

A Qualitative Examination of Challenges Influencing Doctoral Students in an Online Doctoral Program

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Abstract

The main purpose of the study was to investigate the challenges faced by students in completion of an online doctoral program at the University of Liverpool, Online Doctoral Business Administration program. We analyse the responses of 91 doctoral students in an online DBA program. Based on the exploratory qualitative study themes were developed based on student perceptions. Various themes identified were course structure and workload, resources, absence of human interaction, technological challenges, support systems, and satisfaction with instructor and quality of instruction. Discussion, Implications and avenues for future research are presented.

Keywords: online professional doctoral program, online education, doctoral student challenges

1. Introduction

To cater to the ever increasing need for doctorally prepared workers, institutions of higher education are beginning to offer professional doctorate programs in traditional as well as online modes. The professional doctorate programs are new and evolving as compared to the traditional PhD programs (Kot & Hendel, 2012). Also worth noting is the fact that during the past 50 years the number of professional doctorate programs have increased in USA, UK, Canada and Australia (Adams, Bondy, Ross, Dana, & Kennedy-Lewis, 2014). As pointed out in the literature there is a fundamental difference between Ph.D. programs and the professional doctorate programs. In a Ph.D. program, student makes a contribution to scholarship and in the professional doctorate programs the emphasis is on making contributions to the practice and industry (Kot & Hendel, 2012). The structure of the two programs is different in that the structure allows for more applied outcome in case of the professional doctorate programs. Research indicates that in some institutions enrollments are on a rise in professional doctorate programs as compared to PhD programs (Servage, 2009). Given the difference in structure and the nascent stage of development of professional doctorate programs it is important for researchers to add to the body of research concerned with professional doctorate programs (Sarros, Willis & Hardie, 2004; Salter, 2013; Pratt, Tedder, Boyask, & Kelly, 2015). Furthermore, the issue of dropouts continues to be a major issue for doctoral programs in general and in any field. For instance, the dropout rate for students in Ph.D. program is near of above 50% and is significant (Bowen & Rudenstein, 1992; Litalien & Guay 2015).

Research indicates that the doctoral students in general and particularly online doctoral students face numerous challenges from a cultural and an academic standpoint and this has been identified as a major cause of student dropout from doctoral programs (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Brus, 2006; De Valero, 2001; Di Pierro, 2013; Golde, 2000; Protivnak & Foss, 2009). Students enrolled in the professional doctoral programs face numerous challenges and a systematic investigation in this area is lacking. It becomes important to investigate the challenges which student face in the professional doctorate programs with a view to help in understanding the student issues while they undergo doctoral studies and possibly help retain students. Understanding of the student challenges will also help in offering recommendations to administrators to further improve the professional doctorate programs. Our research is based on investigations within one such UK based online professional doctorate (DBA) program. This research is unique in that there has been little research to collectively investigate the challenges faced by students in the completion of a professional online doctoral program level (Offerman, 2011; Kot & Hendel, 2012). The practical contribution of this research is particularly significant because identifying the challenges will provide instructors and administrators of the professional doctoral programs with means to develop strategies to assist and help students successfully transition into

successful learners and prevent student dropouts. Furthermore this research will add to the limited body of research devoted to the professional business administration program as there are only a handful of studies that focus on professional business administration doctoral programs (West, Gokalp, Pena, Fischer, & Gupton, 2011).

2. Literature Review

There have been research reports which investigate the student's perception of challenges faced during the course of their doctoral studies. Protivnak and Foss (2009) carried out a qualitative study on counsellor education doctoral students and found that personal issues, departmental culture, mentoring, and support systems presented challenges to the students. Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) in a qualitative study of 33 doctoral students found that lack of student connection with the doctoral faculty members as a major challenge for doctoral students. The study also found this as a major reason for students leaving the doctoral program. Cusworth (2001) in his qualitative study on counselling psychology doctoral students found that participants faced challenges due to lack of mentoring, lack of adequate information, interpersonal difficulties with faculty members and lack of funding.

Engaging in the doctoral work is full of challenges. For instance isolation (Gardner & Holley, 2011), stress due to lack of adequate tutor support (Golde, 1998; Seagram, Gould, & Pyke, 1998), cultural barriers (McAlpine, Paulson, Gonsalves, & Jazvac-Martek, 2012), financial issues (Moyer & Salovey, 1999), struggles due to family lives (Offerman, 2011), lack of adequate balancing of family and worklife (Brus, 2006) have been identified as challenges in literature. In addition, challenges arise because of lack of adequate social support from family members or fellow peers. Yet another stream of research indicates that lack of familiarity with technology can also be a detrimental factor is students withdrawing from online programs (Bolinger & Halupa, 2012; Kaymak & Horzum, 2013). Erichsen, Bolliger, and Halupa (2014) found that lack of maintaining relationships over distance with faculty mentors and students was seen as a major challenge by the students in completion of the doctoral studies.

Once the student enters the program the challenges faced may possibly change. For instance, when the student first enters the program, the challenges particularly in an online environment may be to get acquainted with the technology to effectively participate in the course, to successfully communicate with peers, demonstrate ability to faculty and to determine ability to fit with the program and match one's own expectation. In addition, as the student progresses through the program the challenge becomes to continue to perform better, and think from a scholar perspective and generate new knowledge. In the dissertation phase, the challenge is to continue to maintain active communication with the supervisor and to maintain supervisor student relationship and work towards completing the thesis. The role of support by family, tutor and the institution is critical to be able to help student meet the challenges.

Lee (2009) indicated that some of the challenges faced by nursing students enrolled in doctoral studies were due to financial issues, problems with the supervisors and lack of academic self-discipline. In their study Golde (2005) indicated that some of the major challenges which students faced that ultimately lead to the student dropout included isolation of the student from the department and mismatch of student's own expectation and programmatic goals. Nerad and Miller (1996), found that lack of care shown by faculty advisor and lack of adequate financial support were the major challenges faced by the students in completion of their doctoral degrees. It is important to study the challenges faced by students because this can have serious impact such as higher attrition rates. For instance, as pointed by Golde and Walker (2006) the doctoral students face many challenges in online doctoral programs which results in higher attrition rates. There is also a stream of literature which indicates that the challenges can be positive and can help students work even harder and make attempts to succeed in the doctoral programs (Vekkaila, Phyalto, & Lonka, 2013). However, challenges can become stressors if adequate support is not given to the students. This further leads to student drop outs from the program (Vekkaila et al., 2013).

In summary, the above literature indicates that doctoral students face many different kinds of challenges. Majority of the studies have focused on the challenges faced by students in on-ground doctoral programs. There has been a paucity of research investigating the challenges faced by students in an online context and specifically from the standpoint of professional doctorate degree students. This study will specifically focus on the challenges that must be conquered by the students while they pursue their doctoral degrees. In the end, recommendation are provided to help minimize the challenges and help the institution.

Research Question:

What are the challenges the doctoral students face in an online professional doctorate degree program?

3. The Study Setting: DBA Program at the University of Liverpool

The University of Liverpool in partnership with Laureate online education offers a cohort based action research online doctoral degree program. The University of Liverpool's DBA program in partnership with Laureate online education is completely online and does not include blending of distance with traditional face to face delivery such as requirements to meet on weekends (Laureate Online Education, 2015). Emphasis is placed on solving real life work problem based on action research modality. The doctoral program is catered to meet the needs of adult students who are mainly practitioners and working professionals. The University of Liverpool's online DBA program delivery is unique in that it focuses on using critical action learning and action research to help students reflect on the practices encountered at the workplace. In addition, critical action learning and action research is also used to find solutions to workbased problems while constantly challenging their individual biases and assumption (Laureate Online Education, 2015).

Success in the DBA program is based upon nine core modules such as 1) Doctoral Practitioner 2) Change and Crisis Management 3) Knowledge Management 4) Management Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Methods 5) Action Research and Action Research Thesis 6) Complex Adaptive Systems 7) Decision Making with Risks and uncertainty 8) Ethics, Sustainability and Social Impact 9) Leadership and Community (Laureate Online Education, 2015).

The Doctoral Practitioner is the first module for all the incoming cohort of doctoral students. It follows an 11 week structure in which the first week is devoted to get an understanding of why the students chose the DBA programme at the University of Liverpool. Also the first week is devoted to obtaining an understanding of what the students wish to accomplish by achieving the DBA degree. The academic content begins from week 2 through week 11. The rest of the eight core modules follow a 10 week structure. Each core module (including the doctoral practitioner module) involves students working into different learning sets which function as an applied problem-solving and learning group. The primary purpose of the learning sets is to help each student critically identify and resolve a specific work-based problem with the help of other student colleagues and doctoral tutor in the learning set (Laureate Online Education, 2015). In addition to the learning set participation each student is also required to submit literature syntheses pertaining to the weekly assigned readings (Laureate Online Education, 2015).

Also each student is required to submit a Critical Literature Review which frames the identified problem in the context of the relevant literature and identifies different viewpoints on the problem from the literature. Students also submit a problematising write-up which summarises how the identified issue was problematised and how this process impacted the final statement of the problem. In the final week, a CAL Final Report, is to be submitted which describes in detail how the student approached solving the identified problem, the issues encountered and the outcomes achieved from the process (Laureate Online Education, 2015).

In addition to completing the above mentioned core modules, students write a Doctoral development plan (DDP) as a means to reflect on their development as doctoral practitioners (Laureate Online Education, 2015). The intent of DDP is to help students develop critical thinking skills necessary for leadership in organizations. Students can also attend two face to face residencies in Liverpool, UK which are optional. The purpose of the residencies is to help students interact with the other students from different cohorts and develop networking (Laureate Online Education, 2015). The emphasis in the residencies is also on research. Students can choose to replace either the Complex Adaptive Systems module or the Decision Making with Risk and Uncertainty module with the optional residencies. These residencies consist of 4-5 day meetings where students work closely with experienced faculty researchers to develop their research and explore variety of research questions which are relevant to them. The students have a chance to present their research at a conference during a second residency. There is also a thesis component which is required to be completed by all students as a part of the degree program. The focus of the thesis is on solving a workbased problem relevant to the student's situation (Laureate Online Education, 2015).

4. Research Methodology

The data analysed in the current study is based upon a larger study which used an 84 item questionnaire including Likert scale type and open ended questions. The authors of the study developed this survey instrument to obtain an insight into challenges encountered by students during the completion of their doctoral studies. Among these 10 were open ended questions and served as a primary source of data for this study. IRB approval was obtained from the University of Liverpool prior to conducting the research. An invitation email was sent to all enrolled students in the DBA program to invite them to participate in the study. We used survey monkey for the data collection purposes. A consent form was given online along with the survey. This invitation email

included the purpose of the study, what we wished to accomplish and the reasons for selecting the students as potential participants of the study. Also it was made clear that the student participation was voluntary and they could choose to withdraw anytime. An analysis of themes contributed by 91 doctoral students was done.

5. Findings

5.1 Demographic Information

Data analysis indicates that majority of the survey respondents were over 25 years of age among which 26% were between 25 to 34 years old, 31% were between 35 to 44, 27% were between 45 and 54, 9% were between 55 to 64 years old and 7% were 65 or older. Men constituted 63.5% of the sample. From the responses to the open-ended questions about the doctoral student experience various themes were formed and are presented below:

5.2 Identified Themes

5.2.1 Course Structure and Workload

Participants responded positively to the course structure and workload. One participant responded:

The course workload seemed to be very much in balance. I was able to successfully complete all the weekly assigned activities.

Another participant indicated: *The course structure helped me engage in active interactions with my colleagues. I was able to engage in meaningful conversations with my colleagues because of the layout of the course and implement some of the things discussed in my workplace.*

In contrast some participants also discussed perceived difficulties with the course structure and workload aspects of the DBA program. Some sample comments from participants are as follows:

fact that during weeks five (5) and ten (10) we are still required to actively participate in learning set activities when we are preparing what in essence is fifty five percent (55%) of our grade. This to me is counter productive.

The main challenge remains with the requirements for participation. I devote great deal of time to readings and synthesis during the weekend. During the week days it is very difficult to dedicate 3-4 hours to read my colleagues posts and comment on it.

The size of some of the learning sets were too large, especially module 9. It is very interesting with lots of readings, at times 6 articles and it is difficult to engage many set members who bring so much practical experience to the set. At times in order to keep up you skim the surface and not go deep enough or just engage 1 or 2 set members who have a similar work place based problem.

Some participants also specifically expressed their concern about the class structure:

The classroom part of the study is dependent on other set members replying and submitting posts on time. The massive workload expectations need better information prior to the start of a DBA model like this.

I think the module of qualitative and quantitative analysis portion needs to be strengthened. There wasn't clear guidelines on how student can incorporate mix-researched method into its action research study and how it can be formatted in the thesis. Personally, I struggle a lot and make numerous amendments in between chapters.

Several participants provide suggestions regarding improving the structure of modules in the DBA Programs. One participant indicated:

Changing weekly assignment system to biweekly will allow students to read, understand and analysis the reading content in depth rather than hovering around the topic. Participant responses also indicated alternative to the program policies of requesting work from students even if the deadlines falls on holidays. One participant indicated: Modules running through European vacation times leading to doing DBA work while "on vacation" with the family. I've written papers while lying in a hammock. Suggest that the Easter, high summer and last week of December periods are sabbatical weeks for modules that cover these times. The quality of work over these periods is compromised and hence a response needs to be found.

Also some of the participants indicated that a clear grading and marking expectation and description of academic terminologies upfront would be of significant help. A participant indicated:

For first timers in the online mode of study/ UK curriculum there should be some form of guide to the marking scheme and expectations/ interpretations of academic lingo. Example-underlying assumptions. A participant also indicated that allowing students to work on extra day would help students submit the work. This participant specifically indicated: Challenges of reading research articles, absorbing their content, developing independent

views on the content by critical thinking, and writing a literature synthesis, all between Thursday and Saturday. (An extra day would help enormously).

5.2.2 Resources

Availability of resources is critical for the success of a doctoral student. Overall students seemed to be satisfied with the resources provided in the DBA program. One participant indicated:

The articles provided in the modules are very informative and have helped me learn action learning. Another participant responded: The peer reviewed articles and instructor guidance helped me plan my doctoral work. I am also going to be using the information I learnt in the doctoral practitioner module in upcoming modules and my thesis work.

Some of the survey participants have had troubles accessing online books and articles. One the participants recommended:

Where books and articles are inaccessible-don't waste our time by listing them on the required reading and supplementary listing. It only frustrates the process and leaves students with the view they are missing valuable information. Some participants indicated that the overall online access to the books could be improved. Furthermore one participants indicated: Improvements to elibrary is good but still not an intuitive study tool. I think most students still leverage Google scholar because of its intuitiveness. Another participants shared their struggles with the reading material: I have struggled for several months to get the reading materials before the start of the module (during module break) but never succeeded. I have reach my last module so no more relevant for me but I would hope that this is done for the future cohorts.

5.2.3 Absence of Human Interaction

Absence of human interaction is a critical issue for online programme. Some participants particularly highlighted their frustrations with lack of face to face dialogues with colleagues and instructors. For instance one participant indicated:

The online environment limits the interaction between research student and supervisors. There should be some opportunities for developing as a scholar. Research work is a "green" field territory for many so students may gain from classroom training to improve our understanding of methodology, research design, gathering research data and analysing research data. While another participant noted: There are no face-to-face session or discussions.

Because of the lack of proper English language skills some learners struggled to communicate with other learners in the DBA program. The learning experiences of both English and non-English speakers are impacted. One learner highlighted this aspect:

I have encountered difficulty in engaging in meaningful dialogue with a few students in my learning sets who do not seem to be effective in fully expressing themselves in English.

One participant indicated:

-feeling lonely-participation in the residency 1 and 2 was incredibly valuable as you feel part of a group of likeminded people. This should be highly recommended!

- not having live chats with video for example in the learning sets

- not having videos from the tutor doing a lecture

- there should be more 'social' activities for students to feel part of the community as it gives you the support needed from peers to carry on

Yet there were some participants who praised the instructor presence and support and indicated:

The most helpful part of my doctoral studies was to constantly hear from my doctoral tutor. I did not feel that I was missing any face to face interaction. Constant interaction with him kept me going and helped me retain motivation in the programme. Another participant replied: I never felt that I was lonely. The constant nudging from my tutor helped me.

5.2.4 Technological Challenges

Internet and technological challenges also emerged as a key theme for the survey respondents. Participants frequently commented on the problems arising due to the lack of availability of the internet and sometimes the challenges faced due to this. For instance one of the participants indicated:

For students, such as myself, who travel in Africa in areas, where no internet is available there is often a lack of understanding by the tutor in trying to arrange the class contribution differently (please note: not avoiding it).

Similarly participants highlighted the view that the internet connectivity in developing countries was a challenge. Overall internet connectivity was seen as major hindering factor. One participant indicated:

IT connectivity is a major concern from many students. The system and connectivity is variable at best and is frequently inaccessible from all parts of the world." Furthermore one of the participants commented that "Periods of system upgrades and technology changes can be very difficult.

Another participant indicated:

Internet speed or sometime connectivity concerning Skype or other APPs for discussions. Communicating via this online system has been a challenge - especially when the University changed the format. I lost a "lot of time" -it was very expensive when i did not have the ability to communicate with my advisor.

Other comments such as the following also highlighted issues with internet speed and connectivity:

Yes. Due to the continent that I come from, infrastructural challenges still pose a great challenge - power is not constant therefore, individuals have to generate their own electricity, which has become the main power supply and no longer a support to the main electricity supply.

ICT issues are a common-parlance for those of us in the developing worlds. The IT service provider may not just work when you are time-bound to submit your assignments.

Some students face internet communication challenges either due to their places of residence or work sites and that should be considered also.

Additional major challenges include poor network connectivity in some areas like my region in Nigeria and the exchange rate of school fees is so high compared to similar studies in my country.

Server workload issues were also highlighted with comments such as:

It seems to me that UOL faces server workload problem. Usually, I work at night which is day time in Europe. During that time it is extremely difficult to get online. The impact is on Sat when I need to submit my assignments.

The university transitioned to a different version of the learning management system and this was also seen as a challenge by many respondents. For instance one respondent indicated: *The change to the laureate lens was traumatic.*

Many respondents indicated that they had great success overall with technology. For instance one respondent indicated that:

I think technology in 2.4 above has more than one phase. For example, the difficulty I experienced was less as a result the learning platform or technological skill that inadequate infrastructure which is a national problem in my part of the world. Another respondent indicated that: I was initially apprehensive on how I would cope with the technology and online class. The technology platform of the program made it extremely easy to navigate and interact with the doctoral tutor. This was one of the major reasons I decided to continue in the program.

5.2.5 Support Systems

Overall majority of the students seemed to be satisfied with the support system provided. Students acknowledged the vital role played by peers in their development. *"Learning set interactions and support have been instrumental in my development as a learner"*. Students also commented about the benefits of supports from friends and family. *"It would not have been possible to reach this stage of the DBA program without the constant supports of my family and friends. My spouse has been my biggest supporter!"*

However respondents indicated that more support needs to be provided. For instance support in terms of meeting financial challenges. One participant commented:

Received sufficient academic support. However, little or no support regarding financial challenges (no scholarship, grants, etc).

Support systems for the purposes of the research involves support from fellow learning set members, student support managers, friends and family provided to the doctoral student.

Participants expressed the need for more support during the course of the DBA program. One participant shared:

The DBA journey has been daunting and I actually sometimes feel like I have been through in the deep end with no support. Students like me with no research experience will gain through a targeted training that addresses the needs of this category of people.

International students are often impacted by lack of proper writing and grammar skills. Many respondents indicated the need for more one on one support in order to overcome the study challenges. One participant commented:

When you have a problem for example with writing skills and grammar, you are merely referred to a link to go and find your answers. No elaboration on the problems and how to overcome the challenges. This do not help learning.

Recommendations were also made by the participants to offer more support in form of face to face classroom trainings to enhance student understanding of research methodology, research design and data collection practices.

In addition, participants also commented that the support system must play a more active role in helping students manage the workload issues. For instance:

Rather than simple IT related support, I am not sure whether students' request for support, such a problem related to the time differences and work load have even been taken in consideration. It seems that the student support system is just a link rather than a real support system.

5.2.6 Satisfaction with Instructor and Quality of Instruction

Majority of the learners seemed to have positive experiences with the tutors. Participants discussed the invaluable help from tutors in their development:

The most helpful aspect of the program is the helpful support shown by the tutor. Without the help of my doctoral tutor I would not have been able to be where I am in the program.

The resources which the doctoral tutor provided helped me immensely and played a critical role in my development.

Another participant shared:

Without doubt my doctoral tutor has been there for me. I have come to rely on him for advice beyond studies and work life. He is indeed a mentor in true sense.

Whereas the role of instructors was perceived to be very helpful, many participants discussed difficulties with satisfaction with instructor and quality of instruction. One participant shared:

I have had 3 tutors so far. Only in one instance, did I feel that he was present and interactive to a satisfactory level. He was responsive and provided at least some minimum level of guidance about the readings. He also provided very direct feedback to our submitted work. The other tutors seemed to not be in engaged with the material.

Many participants pointed out that the instructional styles were different which led to challenges:

Key challenge is the difference in approach and judgment of different tutors. What is encouraged by one tutor is dismissed by another. This is particularly the case in terms of the academic requirements (how to write literature synthesis, literature review and CAL).

My current challenge now is that it seems that tutors want to shape online participation to ensure the objective of the DBA, that is ok, but they do this disregarding the posted weekly briefs and with no respect to student freedoms. I was hurt recently as one particular behavior I had at class was loved by my colleagues but not by my tutor. That also would be ok if she explained and addressed directly her reasons. I just felt being ignored. Like I was not there. Another challenge is that some times because of the asynchronous environment, set members opt to comment on whichever they choose to and some posts go without any contribution to the class and students do not have direct input from their peers.

Participants also included suggestions to improve the support from instructors. For instance:

I think a thesis advisor should allocate enough time to read their student's paper and be able to give a feedback.

Tutors are also viewed as student representatives. Their response time in matter that are somehow critical to students needs to be improved.

Few of tutors were not objective in their feedback, and didn't allow open discussion about the topic. Some time I felt that I study in a catholic boarding school, which thinking is not allowed.

6. Discussion, Implications and Avenues for Future Research

The main aim of this study was to recognize the challenges faced by the students in a professional doctoral program. The findings of this study are consistent with themes identified in other studies which deal with doctoral student challenges and also identified new challenges. Various studies in the doctoral education have previously examined the importance of faculty member involvement (Golde, 2000), cultural issues (Lim, Dannels, & Watkins, 2008), support systems (Hoskings & Goldberg, 2005) in helping doctoral student overcome challenges. The existing study found that some of the other challenges such as Absence of human interaction, financial difficulties, course structure and workload also impact online students enrolled in professional doctorate programs.

Course structure and workload issues are important from the overall learning standpoint. The administrators need to be careful not to over-burden the students. While majority of the participants in the study responded favourably to the existing course structure and workload issues it is important that course structure and workload issues are looked at for the betterment of the program. The size of the learning sets can be carefully monitored and mechanisms need to be put in place to identify students with similar work problems be placed in the same learning set. This will further promote a more efficient learning environment. Given that learning set participations are key and vital part of knowledge sharing in the program, the number of assignments per module can be reduced to help students focus on the learning set participation with set members to focus on more detailed critical discussions and reflections. The learning week begins Thursday and ends Wednesday. The current course structure warrants that assignments be submitted on Saturday also the students are required to engage in learning sets from Monday through Wednesday. One recommendation would be to extend the deadline to submit assignment on Monday. This will help in providing working adults more time to work on the assignment and produce better output.

The majority of survey respondents were happy with the resources in the program. Some participants indicated troubles accessing online books and articles. It would be recommended, that the course development and delivery teams do a periodic check on the availability of all the listed resources in the module and make sure that all the links listed in the module are functional.

Internet connectivity can be a major issue for international students. While developing the resources for the module, it would be valuable to make sure that bandwidth issues are considered for students. Also, students reportedly faced issues during the transition to new learning management systems. Adequate training must be provided to student to ensure that the transition is smooth.

Many students in the study discussed the challenges they faced because of differing instructor teaching styles. Respondents highlighted the need for the tutors to better foster peer to peer facilitation. Administrators of the program should consider offering more workshops on instructional best practices. It becomes important for doctoral tutors to understand that the level of each student is different and often cultural aspects influence the learning style. The instructional best practices workshop can specifically focus on communication aspects and help instructors enhance the understanding of cultural awareness. As an example of activities in such workshops instructors can be presented with challenging scenarios arising because of cultural differences of the course participants and asked about possible ways to deal with them. Mutual sharing of possible strategies to deal with challenging scenarios can help faculty learn from each other and this should be encouraged in such workshops.

Doctoral instructors must serve as a source of encouragement for students. Quality and timely formative feedback and grading play a significant role in enhancing doctoral student learning experience (Can & Walker, 2011; Wang & Li, 2011). The DBA program requires doctoral instructors to provide formative feedback and grading on deliverables each week to the students. A common rubric for grading and formative feedback can be adapted by faculty to maintain consistency of grading and feedback and this will help alleviate some of the challenges which student face due to their perception of inadequate feedback.

Respondents strongly felt that in addition to being interactive and present, faculty members must also contribute to the student learning from a practitioner standpoint. Professional doctorate programs rely on solving real-world problems. Administrators of the program need to place a special emphasis on hiring faculty members who bring real world expertise to further advance the practical knowledge of students. Furthermore, administrators must continually organize opportunities to train faculty in real-world applications to keep the knowledge of the faculty current and promote faculty collaborations with industry.

The administrators should also consider offering doctoral tutors with avenues to share their experiences teaching online and learning from each other on an ongoing basis. For instance, creation of a designated forums where

tutors can share their instructional best practices. Administrators can also consider providing mentoring support for instructors and particularly pairing experienced mentors with new instructors. This type of association will provide both the experienced tutors and relatively new tutors with avenues to potentially learn from each other. More training seminars can be provided to doctoral tutors to develop uniformity in terms of providing grades and formative feedback to participants. Communication between a doctoral tutor and a student is vital and more learning opportunities should be provided for tutors to improve in this area.

Doctoral students in the program discussed the challenges they faced due to lack of support. Majority of the participants indicated the need for more support. Specifically, participants also indicated that the socializing activities were minimal. The administrators of the program should work on including more face to face socializing events for students and help develop more peer to peer support groups. There has been research which highlights the benefits achieved by such peer support groups (Noonan, Ballinger & Black, 2007; Minor, Pimpleton & Stinchfield, 2013). Majority of the respondents were satisfied with the mentoring they received in the program. However respondents also commented on the need to develop the mentoring aspect further in the program. Administrators of the program can work towards identifying better means to connect student in the program with faculty members based on their research interests. Support in terms of academic writing can be extremely valuable to doctoral students. One recommendation would be to set up an online centre dedicated to academic writing. Faculty can recommend students to the centre and the support staff in the centre can work one on one with the students on academic writing in an asynchronous or synchronous mode. International students will benefit immensely with the feedback dedicated on their academic writing.

The program is based on an action learning modality. Some of the participants highlighted the need to get exposed to action learning modality prior to starting module 1. Pre-program training can be offered to students on action learning to help them obtain the benefits of this modality when they actually start their modules. Learning set participation is a key component of all modules in the DBA program. Such pre-program training can involve training students on ways to help them better interact with colleagues who are from different backgrounds. This will help students obtain most benefits out of learning set interactions. Students are required to work in the learning sets in each module and the discussions and critical reflection on work based problems happen in the learning set. The learning sets need to be carefully formed in such a manner that the members in a particular learning set have similar interests and are from similar time zones. International students form the core of this program and assigning students based on closeness of the time zones will help towards ensuring that members of the learning set receive timely feedback on work based issues.

Participants also discussed the importance of having supportive classmates who could be relied upon for encouragement and guidance. Doctoral instructors and administrators should work towards finding ways to promote building supportive relationship between doctoral students. Forums could be formed to promote discussion of student challenges and discuss how students worked to overcome this. Also having encouragement and guidance from instructors to find ways to balance work and academic life tasks would be beneficial for the doctoral student development. More workshops (for instance, time management workshops) and discussions should be organized for students to help them make better academic choices and also help them balance studies, work and family lives.

Results of this qualitative study are not generalizable as the study reports the experiences of 91 respondents who participated in the study. More studies should be conducted to investigate if these experiences are in line with other professional doctoral students. More face to face in-depth interviews should be conducted to obtain a clearer understanding of participant experiences. Future research can focus on investigating ways in which the communication between doctoral student and instructor can be improved. Future research can also look at ways in which closer collaboration between doctoral students who are culturally different can be obtained. Culture can play an important role in doctoral student interactions and it will be good to see the impact culture has in doctoral student interactions in an online context. The current research reveals that faculty need to do more in terms of helping doctoral students succeed. Future research can look at how specifically the doctoral faculty can plan and prepare in order to accommodate the learning curve of the online doctoral students and play a key role in student retention in online doctoral programs.

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