Construction of Work Experiences by Doctoral Students in Victoria

Abstract:

Recent studies found that more students were increasingly engaged with part-time work. However, research remained ambivalent about the part-time work experiences of doctoral students in Australia. Although it was evident that paid work could provide monetary support for doctoral students' education and living expenses, it remained uncertain why they were motivated to work when most of them were being funded by scholarship programs. Further, as doctoral students often belonged to different age groups as compared to their undergraduate counterparts, current research on students' paid work may have limited applicability. Thus this paper aimed to conceptualise how doctoral students construct their work experiences in Australia. In the process, it would also identify whether there were any significant differences in work experiences between international and domestic doctoral students. This study would utilise a series of semi-structured interviews with 20 domestic and 20 international doctoral students in Victoria, Australia.

Keywords:

International Students, Doctoral, Experiences, Work, Scholarships

Introduction:

Although doctoral students only constituted 4.1 percent of the total higher education student population in 2009, they played a pivotal role in ensuring that Australia remained competitive in the global research and development landscape (Australia Education International [AEI], 2010a; Group of Eight Universities [Go8], 2010; Harman, 2002, 2003; Neri & Ville, 2007; Universities Australia [UA], 2008). They also enhanced Australia's image as a choice destination for other international students and investors through their scholarly contributions (Gillard, 2010). Given the importance of doctoral students to Australia, it was increasingly essential for them to successfully complete their research degrees and translate their findings to the public in a timely manner.

However, existing research found that more students were undertaking part-time work during semester to pay for their education and living expenses (Hofman & Steijn, 2003; James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010; Jonkman & Boer, 2009; Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Mclnnis & Hartley, 2002, Mclnnis, James & Hartley, 2000). Although studies found that part-time work had a negative impact on students' academic pursuits, most studies focused on the experiences of younger high school and undergraduate students (Watts & Pickering, 2000). The impacts of paid work on doctoral students' research and study experiences have yet to receive any notable scholarly attention (Harman, 2003). Noting the age disparity between these students and their doctoral counterparts, they may have very different types of commitments and motivation when engaging with part-time work. This knowledge gap was further extended when a continual absence of national statistics on doctoral students' financial and familial commitments remained in Australia. Harman (2003, p.343) noted that there was no clear indication of 'how many students with relatively low incomes were the main breadwinners for family units, and for such cases what the total family income was'. As such, it was a significant challenge to determine doctoral students' situational circumstances, motivations to work and the impacts of their work involvement.

This paper was based on a doctoral thesis that aimed to conceptualise the motivations and decision-making processes of doctoral students in Australia when engaging with paid work. This study would provide particular consideration for the doctoral students' background (notably their commitments and financial situation) to identify their needs, their main motivators to work, how they viewed their work experiences and their perceptions of the impacts of part-time work on their scholarly research. This would be achieved through a qualitative study, consisting of in-depth semi-structured interviews with 40 doctoral students in the State of Victoria, Australia.

Profile of Doctoral Students in Australia

In 2009, there were 39,745 doctoral students in Australia (4.1 percent of total higher education student population), which included some 8,264 international doctoral students (5.1% of total international student population; AEI, 2010b). A domestic student is defined as 'a student who is an Australian citizen, a New Zealand citizen or the holder of a permanent visa [all permanent residents including humanitarian visas]' (Going to University, 2010). On the other hand, international students were those who did not fit into the above category. Although general statistics on these two groups of doctoral students were readily available in the public domain, it remained a significant challenge to gather relevant information on their social and work lives in Australia. This was because there was continual lack of national statistics relating to their social background (e.g. work engagement, family and commitments), family background (e.g. number of dependent children and whether their spouses were engaged with any form of paid work), relevant information scholarship receivership (e.g. number of scholars, type and value of scholarships) and work profile (e.g. type of work engagements and hours worked; Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations [CAPA], 2008a; Harman, 2003). However, it was generally accepted that there were both differences and similarities between domestic and international doctoral students.

Differences between International and Domestic Doctoral Students

The most comprehensive profile of doctoral students was established by Harman (2003) in his study of 1,534 doctoral students (168 international and 1,366 domestic students) from two Go8 Universities. He identified three distinctive differences between international and domestic doctoral PhD students (with reference to *Table 1*). First, he found that international doctoral students tend to be younger than their domestic counterparts, with a majority of them below the age of 39 (87.5 percent as compared to 72.8). Second, international doctoral students did not enjoy as much research flexibility as domestic students (Harman, 2003). Due to their visa regulations, international students were not allowed to take any time off from their studies if they encountered any forms of financial difficulties; and they were subjected to a maximum 20 hours per week work limit. This greatly impeded their ability to address any immediate financial challenges. Third, Harman (2003) indicated that a small percentage of international students (18.6% of respondents) reported that English was their first language (as compared to 81.4% for domestic students). Recent research suggested that international students more challenging to find suitable employment, and be more receptive to illegal work conditions and pay rates due to their lower English language proficiency (Ong, 2006; as citied in Marginson, Nyland, Sawir & Forbes-Mewett, 2010). Finally, it was worth noting that, as temporary residents in Australia, international students were not eligible for any health benefits (i.e. Medicare), government support schemes and local bank loans (Marginson, et.al, 2010).

Table 1: Selected Profiles of Doctoral Students in Australia (Haman, 2003)

Variables		International Students	Domestic Students
Age Profile	Under 30 years	39.9	41.1
	30 to 39 years	47.6	31.7
	40 to 49 years	10.1	18.3
	50 years and above	2.4	8.9
Enrolment Status	Full Time	99.4	66.6
	Part-time on-campus	0.6	22.4
	Part time off-campus	0.0	11.0
English as First Language		18.6	81.4
Percentage of Students with Scholarships	Yes	85.5	87.6
	No	14.5	12.4

Similarities between International and Domestic Doctoral Students

Both groups of student shared some similarities. First, it was evident that all doctoral students were generally older than their undergraduate counterparts. Official statistics found that about 89% of international higher degree students (including doctoral students) were above the age of 25 years (UA, 2008). This is compared to the average age of between 19 and 22 years for international undergraduate

students. This age disparity was supported by an earlier study that found the mean commencing age of PhD candidates was 33.5 years (Bourke, Holbrook & Lovat, 2006). Therefore, it was possible that international and domestic doctoral students may share similar types and levels of commitments (e.g. spouses and dependent children) and work motivators due to their similar age groups.

Second, regardless of their residency status, doctoral students may face similar work restrictions. For example, scholarships conditions imposed limited working hours conditions (commonly 15 hours per week) on scholars to ensure that they focused on their research and complete their degree within the designated time frame. Also, to maximise successful completion rates, supervisors and university research offices would encourage all doctoral students to focus on their research and only undertake any forms of extracurricular activities, including paid work, when necessary (Tobbell, et.al, 2009).

Third, both groups of doctoral students may engage with similar types of part-time work. As doctoral students had higher level of education qualifications, they were often employed as sessional tutors or research assistants. Supervisors would encourage doctoral students to undertake on-campus academic appointments as it provided students:

> '… with an opportunity to consolidate and deepen your knowledge in your own discipline. These activities can enhance your communication, presentation and inter-personal skills. Tutoring is also a way of earning (extra) money and of possibly improving your career prospects after your postgraduate degree' (University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association, 2010).

However, many doctoral students may be required to seek off-campus paid work due to limited on-campus opportunities. Although there was no comprehensive statistics on the type of off-campus work that doctoral students engaged with, it could be inferred that they would engage in similar type of jobs (e.g. in service industries) like their undergraduate counterparts due to their work restrictions (notably limited their working hours and non-work commitments; Mclnnis & Hartley, 2002). It was noted that such jobs would potentially attract lower salaries and less job security than on-campus ones (Marginson et.al, 2010).

In the light of the above discussions, any comparisons between domestic and international doctoral students would provide useful insights into their experiences, which facilitate the development of relevant strategies and policies to address their research and work needs.

Students' Financial Needs for Work

Despite facing different work challenges, existing research found that more students (both domestic and international) were undertaking paid work during their academic semester to pay for their tuition fees and living expenses (Hofman & Steijn, 2003; James, et.al, 2010; Jonkman & Boer, 2009; Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Mclnnis & Hartley, 2002). Research in other countries including New Zealand (Manthei & Gilmore, 2005) and the United Kingdom (UK; Canny, 2002; Metcalf, 2005; Robotham, 2009) also supported this trend. Although no specific references to doctoral students, it was found that more postgraduate students were increasingly engaged with paid work due to financial difficulties (Mclnnis & Hartley, 2002). A recent study found that 32 percent of their full-time postgraduate research students were working more than 20 hours per week, with 7.1 percent indicating that they were engaged in full-time employment (i.e. about 37 hours per week; James et.al, 2007). It was added that their average work hours were between 13 and 17 hours. However, it was generally believe that doctoral students did not have such working commitments due to financial support provided by their scholarship programs (Winkler, 2009). Scholarships were often provided to doctoral students for their academic excellence and to meet their daily living expenses (Going to University, 2010; AusAid, 2010).

However, recent review papers painted a contradictory picture (CAPA, 2010b; Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research [DIISR], 2010; Harman, 2004; UA, 2008). First, not all scholar programs provide living stipends for their students; thus students were required to seek other sources of income (e.g. part-time work and family support). For example, the Endeavour International Postgraduate Research Scholarships (IPRS), a prestigious Australian Government scholarship for international students, do not provide any forms of living stipend; students were required to apply separately for a stipend scholarship from their respective universities (DIISR, 2010).

Second, it was found that the living stipends provided to doctoral students were often below or slightly above the poverty line (CAPA, 2008b; UA, 2008a). In the 2010 evaluation of the IPRS, , it was found that 'around 78% of IPRS recipients living with families are living under the Henderson Poverty Line [with reference to *Table* 2] for single people' (DIISR, 2010, pp.33-34).

Table 2: Henderson Poverty Line as of December Quarter 2009

Family Status	Henderson Poverty Line[1]	Annual Figure[2]
Single Person (one adult)	$401.16	$20,860.32
A Couple without any Children (two adults)	$536.64	$27,905.28
Two Adults (one working) and Two Children	$753.49	$39,181.48

[1] Per Week; the Henderson Poverty Line is the benchmark used to determine the poverty lines in Australia since 1973. If 'the income of an income unit is less than the poverty line applicable to it … is considered to be in poverty (Melbourne Institute of applied Economic and Social Research [MIAESR], 2010, p.1)

[2]Annual figure is multiplied by 52 weeks.

Further investigation (with reference to *Table 3*) found that some international students were receiving living stipends below the poverty line, namely Deakin ($346.15 per week) and La Trobe's ($369.80). Even domestic scholars, who were collecting Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) or equivalent stipends ($432.70), were not much better off as they were only receiving an additional of $31.54 per week above the poverty line. It was noteworthy that the provision of living stipend varied significantly in different universities. The larger universities (notably those in the Group of Eight; e.g. Monash University and University of Melbourne) were able to provide living stipend scholarship either better or comparable to the APA. Most scholars may be living under impoverished conditions and found it a significant challenge to concentrate on their research degree, without any access to additional financial sources (this was noting that international students may be facing more difficulties due to their lack of access to government support).

Table 3: Value of Living Stipends in the State of Victoria, Australia

Name of Scholarship (in Victoria)	Annual Stipend	Weekly
For Australian Citizens and Permanent Residents Only		
Australian Postgraduate Award (APA)	$22,500	$432.70
APA (Industry)	$27,222	$523.50
For International Students		
International Postgraduate Research Scholarships (IPRS – tuition paying scholarship)	None; Normally provided by universities	$432.70
Endeavour Postgraduate Awards	$2,500 per month ($30,000 per annum)	$625.00
University-specific scholarships that **less than APA**, e.g.[1]:		
• Deakin University International Research Scholarships	$18,000	$346.15
• La Trobe University Postgraduate Research Scholarship	$19,231	$369.80
University-specific scholarships that **match with APA**[1 2]	$22,500	$432.70
Special Scholarships (Above APA rates)[1]:		
• Chancellors Research Scholarship (Swinburne)	$30,000	$625.00
• Human Rights Scholarships (Melbourne)	$26,000	$500.00
• Sir James McNeill Foundation Postgraduate Scholarship (2009 rate; Monash)	$27,169	$522.50
• Monash Silver Jubilee Postgraduate Scholarship	$27,222	$523.50

[1] Deakin University, 2010; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2010; La Trobe University, 2010; Monash University; 2010; RMIT, 2010; Swinburne University of Technology, 2010; University of Melbourne, 2010; Victoria University, 2010; Note that Australian Catholic University (2010) and University of Ballarat (2010) did not provide any scholarships for international students.

[2] Examples include: Melbourne International Postgraduate Scholarship; The Prime Minister of Malaysia's Melbourne Scholar Program; Monash Graduate Scholarship; RMIT PhD Scholarship; Swinburne University Vice Chancellor's Research Scholarships; Swinburne University Postgraduate Research Awards; Victoria University Scholarship

Third, most scholarship programs did not provide due considerations for doctoral students with families, notably spouses and dependent children (both in Australia and their home countries). This was clearly specified by AusAid in their information pack provided to potential scholars: '… the Contribution to Living Expenses is only intended to assist in meeting every day living costs. It is not designed to cover the complete costs of awardees and/or their dependants whilst in Australia' (AusAid, 2010). Given the age of most doctoral students, it would not be a surprise that they had established their own families or have to support their elderly parents, let alone receiving financial support from them. Thus it was quite naïve of universities and scholarship agencies that doctoral students would accept a scholarship without acknowledging their financial commitments to their families. Thus, in addition to the inadequate stipend provided to their living expenses, doctoral students may be forced to undertake part-time work to support themselves and their families. It was also noteworthy that international students' family members were not eligible for any public assistance schemes in Australia (Ong, 2006).

Fourth, international students were in a more precarious position as compared to their domestic counterparts due to their statuses as full-fee paying students and temporary migrants in Australia (Marginson et.al, 2010). For example, due to their ineligibility for Medicare and other forms of public assistance schemes, their stipends were utilised to cover a wider range of living, and sometimes compulsory expenses (e.g. overseas student health cover, student visa). Further, Harman (2003) also found that due to their transition into an unfamiliar environment, international HDR students often found it a challenge to minimise their expenditure accordingly, notably on accommodation (also Jonkman & Boer, 2009; Neri & Ville, 2007).

In addition to the above challenges, it was noted that some international doctoral students received scholarships from their respective home countries and institutions. This posed additional challenges. First, some overseas scholarships offered a lump sum of funding. Thus, scholarship recipients' living stipends would be determined after the deduction of all compulsory costs (notably tuition fees and OSHC). As some of these scholarships were not reviewed on a timely basis in response to any fees increases, these students may not have adequate living allowances. Second, some overseas scholarships may provide stipends in a foreign currency (e.g. US Dollars) instead of the Australian Dollar (AEI, 2006). Thus, any appreciation of the Australian Dollar would pose significant challenges to these scholars to maintain a minimum living standard.

Similar Work Challenges Faced

Recent research found that despite their local dispositions, domestic students were generally subjected to similar unfavourable working arrangements as their international counterparts (Mclnnis & Hartley, 2002). First, although on-campus academic employment was preferable, it was found that postgraduate students may be covertly exploited in some manner. A recent study of sessional staff found that they generally wanted better professional learning, financial remuneration and working conditions (Macquarie University Learning and Teaching Centre [MULTC], 2010a). It was concerning to find that sessional staff reported that they were "working more hours than they are paid…" which may constitute some forms of work exploitation (MULTC, 2010b, p2). The same study also found that sessional staff did not have a strong sense of job security due to the university's non-transparent recruitment process, constant need to secure short-term contracts and lack of performance reviews (MULTC, 2010a). This was consistent with research conducted on the experiences of sessional staff in other Australian universities (Blanchard & Smith, 2001; Nicolettou & Flint, 2004; University of Queensland Teaching and Educational Development Institute, 2010a, 2010b).

Second, recent scholarly attention focused on the off-campus work exploitation of international students in Australia and it was suggested that domestic students were also placed under similar conditions (Deumert, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia & Sawir, 2005; Mclnnis & Hartley, 2002; Marginson et.al, 2010; Nyland, Forbes-Mewett, Marginson, Ramia, Sawir and Smith, 2007). Examples of such work exploitation included receiving salaries below the legal minimum wage rate and unsafe working conditions. Although the impacts of off-campus work on students' academic and social lives were increasingly documented, their

impacts on doctoral students' scholarly research (considering its differences from coursework studies) remained largely ignored. Further, as scholars and individuals with high academic standings, it was increasingly essential to determine the impacts of biennial jobs and working conditions have on their self-esteem as a scholar and ability to complete their research (Canny, 2002; Neri & Ville, 2007). This was consistent with other studies, which found that low level work often had negative impacts on individuals' self-identities, mental well-being and motivation (Allan, Bamber & Timo, 2006).

The Study

Based on earlier discussions, research had effectively identified monetary rewards as an objective for students to engage with paid work. Researchers were often quick to establish a correlation between students' financial shortfalls and their part-time work engagements (Hofman & Steijn, 2003; James et.al, 2010; Jonkman & Boer, 2009; Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Mclnnis et.al, 2002). However, some researchers doubt that this correlation could be applied to all students (Metcalf, 2005; Richardson, Evans & Gbadamosi, 2004). Although monetary rewards were clearly present in any paid work, it may not be the main objective for some students as the money may not be solely utilised to meet any financial shortfalls. For example, some students may work to support their consumerist and comfortable lifestyle (i.e. to purchase latest gadgets, luxury goods, cars and entertainment). Others may select night shifts to spend more time with their children during the day and the higher salary (as required by work legislation) was a secondary objective. Finally, some financially-sound students may choose to work part-time for non-monetary rewards (e.g. work experiences, expanding social networks and cultural experiences; Atkins, 1999; Molesworth & Scullion, 2005; Raybould & Sheedy, 2005).

As the objectives and outcomes of part-time work are often influenced by students' preferences (Metcalf, 2005), the purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding why doctoral students would have certain preferences for their work engagement. To achieve this, there was an initial need to identify the innate (e.g. motivators) and explicit variables (e.g. monetary rewards) of their decision-making process when selecting paid work in Australia. Thus, the central question of the thesis was '*How do doctoral students construct their work experiences in Australia?*' The study would be guided by a series of sub-questions to provide additional insights to their work experiences:

1. Do they exhibit different levels of motivation to achieve the same outcomes for work?
2. What are their motivational sources that influence their decision-making?
3. What are their current commitments in Australia and their home countries? (*link to Question 2)*
4. What are their current financial situations in Australia?
5. Are they more willing to accept below standards working conditions if they are attempting to survive in Australia?
6. Are they more selective of their jobs if they are not or less concerned with their financial survival?
7. What are the impacts of paid work on their scholarly research? Does this have a correlation with the primary motivation of their paid work?
8. Are there any differences between international and domestic doctoral students' work motivations?
9. Do the identified motivators have any impact on the students' scholarly research?

Based on these sub-questions, a suitable framework would be developed accordingly to address the central questions.

Methodology

Review of Past Methodologies

Robotham (2009) indicated that quantitative surveys were the most common research tools to elicit large amount of data from student respondents for in-depth analysis. However, more researchers were inclined to utilise qualitative techniques like semi-structured interviews (Watts & Pickering, 2000) and focus groups (Tobbell, et.al, 2009). This was because such techniques were able to elicit rich data based on student respondents' perceptions, personal experiences and attitudes towards a topic of interest. This was supported by Marginson et.al (2010, p.13), whose study adapted a similar qualitative approach:

> Most studies involving international students are sample surveys… [that] are limited to preset questions and so confined by the researchers' prior assumptions. There is no opportunity for those under study to put things in their own words or to explore new issues arising… intensive semi-structured interviews… [can] gain depth of insight and provide the students with space in which to shape the enquiry.

In order to maximise the accuracy of a study, Watts and Pickering (2000) suggested the use of a mixed methodology where qualitative data (e.g. perceptions of academic performance) could be verified against a range of quantitative data (e.g. academic grades). A prime example was the study on international PhD student experiences conducted by Harman (2003), which utilised both semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. However, a mixed methodology would require additional resources and skills to manage.

Proposed Methodology

To better understand how doctoral students construct their work experiences, it was essential for this study to adapt a narrative approach where the students would be able to provide a detailed account of their background and overall experiences. This would be best achieved through a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews. This technique provided respondents with the flexibility to present their perceptions of and experiences from paid work without extensive intrusion from the interviewer (King, 1994). Through the use of a flexible checklist, the interviewer could ask open ended questions that encourage the interviewees to provide deeper responses and insights to their work experiences (Yin, 1994). This also provided some form of guidance to ensure that all relevant topics would be covered in the interview. A two interaction between the interviewer and interviewee established a better understanding of the current situation faced by interviewees in relation to their perceptions. The interviewer would also keep a dairy of all interviews with notes on respondents' reactions to certain questions and interpretations of their body language during the interview. This would provide additional insights into any disparities between respondents' expressed responses and their innate opinions.

The interviewer was a former international student and university student leader, who had extensive experiences in communicating with both international and domestic students. These experiences would be useful in soliciting relevant responses on sensitive topics and personal issues (e.g. expectations).

Considering the required data richness and logistical challenges for this approach, this study aimed to conduct some 40 in-depth interviews with international and domestic doctoral students (20 respondents from each group) in the State of Victoria. First, it was worth noting that since international students were required to undertake full-time studies, only full time domestic doctoral students would be considered to provide more consistency to the study. Second, as the study seek to provide insights to students' work motivations, non-employed doctoral students would be included in the study to examine their motivations, current financial situation, job-seeking behaviours and potential employment barriers.

Respondents would be recruited from nine Victorian universities, namely, Australian Catholic University; Deakin University; La Trobe University; Monash University; RMIT University; Swinburne University of Technology; University of Ballarat; University of Melbourne; and Victoria University. In order to achieve the target number of student interviewees and ensure conformity to each university's regulations, a letter requesting for their permission and support would be sent to the respective vice-chancellors. In addition to seek their assistance in promoting the study to their doctoral students, the letter would also reassure the vice-chancellors that the privacy of their institutions and students would be protected. Student respondents may also be recruited from the public domain through the word-of-mouth and postgraduate student organisations. This study would conform to all ethical guidelines of Monash University.

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