years ago. The birth of his child was not straightforward and his daughter was born with some health problems that are ongoing. Peter has indicated that whilst he would like to undertake a doctorate at some time in the future, he realises that doing so now, would place him under additional stress and so has decided to put his plans for doctoral study on hold for the time being.

It is now three years later and he has decided that the time is right for him and his family. Peter has worked in academia for six years and anticipates that his career will be focused in his discipline within academia for the foreseeable future. Peter therefore has elected to undertake a professional doctorate. He feels that the programme of study would be in more manageable chunks for him and this will be beneficial to both his personnel and professional life. He also feels that feedback from individual assignments will enable him to achieve the required doctoral level of study. Additionally in his discipline, the professional doctorate is more highly valued than the PhD by research.

Although an experienced lecturer, Peter has never presented at an external conference. He identified in his annual performance review that he would like to do this and his line manager was supportive. They agreed that in the first instance, Peter would present his doctorate findings at the bi-monthly team meeting.

# Pnina (features in chapter two)

Pnina is an experienced higher education senior lecturer who completed her undergraduate degree and subsequent full time Master’s degree as a mature student. She has worked at her employing institution, a post 1992 HEI, for just over 20 years. During that time, she worked in a number of roles, some of which meant that she was actively involved in research. She enrolled for a doctorate, with much trepidation, having always believed that she could not possibly achieve a PhD, but excited at the prospect that it may one day be a reality for her. Her reasons for undertaking doctoral study were primarily her passion for the subject and because she wanted to continue researching as she enjoyed it and was highly motivated. She did not have particularly clear career aspirations but was simply thrilled, to have the opportunity, to pursue a doctorate in her employing institution.

She had invested a significant amount of time and energy, thinking through and developing her research question, methodological approach and deciding who would be best approached to supervise her. However far less time was spent on thinking through other important aspects of the doctoral journey, such as who her support network would be. This had serious implications as she often felt marginalised, with nobody to speak to, as little worries developed into big fears and anxieties. At the time she was studying there were very few other part-time post graduate research students at her institution and even less who were also working full time as well. Neither had she given much thought to the difficulties of combining part-time study, of which she had no previous experience, with a full time demanding job, believing somehow that she would be able to manage both.

A lack of supportive networks meant that she tended to rely heavily on her supervisors, for emotional as well as academic assistance. She had not anticipated the big step up from MSc study to doctoral level. Neither had she appreciated just how much autonomy there would be as it was her who had to steer her ship, so to speak. At several points throughout the journey, having not made the progress anticipated, she had felt that the best thing to do was to withdraw, as she believed that she simply did not have the skills required for such labour intensive and intellectually demanding work. Instead she felt that she was an imposter. She experienced strong feelings of shame and guilt, believing she was letting everyone down.

However, she persisted in her studies, facing some significant life events along the way, including the death of both parents, becoming a grandparent for the first time and remarrying herself. Her sheer determination not to give in, coupled with her enthusiasm for the topic of study and the support of her supervisors and line manager, meant she limped as it were, to the finishing line. Well, she describes the end more like a sprint, due to the fast approaching deadline. She managed to submit her thesis, just in time, which after a successful and enjoyable viva, and some moderations was deemed of a good enough standard for her to be awarded her PhD. Some months later she progressed into a more research focused role at her institution which she is thoroughly enjoying.

# Raymond (features in chapters three and seven)

Raymond decided to undertake a professional doctorate at his home institution. Having talked with other doctoral students, he was assured that the academic and personal support he would receive would be at least equivalent to that provided by other institutions. His home institution had a proven track record delivering the professional doctorate. Raymond also felt with his full academic load, the travel time to an external institution would be an unnecessary burden as the nearest external institution offering the same professional doctorate was 25 miles away. Additionally, he felt that more direct access to his supervisory team and academic resources would be beneficial. Although at the time he embarked on his doctorate his home institution would potentially fund studying at an external institution, he was aware that this was becoming increasingly difficult for other doctoral students to secure.

Five years later, Raymond, feels that he has come to a complete stand-still with his doctorate. He is however, reluctant to raise his concerns with his supervisory team because he fears that this would lead to closer scrutiny of his work and progress to date. Raymond has for some time been ‘covering his tracks’ and has fallen into the habit of frequently rescheduling supervisory meetings at the last minute. Raymond feels the pressure of the commitment that the university, his supervisory team, line manager, and colleagues have made to him regarding funding, the provision of study time, supervisory support, covering aspects of his workload and the provision of more general support is having a negative impact on the situation. One of the main motivators for Raymond starting his doctorate was to help him secure a promotion within the institution. He now questions whether this is of such importance to him. He feels there is no-one within the institution to whom he can confidentially disclose his feelings and concerns.

# Rex (features in chapter three)

As part of his senior academic role, Rex has over the years been seconded to work part-time on a number of research projects. These projects have culminated in a range of peer-reviewed publications in international journals. Rex’s time working on these studies and publications prevented him from starting a doctorate and he began to become anxious that he was being ‘left behind’ his colleagues. He therefore decided to commence a PhD by publication. Working on the accompanying ‘narrative’ was much more challenging than he had anticipated. As a consequence of his elected narrative, it became apparent that some of his publications were ineligible and some were too old. He also encountered difficulty in securing the publication of the final paper which would tie his body of work together. The doctorate therefore took much longer than he had originally anticipated. Nevertheless, Rex still felt he had made the right choice of doctorate.

# Tom (features in chapter eight)

Tom opted to have a mock viva. As a lecturer, Tom was used to teaching both large and small groups. Nevertheless he was nervous about the viva but felt he should try to put on a ‘brave face’ in front of his mock examiners and supervisory team. In the early part of the mock viva he stumbled over his responses and had to ask for several questions to be repeated. He also ‘lost his way’ in his answer to a more complex question and had to start his response again. However, the examiners were supportive and gave him the time to consider his responses. As the viva progressed, Tom became more confident and began to enjoy the event. He was though, surprised at how exhausted he felt afterwards. The examiners gave him detailed and helpful feedback which primarily focused on his need to develop his verbal reasoning skills.

# Viv (features in chapter five)

Viv had worked alongside one of her supervisors (Wendy) for several years before she began her part-time doctorate nine months ago. Viv’s second supervisor is external to the institution and only joins supervisory meetings periodically via social media. Viv was initially pleased to have been allocated Wendy who is an experienced and successful supervisor. However, Viv soon felt that Wendy was taking an overly relaxed attitude to doctoral supervision. Wendy seems to want to spend most of their supervisory meetings chatting about wider institution-related issues and discussing her own work-related problems over a cup of coffee in the canteen. Viv is rapidly becoming frustrated and concerned that she will not progress with her doctorate in the way that she should. Taking time-out from her heavy workload for doctoral supervision is problematic for Viv and she therefore feels this precious time should be as productive as possible.

# Winifred (features in chapter six)

Winifred’s part-time doctorate required the manufacture of a device which was to be tested in a randomised controlled trial. It was hypothesised that the device would support the development of mathematical skills in primary school children. A contract was set up with a manufacturer in which it was agreed that a set amount of devices would be made per year, for which the supplier would be paid annually. However, part-way through the study the manufacturer went out of business. A new supplier had to be found and a new contract set up. This took six months to resolve and during this time, Winifred’s data collection had to stop.

# Zoe (features in chapters five, eight and nine)

Zoe is undertaking her part-time doctorate in her home institution. She was delighted with the two supervisors she had been allocated. They were established and respected academics within the institution and both had a long track record of doctoral supervision. Their knowledge of research methodology was second to none. However, here lay a potential problem for Zoe, who felt she had previously ‘got by’ on limited knowledge of research methodology. She recognised that she needed to acknowledge this at the first supervisory meeting and was relieved that when she did this, both supervisors were supportive. In addition to the work forming part of the Post Graduate Certificate in Research, Zoe’s supervisors recommended further reading and related activities for her to undertake to increase her knowledge base. However, it was made clear that the onus was on Zoe to do this.

During Zoe’s part-time doctorate, she had encountered a number of personal and professional challenges that had caused various unanticipated delays. As a consequence, the end of Zoe’s registration period was rapidly approaching. Thesis had to be submitted in three days’ time, but she felt that she still had sufficient time to meet the deadline. On the day she had planned to run her thesis through the anti-plagiarism software, the institution’s systems crashed. Although Zoe sought help from the IT department, they were busy trying to resolve institution-wide problems. It was therefore another 48 hours before she could generate the report which required her supervisors’ ‘wet ink’ signatures. At this point Zoe discovered that one of her supervisory team had been unexpectedly called abroad and was not contactable. In extreme distress, Zoe consulted her lead supervisor who was able to negotiate alternative arrangements for Zoe’s thesis submission with the doctoral college.

It was made very clear to Zoe that having completed her doctorate, that her home institution expected her to take on the role of supervisor at the earliest opportunity. She discovered that she had automatically been scheduled to attend the ‘in-house’ supervisor training programme. Zoe’s first supervisory experience was working alongside one of her former supervisors. At first she found this rather strange but quickly began to enjoy the experience. She found she was able to provide her supervisee with practical guidance and support. She also felt this new perspective of doctoral supervision was a tremendous learning opportunity for her.