Title: Postgraduate researchers' experiences of accessing participants or resource gatekeepers: 'Wading through treacle!'

Abstract:

Background and Aims: Research exploring both the general experiences of postgraduate research students when interacting with gatekeepers and how this affects their progress and emotional resilience is currently lacking. Consequently, this study aims to explore the experience of postgraduate researchers interacting with gatekeepers to develop an understanding of both the challenges and enablers.

Method: A mixed-methods online questionnaire was distributed internationally. N=66 questionnaires were returned.

Results: Analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data highlighted that postgraduate researchers face a range of challenges when using gatekeepers to access participants for studies, and that there is a negative emotional impact arising when challenges are faced. Thematic analysis revealed six themes relating to the experiences of the postgraduate researchers: Access to participants; Relationships; Perceptions of research; Context for gatekeepers, Emotional impact, and Mechanisms to address challenges.

Conclusion: The study has highlighted a gap in the literature concerning the number of students who experience issues with gatekeepers, and how this affects their ability to undertake their research, their emotional resilience, and their access to support. Furthermore, postgraduate researchers utilised a number of supportive mechanisms including seeking advice, reflective practice, and persistence to help them overcome challenges faced.

Keywords: student, postgraduate, gatekeepers, experiences, recruitment, researcher

Abstract word count: 193

Word count:

With refs: 7740

Without refs:6316

Introduction

Undertaking a PhD can be a demanding, isolating, and emotional experience (Lally, 2012) which requires the ability to manage emotional distress (Devos *et al.*, 2016). PhD research can be emotionally demanding, complex, and time consuming for the student (Gill and Burnard, 2008) and can affect wellbeing (Levecque *et al.*, 2017; Marais *et al.*, 2018). Ensuring that students complete their PhD in a timely manner is of great importance to universities, as their work represents a large proportion of research output in higher education, and their studies are a source of new knowledge in their respective fields. Challenges with gatekeepers during PhD research has been evidenced in literature (Lange, Rogers and Dodds, 2013; Bracken-Roche *et al.*, 2017) and could affect timely completion of studies if barriers to recruitment are not factored into strategic planning (Singh and Wassenaar, 2016).

The first two authors (AS and OH) have faced challenges with recruitment owing to reliance on gatekeepers. Both received advice from their supervisors to review the literature, record these challenges, and incorporate them into their theses. This exploration of the literature highlighted that to date, research has explored the role and experiences of gatekeepers, and their relationships with researchers (Clark, 2011; Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013; Singh and Wassenaar, 2016). There is also considerable research exploring the technicalities of accessing specific groups of participants in vulnerable fields (Miller, Kelly and Spawls, 2013; Høyland, Hollund and Olsen, 2015; Collings, Grace and Llewellyn, 2016; Carey and Griffiths, 2017). Furthermore, literature evidences that other postgraduates (PGRs) have reflected on challenges with gatekeepers in specific studies such as fieldwork and research with children (Johl and Renganathan, 2010; Collings, Grace and Llewellyn, 2016). While this existing literature provides a valuable insight, it does not provide sufficient insight into the broader experiences of PGRs with gatekeepers.

There is a notable lack of qualitative research, particularly from the United Kingdom (UK), exploring PGRs' experiences interacting with gatekeepers. Specifically, nothing in the literature appeared to echo the researchers' experiences, nor provide them with strategies to deal with the challenges faced. Thus, to date, there is a clear gap in knowledge, and a need to explore the experience of PGRs interacting with gatekeepers to develop an understanding of both the challenges and enablers they may face. This paper seeks to explore one of these challenges in more depth: PGRs experiences of accessing participants using gatekeepers. In the context of this study gatekeepers are defined as any person who is instrumental in allowing PGRs access to participants or other resources for their research.

Background

The exploration of the literature and written reflection were useful for thesis development. However, neither of these activities addressed the immediate challenges faced, nor dealt with the emotions experienced. Thus, given the health and social care backgrounds of the authors, AS and OH decided to explore their experiences using a tool commonly used within these disciplines: a structured critical reflection process. Reflection can be applied to a wide range of situations (Fook and Gardner, 2007), and is an important part of doctoral study (Brookfield Stephen, 2015) which can foster resilience and creativity (Gray, 2007). It can be challenging to critically self-reflect (Brookfield, 1995) therefore, reflexive conversations can help make sense of situations (Gray, 2007; Maxwell, 2014). Conversations with peers can be beneficial, since peers understand learning experiences in a

similar way (Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck, 2010), which created an impetus to collaborate. A set of questions were developed, based on the four domains recommended by Smith (2011): self-critical (own actions), interpersonal (relationships), contextual (concept, theories, and methods) and critical (political, social, and ethical context) to explore the issues, avoiding 'why' questions as these can lead to defensiveness and justifications (Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck, 2010). The chosen questions allowed for reflection on experiences and lessons learnt, facilitating the reflective process. Two conversations were undertaken with a two-week gap in-between, as reflecting on reflection can further individual learning (Fakirani, 2009). Questions used for these conversations are attached in Appendix 1.

[Figure 1 here]

This reflective process (Figure 1) led to the identification of certain similarities concerning the challenges faced, emotions experienced, and strategies to overcome such issues.

Methodology

Design and distribution of a questionnaire

The researchers wished to determine whether other PGRs had experienced the same challenges. Consequently, they developed a questionnaire with the aim of quantifying and qualifying PGR experiences. This included a question asking participants to describe their experiences using a metaphor. Reflective metaphors can be a powerful medium for exploring ideas and insights that do not come from rational discourse (Gray, 2007). The majority of questions were based on the questions used in the reflective conversations or designed from the similarities in the researchers' own experiences. The questionnaire was piloted, as this can help ensure quality of the instrument, help identity any issues, such as ambiguous questions, and assess elements such as time to complete (Oppenheim, 1966; van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2002; Kelley *et al.*, 2003). Ethical approval was granted by Bournemouth University's Ethics committee (reference ID: 17292). The online questionnaire was shared through a mixture of convenience sampling and snowballing (Robinson, 2014). The distribution was done via the researchers' personal networks, a presentation at a Public Health PGR Conference in the UK, and by contacting University Doctoral Colleges via email, and via Facebook and Twitter. Social media is a useful medium to connect with potentially hard-to-reach populations, but the anonymity may augment honesty (Rodham and Gavin, 2006).

Assumptions

The researchers had four key assumptions:

- PGRs would commonly face challenges with gatekeepers when attempting to access participants;
- That there would be a potentially negative emotional impact on PGRs who experienced challenges recruiting participants or accessing resources through gatekeepers;
- That PGRs may have adopted a range of strategies to help them overcome difficulties;
- Sharing useful strategies might be of benefit to other PGRs in similar situations.

Data analysis

Analysis occurred in three stages:

1. Quantitative survey responses were analysed using IBM SPSS statistics version 25 by the third author. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for demographic information and survey responses. Chi-square tests of independence were selected to determine whether frequencies differed between demographic categories.

2. The first two authors undertook analysis of the content of the open-ended responses using thematic analysis, which involves organising data into themes by recognising patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2012). The data was analysed through a process of deductive coding using a framework developed from the issues identified in the researchers' reflective process, and inductive coding of emerging themes. One fifth of 66 participants' qualitative data was read by the third researcher, who reviewed the analysis for consistency and quality.

3. Synthesis of the qualitative and quantitative data was undertaken with the qualitative data used to explain and explore the quantitative data. Themes and sub-themes were refined through discussion between the researchers.

Findings

Quantitative

Demographics of the 66 participants are outlined in Table 1. The mean age of the survey respondents was 36 (±11) years. 6% (4) of the survey respondents had one doctoral supervisor, 89% (59) had two or more supervisors. 86% (57) had worked outside of research before starting their doctorate. 27% (22) of participants were researching industry professionals, educators, or healthcare practitioners. 48% (32) were working with vulnerable participants for the purposes of their research, of which 26% (17) were researching children and young people. Other vulnerable groups included patients and service users, pregnant women, dementia or cognitive impairment, victims of crime, people with mental illness or neurodiversity, and refugees or trafficked people.

[Table 1 here]

Percentage is reflective of whole sample (N= 66). N= how many participants provided demographic information.

Participants were asked to select the top 3 emotions experienced from a range of positive and negative emotions. It was notable that the most frequently reported emotions were negative; over one third felt disappointed, and just under one third experienced worry and stress (see figure 2). Only 21% (14) viewed their experience with gatekeepers as negative. 44% (29) reported that their recruitment with gatekeepers had been successful, 42% (28) had limited success, whilst 3% (2) failed to secure participants through gatekeepers. 70% (46) of the PGRs experienced challenges in recruitment with gatekeepers.

[Figure 2 here]

49% (32) of participants sought help from others when experiencing recruitment challenges of which 21% (21) contacted their supervisor for help. Others sought help from external organisations (6), their colleagues (5), individuals in their professional networks (4), their research participants (2) or friends (1). When facing challenges with recruitment, participants tended to use their personal (29) or professional networks (32) for advice. Others approached external organisations for help with

recruitment (27) or asked for advice from academics who had undertaken similar research (16). PGRs were less likely to use their supervisor's contacts (9), ask their supervisor to intervene on their behalf (8) or advertise for participants in print media (4).

The PGRs found the following actions helpful in managing the challenges of recruitment: talking to supervisors (37), talking with other students (36), talking to friends (29), focusing on other projects in the meantime (26), reading about other PGR's experiences (24) or reflectively writing about own experiences (24). 55% (36) of respondents felt that completing the survey helped them reflect more deeply on their own experience with gatekeepers.

Qualitative

Thematic analysis of the open-ended responses validated the issues identified from the process and highlighted a broader range of issues. Six themes were identified, with associated sub-themes (see Table 2). Several themes interlinked; for instance, emotional impact (theme five) was generally mentioned as a consequence of encountering one or more of the challenges in the first four themes. Direct quotations are used to highlight participants' experiences. Each quotation is followed by a unique participant identifier, the location of their fieldwork, and their academic discipline.

[Table 2 here]

Theme 1 - Access to participants or resources

This theme consists of a number of issues faced by researchers when seeking access to participants or resources through gatekeepers. One challenge was the difficulty of gaining initial access to participant populations and one area where this seemed to be particularly problematic was undertaking research in schools e.g.

'While teachers have been understanding and supporting my attempts at researching in their schools, to the point they have even been promoting my project to their principals, the principals seem to agree the work is important, but just don't agree to it happening in their schools (reasons: don't want to focus on negative because now using 'positive education', currently committed to other research). Plenty just never respond to the initial contact' ***P17-Australia -Education.***

Other issues within this theme included ignoring initial communications, decisions appearing to be made on the behalf of participants without giving them a voice or choice, and challenges identifying the gatekeepers in the first place e.g.

'Predominantly gatekeepers blocking avenues to potential access to participants- deciding on an institutional level that none of their patients should be 'disturbed' despite the study having full ethical approval. I felt the gatekeepers were extremely paternalistic, removing the opportunity for potential participants to even hear about the study, let alone make up their own mind if they wanted to participate.' ***P59, UK, Clinical Health.***

Researchers also experienced some gatekeepers having a 'monopoly' on certain groups, gatekeepers expressing interest or giving consent but then changing their minds further down the line:

'Some (most) gatekeepers were totally up for it, but a few said yes initially but when the time came to actually post the survey link, they became hard to pin down, didn't answer calls and one was outright rude.' ***P30, UK, Social Sciences.***

'On the other hand, the original primary target audience for the research was difficult to access, possibly because the right gatekeepers were not known/encountered.' ***P46, EU, Computer Science.***

Difficulties were exacerbated when fieldwork was undertaken in another country from the one in which they were studying:

'Developing a sufficient working relationship with a University in India is a lengthy and difficult process when communicating via email from the UK' ***P7, India, Social Sciences.***

Interestingly, one barrier used by gatekeepers was 'survey fatigue' which was often given as a reason, without consulting potential participants. Ironically, this 'survey fatigue' excuse was one of the reasons given by many Doctoral Colleges to the authors when accessing the student population. Moreover, even the researcher's University has strict restrictions on the dissemination of surveys to the student body.

Theme 2 – Relationships

This theme brings together all the challenges and benefits that align to the need for researchers to influence gatekeepers and the gatekeepers' influence on participants. It has highlighted challenges faced around the levels of control gatekeepers wanted and issues faced included:

- Wanting to control the communications with participants;
- Wanting to dictate which participants could participate;
- Pressurising people to participate;
- Researchers having to compromise to meet gatekeeper demands;
- Gatekeepers poorly briefing participants.

When it came to information control one participant noted that:

'Some head teachers refused to forward the message to their staff, explaining that they had no teachers meeting the study's criteria. One head insisted on a change of wording before being prepared to share the message.' ***P57, UK, Education.***

This could also present ethical challenges for researchers, as often communication documentation has been approved through an ethical panel.

The following quote highlights the frustration faced when gatekeepers believed they should decide which participants are most useful for the study:

'I found that where I have accessed participants using gatekeepers, they have steered me towards particular service users and cases. Only one of my gatekeepers has given me the freedom to develop my own relationships and follow up on leads.' ***P66, UK, Social Sciences.***

However, there were also a lot of positive comments about how supportive some gatekeepers have been; offering advice and guidance on processes and procedures and helping PGRs interact with participants. Additioanlly, many gatekeepers took a personal interest in the research and provided both motivation and support to researchers e.g. regular contact to ask about the study and expressing their excitement to be engaged in the research:

'One of my gatekeepers was instrumental in helping me find a second research site for my study. The introduction they provided was invaluable and saved a lot of time and effort.' ***P52, UK, Clinical Health.***

Theme 3 - Perceptions of research

This theme centres on how gatekeepers' feelings about the research impeded or assisted progress and credibility. Some gatekeepers were not unhelpful nor unsupportive but perceived the research as low priority, whilst others did not fully engage. Such tactics often impacted on the recruitment of participants and raised time pressures for the researcher. There were issues around gatekeepers perceiving the research as a potential threat to their reputation or that of the organisation as well as those questioning the value of the research e.g.

'Another gatekeeper did not appear to be keen on the research and despite originally having access approved at a higher level she spoke to others and the support for the research was withdrawn. This individual also took months to respond to emails/return documentation.' ***P64, UK, Life Science.***

'Gatekeeper offering arbitrary judgement on the value of my work- i.e. I don't see the point, it's just a lot of paperwork and the patients wouldn't be interested anyways' ***P59, UK, Clinical Health.***

This theme also highlighted how the personal qualities, beliefs, and values of the gatekeepers did not only hinder or help access to gatekeepers but also impacted on the research in a more concrete way, with some only supporting the research if it met their own personal agendas. The following two quotes exemplify some of the challenges faced around control of participants and the research agenda:

'Some have been unwilling to speak to me. Some provide misleading information. In most cases, they are biased and will only do things that will benefit them. For example, they will only help you organise focus group discussions if they can participate in them or have their family members participate.' ***P5, Africa, Business and Economics.***

'Two gatekeepers, men in their 40s and 50s, were using the opportunity to advance their own agenda rather than support the research.' ***P55, Australia, Life Science.***

Theme 4 – Contextual factors for Gatekeepers

This theme covers the contextual issues faced by the gatekeepers: political, economic, and social drivers that can impact the relationship between the gatekeeper and researcher and the gatekeeper's ability to support the research. Staff turnover sometimes led to gatekeepers changing which meant researchers had to restart the engagement and buy-in process, change their recruitment strategy, as the new gatekeeper did not have the same relationships with participants, or work with the fact that the new gatekeeper wanted no involvement with the research.

It was also evident that there was a distinct difference in the priorities of the researcher and the organisation, and this meant that however willing gatekeepers were to support the research they often found themselves with a lack of time and consequently often slow to respond to researchers e.g.

'Some gatekeepers have competing priorities and do not mention the trial. Some do not explain the randomisation correctly or do not explain the trial in a positive light' ***P13, UK, Clinical Health.***

'The gatekeepers are willing to help as much as they can, but ultimately it depends on the time/resources of the prisons which I wish to access.' ***P6, EU, Social Sciences.***

One challenge faced was tiers of access. Trying to identify who had authority and then who else would be supporting the project was often challenging. Participants talked of having top-level engagement but none from the people directly working with participants or vice versa, support from the ground but difficulty convincing the top-level e.g.

'Hospital administrators decided if I could recruit at their sites, Research nurses working at the sites decided which patients could be approached, and then family had the right to decline on the behalf of participants if they did not have capacity...so three layers of various types of gatekeepers.' ***P59, UK, Clinical Health.***

Theme 5 – Emotional Impact

PGRs experienced similar emotions, despite a wide range of differing challenges faced. Frustration was a key emotion experienced, and this impacted motivation:

'…to be honest my motivation has decreased hugely over the last year, and I am really struggling to keep going' ***P64, England and Wales, Criminology.***

However, participants spoke of a number of things that helped them to maintain their motivation, including enthusiasm from gatekeepers and participants, their own personal drive and determination to complete the study, experiencing small wins and self-efficacy e.g.

'Because this is a damn good trial and I designed it.' ***P13, UK, Clinical Health.***

One question that was incorporated, in order to get a deeper insight into the PGRs' feelings asked them to describe their experiences as a metaphor. From this, the following sub-themes were identified:

- The length of time taken to make progress;
- The levels of persuasion needed;
- That it could be a near impossible task;
- Lots of effort for little return;
- Often out of their control.

One participant went as far as to describe the experience of recruitment as:

'Recruitment is like an invisible monster of research. Reason: No one sees its challenges and difficulties as they should, but it is almost the most difficult part of research.' ***P44, UK, Clinical Health.***

And another's metaphor highlighted the emotional impact of the process:

'for the frustrating process of recruitment would be …trying to empty a sinking boat of water with only a teacup in an area where sharks are circling'. The whole process is very isolating and yet the consequences of failure is worse.' ***P15, UK, Clinical Health.***

However, one metaphor also highlighted that although this is a challenging experience, it is not insurmountable:

'It's like wading through a muddy field: you have to accept it won't be easy and may be dirty…' ***P10-UK, Health.***

Theme 6 - Mechanisms to address challenges

A theme emerged around the need to address the challenges and maintain momentum. Many participants referenced their commitment to completing the PhD to a deadline was a key motivator. Further analysis highlighted that there were similarities in the actions taken to drive the project forward including seeking support from supervisors, peers, family and friends, and utilising professional social networks and social media.

'I spoke to my supervisory team, to discuss my frustration…' ***P66, UK, Social Sciences.***

Seeking support from peers was another common avenue used to address challenges; specifically, engaging in conversations with other research students going through similar problems. Participants noted that they had used skills developed in previous careers e.g.

'I worked for several years in an industry where cold-calling was common and skills I picked up there were irreplaceable to the whole participant recruitment process. To be honest, my past experiences in that industry were what got me through that aspect and even made it enjoyable.' ***P30, UK, Social Sciences.***

Several participants also noted that the process of completing the questionnaire allowed them to consider alternative options or was helpful in identifying ways to resolve challenges e.g. *blogging. A*nother noted that perhaps they should take action rather than accepting the situation and two evidenced that it had led them to reflect:

'Completion has been a reflexive process for me.' ***P30, UK, Social Sciences.***

'Made me think about the importance of the role of gatekeepers for successful completion of the Project' ***P62, UK, Psychology.***

The data enabled the authors to identify 12 tactics used to address the challenges:

1. Asking supervisor(s) to intervene on their behalf.
2. Using personal networks, professional contacts, and supervisor(s)' contacts to find other potential participants.
3. Identifying other organisations and approaching them to find other potential participants.
4. Identifying other academics who had undertaken similar research and contacting them for advice.
5. Talking with supervisor(s).
6. Talking with other peer(s).
7. Writing down experiences.
8. Talking to friends who had research experience.
9. Maintaining a focus on other projects/areas of PhD work.
10. Meeting face to face with gatekeepers.
11. Persistence or determination.
12. Adapting the methodology.

Furthermore, synthesis of the six themes revealed two types: Practical and Emotional challenges. The practical being all the challenges linked to solving the problem, and the emotional being the ability of the researchers to cope with the emotional impact of the challenges. Some of the mechanisms for dealing with these challenges worked effectively for tackling both the practical and emotional, as exemplified in the model (Figure. 3).

[Figure 3 here]

Participants also identified a range of factors that kept them motivated (Table 3). The motivators could be seen as enabling factors that supported the participants' actions. Participants also noted several personal qualities such as optimism, resilience, and tenacity. These could be seen as underpinning the enabling factors which helped the participants to take action.

[Table 3 here]

Discussion

The majority of PGRs experienced challenges when recruiting participants through gatekeepers. The main challenges that appeared to affect the experience of using gatekeepers to access research participants were gatekeepers restricting access, time delays for a variety of reasons, gatekeepers changing and differing priorities. Singh and Wassenaar (2016) note that strategic planning as part of the research process needs to take into account the processes around gatekeeping. Our research highlights the need for a 'plan B' in dealing with gatekeepers to safeguard against these barriers. Considering 'what if' scenarios as part of this planning could be a useful activity as part of the initial project planning phase and this could be incorporated into supervision. This is a very practical action to help PGRs make progress, but it was also clear that a relatively high percentage of respondents experienced worry, stress, and anxiety arising from the challenges during recruitment. Just over one quarter reported feelings of demotivation, a sense of failure, and feeling out of control. It is well documented that academic stress bought on by research challenges can have detrimental impacts on PhD student's mental health including increased psychological distress (Levecque *et al.*, 2017) and decreased wellbeing (Marais *et al.*, 2018). The emotional impacts were complex and hard to address, and this is understandable as some challenges could mean being denied access to participants and not gaining the data needed for analysis.

For some participants, gatekeepers appeared to abide by professional aims and objectives in an effort to protect participants. This situation often led to Gatekeepers denying access to participants particularly for vulnerable groups. Gatekeepers blocking access to vulnerable participants is not uncommon in research (Lange, Rogers and Dodds, 2013; Bracken-Roche *et al.*, 2017), yet ironically, vulnerable participants have found participating in research to be a positive experience. For example, it was found that participating in research that gave bereaved relatives the opportunity to share the narrative of their experience offered therapeutic benefits (Germain, Mayland and Jack, 2016). Therefore, while researchers must make clear the potential benefits, it is important they respect the professional aims and objectives of any Gatekeepers they approach. Specifically, it must be recognised that vulnerable groups need to be protected and not adversely affected. For example, bereaved relatives experience high levels of distress and are susceptible to both physical and mental health issues (Stroebe, Stroebe and Hansson, 1993; Keilman *et al.*, 2014). To protect vulnerable

populations from harm, existing ethical codes must be strictly adhered to and the researchers must listen respectfully to recommendations (Dyregrov, 2004; Keilman *et al.*, 2014).

Nearly half the participants sought help from others when faced with challenges during recruitment via gatekeepers, most frequently talking to their supervisors, of which, more than half reported it as helpful. This finding was expected because of the key role the supervisory relationship plays in the journey of a successful doctoral candidate. It is well documented that sufficient supervisory support is related to positive wellbeing in PhD students (Devine and Hunter, 2017) and in contrast, less supportive supervisory styles can predict psychological distress (Levecque *et al.*, 2017) and depressive symptoms (Peluso, Carleton and Asmundson, 2011). This finding indicates the extent PGRs rely on their supervisors as a source of support when faced with obstacles during their research and there are risks to their wellbeing if their support needs are unmet. Studies have shown that support networks, such as supervisory teams, are essential for the progression of the PhD student (Sarikaya, McAlpine and Amundsen, 2017). Specifically, one paper discussed that supervisors are essential in a student's research journey for passing on such knowledge which covers a multiplicity of insights, concrete tips, energy and time-saving devices, which ease the often rocky road to successful completion (Hockey, 1997). Consequently, it might be beneficial to provide guidance for PhD researchers at the initiation of their researcher on some of the challenges they may face, and possible ways to circumvent or mitigate for these. This could include sessions at PGR indications for supervisors or more experienced peers, discussions in supervision meetings or written guidance in the form of blogs and links to useful resources such as (**cite Ahern 2014**). Such resources written from the perspectives of those who have experienced challenges and reflected on them, also may help PGRs to feel less anxious should they face such issues.

Supervisors can also impact significantly on a PGRs potential to complete their studies (Devos *et al.*, 2016). The PGRs in this study found engaging with their supervisors helped them overcome challenges posed by gatekeepers, specifically, the networking aspect of support. Supportive supervision can also aid in the reduction of emotional exhaustion (Devine and Hunter, 2017). It could be argued that such support and guidance from the supervisory team often relies on good relations between the supervisor and student. Students can come across issues with their supervisory team (Hockey, 1997; Heath, 2002) and whilst this paper does not seek to explore the nature of the supervisory relationship, this investigation does evidence the importance PGRs place on having the support of their supervisors, and the need to build and maintain strong relationships (Phillips, Pugh and Johnson, 2015).

Time constraints, availability, and resources could limit a supervisor's ability to provide the support their student expects. In these cases, it could be recommended that institutions provide realistic guidelines of how much support they can expect from their supervisors and where else they could seek advice or emotional support. In this study, less than 10% of PGRs looked for support from their colleagues, and only 2% from friends. Yet, over half found talking to other students helpful. Findings from Stubb and colleagues (2011) found that 44% of PGRs reported that their academic community was a source of empowerment and encouragement, reducing stress. However, research has shown that up to a third of PhD students in some cases did not feel a part of a scholarly community (Stubb, Pyhältö and Lonka, 2011). To feel a part of an academic community requires students to become absorbed in their environment (Christensen and Lund 2014) and socialise with their peers. Pyhältö and colleagues (2012) found those PGRs who actively engaged in their scholarly community found this to be their central resource of support on their doctoral journey. Likewise, doctoral student networks or peer-support models have been found to increase a sense of morale, and improve wellbeing (Lewinski *et al.*, 2017; Galica *et al.*, 2018). Why more students in this study did not seek support from their peers, colleagues, and friends may require further investigation but this should encourage Universities to consider promoting peer support.

One issue that the PGRs faced was that the research was not a priority for the gatekeepers. Richards (2015) argues that we all have expectations which can affect professional relationships. An awareness of how expectations might affect us, and those relationships, is a way to help us manage them. This is a potential topic that could be considered for inclusion into supervisory meetings. Perhaps discussing how to deal with challenges such as gatekeepers pushing their own agenda onto the research might be of benefit. This research was undertaken prior to the outbreak of COVID19, and it is worth noting that given the current global context at time of writing, there is the potential for the challenges faced by PGRs to be increased, and that the importance of the supervisor/student relationship is therefore increased.

Use of a reflective process

It was reported that completing the questionnaire was a useful reflective tool. Although approximately one fifth of participants felt their experiences of using gatekeepers had been negative overall, more than two thirds experienced challenges. The findings showed that such challenges affected the researcher's emotional state. PGRs undertaking qualitative research often experience emotional turmoil and encouraging reflection can help build emotional resilience in researchers (Service, 2012). This investigation evidenced that emotional turmoil is experienced by PGRs and highlights that there could be more than one benefit from helping PGRs to develop their reflective skills. One method of reflection can be through recording experiences (Holmes, 2012) which could be incorporated into the natural process of writing up the thesis; ensuring that this became part of the thesis and not a standalone activity. However, it has already been noted, in the methodology, that the written reflection undertaken was almost devoid of any emotion, therefore the researchers advocate for the inclusion of a verbal reflective element to any reflective practise. The reflective conversation enabled deeper reflection, specifically around emotion and the lessons learnt. Emotional intelligence has been associated with many positive outcomes of considerable relevance to PhD work, including decision-making abilities, greater confidence, and optimism (George, 2000). Moreover, emotional intelligence has clear links with critical reflective abilities (D'Cruz, Gillingham and Melendez, 2007). Consequently, over and above the provision of guidance from supervisors on how to resolve problems with gatekeepers, encouraging PGRs to reflect critically on challenging situations could be also beneficial to their professional development.

A key issue was initial access via a gatekeeper to participants. Difficulty accessing participants or data samples could have a significant impact on the research, since the PhD projects all hinged on the analysis of data gained from either the potential participant population or data samples. This could impact PGRs' feelings about their research and more specifically their ability to handle the challenges faced. Stracke (2010) found that peer learning amongst PhD students helped them share their experiences and provided a method which facilitated integrated learning communities. Additionally, support from peers can be essential for self-validation (Sarikaya, McAlpine and Amundsen, 2017). Peer reflection might be helpful to consider the more emotional aspects of the PGR journey and could be encouraged by supervisors and University Doctoral Colleges or equivalents. Reflective practice has the person who is reflecting at the centre, but can be supported by more than one person, and collaborative mentoring can promote reciprocal learning (Burchell and Dyson, 2005). The researchers recommend that supervisors should give consideration to supporting PGRs in developing reflective skills. The researchers acknowledge that being critically reflective can be challenging; it is a skill that needs to be developed and honed, as not all reflection is critical (Harvey, Coulson and McMaugh, 2016), rather highly contextual, and its effectiveness can be affected by many factors (Boud and Walker, 1998). Nonetheless, this level of reflection should be explicitly encouraged and embedded in supervision meetings.

Similarly, many respondents found reading about other PGR's experiences using gatekeepers to be helpful, as well as writing and reflecting about their own experiences. Encouraging honest dissemination of experiences is another practical recommendation by providing advice and encouragement to other PGRs experiencing such challenges and may be cathartic for those reflecting on the process.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First and foremost, this was a small exploratory study with 66 participants. Therefore, it would be beneficial for a larger study across post graduate research students to be conducted. Secondly, the main recruitment method was via a PGR Public Health Conference. Accordingly, a large proportion of participants are from these allied disciplines. The authors advocate the need for research across a wider array of disciplines, especially as there may be differences in experience with gatekeepers between disciplines. There was also the potential for self-selection bias, as those who had experienced difficulties might be more likely to complete a survey, and that may have influenced the findings, potentially representing a biased or negative perception of gatekeepers. A further limitation is the representativeness of the sample; the majority were female, and the relatively small sample size compared to the total population of PGRs in the UK suggesting findings may not be generalisable. However, the study serves as a starting point for further work to build upon. The researchers themselves will influence the interpretation of the data (Silverman 2013), particularly in this case, as part of the development of the framework came from the researchers' experiences and they took on a dual role of analysing their own conversations. However, AS and OH have a professional background in reflective practice, and CC was involved in the coding process. Acknowledging the limitations, the researchers recommend the following:

Recommendations for Supervisors and PGRs:

- Supervisors to include discussion on challenges faced when working with Gatekeepers, and to share tips and resources on how these can be overcome.
- Supervisors should encourage PGRs to critically reflect on challenges faced using a structured process (Appendix 1 offers some useful questions).
- Peer support could be used to facilitate reflective practice.
- Supervisors should facilitate PGRs exploration of potential problems when using gatekeepers by using techniques such as 'what if' scenarios.
- Use of supervision to help identify development needs around building emotional resilience.
- The clear identification of one of the supervisory team in a pastoral support role.
- Supervisors or PGR development programmes must include the sharing of the tactics identified to overcome issues with gatekeepers.
- This model of peer reflection with structured questions could be applied more broadly to help PGRs reflect on a wide range of challenges faced.

Recommendations for Universities:

- Formal frameworks for doctoral students that incorporate development of skills such as critical reflection and resilience building.
- Supervisor development programmes should incorporate techniques to help facilitate reflective practice in others, and that the techniques include creative thinking techniques such as the use of metaphor.
- PGR inductions could include sessions by current PGRs or supervisors on challenges faced and how to overcome them

Conclusion

This study has identified that PGRs experience challenges when using gatekeepers to access participants and resources. Although facing these challenges was found to impact PGRs emotional resilience, it also led to innovative problem-solving to overcome such barriers. Twelve key tactics were identified that can help PGRs deal with the issues that arise, including use of personal and professional networks and support from peers and supervisory teams. Moreover, there was several factors identified that helped keep PGRs motivated, which included persistence and desire to complete the thesis. However, further research is required to confirm these as enabling factors and to identify further enabling factors which can potentially help students better overcome emotional and practical barriers. There is a clear gap in the literature concerning how many students experience issues with gatekeepers, and how these impact on both their ability to undertake their research, and their emotional resilience. Future research should examine whether the identified enabling strategies and factors are relevant across all PGR disciplines. Implementing the proposed strategies will not necessarily remove barriers but may ensure that PGRs are better equipped when '*wading through treacle*' by facilitating their personal development and resilience.

Source of Funding: The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgements:

Professor Vanora Hundley

Dr Steve Trenoweth

Bronwyn Sherriff

References

Boud, D. and Walker, D. (1998) 'Promoting reflection in professional courses: The challenge of context.', *Studies in Higher Education*. Routledge, 23(2), p. 191.

Bracken-Roche, D. *et al.* (2017) 'The concept of "vulnerability" in research ethics: an in-depth analysis of policies and guidelines.', *Health Research Policy and Systems*. Montréal: BioMed Central Ltd, 15(1), p. 8. doi: 10.1186/s12961-016-0164-6.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2012) 'Thematic analysis.', in Cooper, H. et al. (eds) *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological.* Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association, pp. 57–71. doi: 10.1037/13620-004.

Brookfield, S. (1995) *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. United States of America: Jossey-Bass. doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2017.1281793.

Brookfield Stephen (2015) 'Critical Reflection as Doctoral Education', *New directions for adult and continuing education*. Great Britain: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015(147), p. 15. doi: 10.1002/ace.20138.

Burchell, H. and Dyson, J. (2005) 'Action Research in Higher Education: Exploring Ways of Creating and Holding the Space for Reflection', *Educational Action Research*. Educational Action Research, 13(2), pp. 291–300. doi: 10.1080/09650790500200280.

Carey, E. and Griffiths, C. (2017) 'Recruitment and consent of adults with intellectual disabilities in a classic grounded theory research study: ethical and methodological considerations.', *Disability & Society*, 32(2), p. 193.

Clark, T. (2011) 'Gaining and maintaining access: Exploring the mechanisms that support and challenge the relationship between gatekeepers and researchers', *Qualitative Social Work*, 10(4), pp. 485–502. doi: 10.1177/1473325009358228.

Collings, S., Grace, R. and Llewellyn, G. (2016) *Negotiating with Gatekeepers in Research with Disadvantaged Children: A Case Study of Children of Mothers with Intellectual Disability.*, *Children & Society*. Wiley/Blackwell (10.1111). doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12163.

Cox, E., Bachkirova, T. and Clutterbuck, D. (2010) *The complete handbook of coaching*. Los Angeles, Calif. ; London: SAGE.

D'Cruz, H., Gillingham, P. and Melendez, S. (2007) 'Reflexivity, its meanings and relevance for social work: a critical review of the literature.', *British Journal of Social Work*. Senior Lecturer, Social Work, Deakin University: Oxford University Press / USA, 37(1), pp. 73–90.

Devine, K. and Hunter, K. H. (2017) 'PhD Student Emotional Exhaustion: The Role of Supportive Supervision and Self-Presentation Behaviours', *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*. Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 54(4), pp. 335–344. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2016.1174143.

Devos, C. *et al.* (2016) 'Doctoral students' experiences leading to completion or attrition: a matter of sense, progress and distress', *European Journal of Psychology of Education*. Springer Netherlands, 32(1), pp. 61–77. doi: 10.1007/s10212-016-0290-0.

Dyregrov, K. (2004) 'Bereaved parents' experience of research participation', *Social Science and Medicine*, 58(2), pp. 391–400. doi: 10.1016/S0277-9536(03)00205-3.

Fakirani, A. (2009) *Meta-Reflection: Reflecting on Reflection*. University of London. Available at: http://www.alimfakirani.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Fakirani-Alim-Meta-Reflection-FINAL.pdf (Accessed: 29 November 2017).

Fook, J. and Gardner, F. (2007) *Practising Critical Reflection: A Resource Handbook*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education.

Galica, J. *et al.* (2018) 'Building and sustaining a postgraduate student network: The experience of oncology nurses in Canada', *Canadian Oncology Nursing Journal*. Canadian Association of Nurses in Oncology, 28(4), p. 288.

George, J. (2000) 'Emotions and leadership: the role of emotional intelligence.', *Human Relations*. Sage Publications Inc., 53(8), pp. 1027–1055.

Germain, A., Mayland, C. and Jack, B. (2016) 'The Bromhead Care Home Service: the impact of a service for care home residents with dementia on hospital admission and dying in preferred place of care', *Palliative & Supportive Care*.

Gill, P. and Burnard, P. (2008) 'The student-supervisor relationship in the PhD/doctoral process.', *British Journal of Nursing*. Faculty of Health, Sport and Science, University of Glamorgan, Pontypridd.: Mark Allen Holdings Limited, 17(10), pp. 668–671.

Gray, D. E. (2007) 'Facilitating Management Learning: Developing Critical Reflection Through Reflective Tools', *Management Learning*, 38(5), pp. 495–517. doi: 10.1177/1350507607083204.

Harvey, M., Coulson, D. and McMaugh, A. (2016) 'Towards a Theory of the Ecology of Reflection: Reflective Practice for Experiential Learning in Higher Education', *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*. Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice, 13(2).

Heath, T. (2002) 'A quantitative analysis of PhD students' views of supervision', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 21(August 2013), pp. 37–41. doi: 10.1080/0729436022012464.

Hockey, J. (1997) 'A complex craft: United Kingdom PhD supervision in the social sciences', *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 2(1), pp. 45–70. doi: 10.1080/13596749700200004.

Holmes, M. (2012) 'Spotlight on critical reflection', *Training Journal*, (July), pp. 65–69.

Høyland, S., Hollund, J. G. and Olsen, O. E. (2015) 'Gaining access to a research site and participants in medical and nursing research: a synthesis of accounts.', *Medical Education*, 49(2), p. 224. doi: 10.1111/medu.12622.

Johl, S. K. and Renganathan, S. (2010) 'Strategies for Gaining Access in Doing Fieldwork: Reflection of two Researchers.', *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 8(1), p. 42.

Keilman, L. *et al.* (2014) 'Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life', *Anthropology {&} Aging*, 35(1), pp. 64–66. doi: 10.5195/AA.2014.41.

Kelley, K. *et al.* (2003) 'Good practice in the conduct and reporting of survey research', *International Journal for Quality in Health Care*, 15(3), pp. 261–266. doi: 10.1093/intqhc/mzg031.

Kennedy-Macfoy, M. (2013) '"It's important for the students to meet someone like you." How perceptions of the researcher can affect gaining access, building rapport and securing cooperation in school-based research.', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology: Theory & Practice*. Kennedy-Macfoy, Madeleine: Taylor & Francis, 16(6), pp. 491–502. doi: 10.1080/13645579.2013.823294.

Lally, E. (2012) 'The PhD Research Journey is not for the faint-hearted', *Kai Tiaki Nursing New Zealand*. New Zealand Nurses Organisation, 18(7), pp. 18–19.

Lange, M. M., Rogers, W. and Dodds, S. (2013) 'Vulnerability in research ethics: A way forward', *Bioethics*. Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 27(6), pp. 333–340. doi: 10.1111/bioe.12032.

Levecque, K. *et al.* (2017) 'Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students', *Research Policy*. Elsevier, 46(4), pp. 868–879.

Lewinski, A. A. *et al.* (2017) 'Partnership for development: A peer mentorship model for PhD students', *Journal of Professional Nursing*. Elsevier, 33(5), pp. 363–369.

Marais, G. A. B. *et al.* (2018) 'A survey and a positive psychology intervention on French PHD student well-being', *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 13.

Maxwell, T. (2014) 'Reflective Practice and Professional Development. ERIC Digest.', *Educational Psychology in Practice*, pp. 1–7. doi: 10.1080/02667363.2013.854986.

Miller, P., Kelly, K. and Spawls, N. (2013) 'Getting Past the Gatekeeper: Safeguarding and Access Issues in Researching HIV+ Children in Jamaica', *Policy Futures in Education*. Policy Futures in Education, 11(2), pp. 167–174.

Oppenheim, A. N. (1966) *Questionnaire design and attitude measurement*. London: Heinemann, [1966]. (Heinemann books on sociology).

Peluso, D. L., Carleton, R. N. and Asmundson, G. J. G. (2011) 'Depression symptoms in Canadian psychology graduate students: do research productivity, funding, and the academic advisory relationship play a role?', *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science/Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement*. Educational Publishing Foundation, 43(2), p. 119.

Phillips, E., Pugh, D. S. and Johnson, C. (2015) *How to get a PhD: A handbook for students and their supervisors*. 6th edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Pyhältö, K. *et al.* (2012) 'Challenges of becoming a scholar: A study of doctoral students' problems and well-being', *ISrn Education*. Hindawi Publishing Corporation, 2012.

Richards, D. B. (2015) 'Effectively Managing Our Expectations.', *Journal of Financial Service Professionals*. Society of Financial Service Professionals, 69(3), pp. 48–50.

Robinson, O. C. (2014) 'Sampling in Interview-Based Qualitative Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 11(1), pp. 25–41. doi: 10.1080/14780887.2013.801543.

Rodham, K. and Gavin, J. (2006) 'The ethics of using the internet to collect qualitative research data', *Research Ethics Review*. The association of research ethics committees, 2(3), pp. 92–97. doi: 10.1177/174701610600200303.

Sarikaya, E. E., McAlpine, L. and Amundsen, C. (2017) 'Doctoral Students' Experiences of Feeling (or not) Like an Academic', *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*. Informing Science Institute, 12, pp. 73–90.

Service, B. (2012) 'Keeping the faith: how reflective practice can turn emotional turmoil into a positive outcome in the context of doctoral study.', *Reflective Practice*, 13(2), pp. 169–182. doi: 10.0.4.56/14623943.2011.626029.

Singh, S. and Wassenaar, D. R. (2016) 'Contextualising the role of the gatekeeper in social science research.', *South African Journal of Bioethics & Law*, 9(1), p. 42.

Smith, E. (2011) 'Teaching critical reflection', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16(2), pp. 211–223. doi: 10.1080/13562517.2010.515022.

Stracke, E. (2010) 'Undertaking the Journey Together: Peer Learning for a Successful and Enjoyable PhD Experience', *Journal of University Teaching Learning Practice*, 7(1), p. Article 8.

Stroebe, M., Stroebe, W. and Hansson, R. (1993) *Handbook of bereavement: Theory, research, and intervention*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Stubb, J., Pyhältö, K. and Lonka, K. (2011) 'Balancing between inspiration and exhaustion: PhD students' experienced socio-psychological well-being', *Studies in Continuing Education*. Taylor & Francis, 33(1), pp. 33–50.

van Teijlingen, E. and Hundley, V. (2002) 'The importance of pilot studies. Nursing Standard', *Nursing Standard*, (35), pp. 33–36. doi: 10.7748/ns2002.06.16.40.33.c3214.

Appendix 1

Table 1 Structured reflective questions

<table>
<tr><th>Coaching Conversation 1 – Reflective Questions</th><th>Coaching Conversation 2 – Reflective Questions</th></tr>
<tr><td>How did you feel when you first learnt about the problem?</td><td>Thinking about your experiences, what did you do that helped you to overcome the challenges?</td></tr>
<tr><td>What did you find particularly challenging about the experience?</td><td>Thinking about your experiences, would you have done anything differently on reflection?</td></tr>
<tr><td>If you had to explain that challenge as a metaphor, what metaphor would you choose and why?</td><td>What do you know now that you did not know then (i.e. When you were facing the problem)? (Including learning about yourself?)</td></tr>
<tr><td>What personal experiences had you had before that was similar?</td><td>Have you found that engaging in reflective interviews is useful/helpful/beneficial? (Yes/No), please explain your answer</td></tr>
<tr><td>What methods did you use to overcome the challenges?</td><td rowspan="8">What advice would you give to your doctoral candidates facing similar dilemmas?</td></tr>
<tr><td>How did you seek to influence throughout the process?</td></tr>
<tr><td>What was your focus throughout the experience?</td></tr>
<tr><td>What is the political/social context in this situation?</td></tr>
<tr><td>What did you learn about yourself?</td></tr>
<tr><td>What would you do differently going forward if faced with a similar situation?</td></tr>
<tr><td>Tell me about any further thoughts that this conversation has generated?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Note: These questions were developed by the researchers from the four domains recommended by Smith (2011): self-critical (own actions), interpersonal (relationships), contextual (concept, theories and methods) and critical (political, social and ethical context) that encouraged reflection. The use of ‘why’ questions was avoided as they can lead to defensiveness and justifications (Cox, Bachkirova and Clutterbuck, 2010), and the question on personal influence added adapted from Holmes (2012). The researchers chose specific questions to allow reflection on specific elements of the experience and lessons learnt.</td></tr>
</table>

Cox, E., Bachkirova, T., & Clutterbuck, D. (2010). The complete handbook of coaching. Los Angeles, Calif. ; London: SAGE.

Holmes, M. (2012). Spotlight on critical reflection. Training Journal, (July), 65–69.

Smith, E. (2011). Teaching critical reflection. Teaching in Higher Education, 16(2), 211–223. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2010.515022