Case Study of satisfaction and completion of part-time research students

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Internationally the past decade has witnessed a stronger policy focus on research students. With the numbers of students undertaking research degrees continuing to increase, government and community interest in doctorates has grown. It is however becoming clear that there is a specific category of research student that has been overlooked to the point that they are ‘invisible’, in both policy and research terms - part-time students. This paper addresses this gap by presenting an analysis of the context of satisfaction among Australian part-time research graduates and a case study of predictors of their completion. The case study provides valuable lessons that can impact on the changes and features of research student programs in other countries. Importantly, part-time doctoral students were found to have faster completion times than full-time doctoral students, in equivalent-time terms. In terms of satisfaction with their student experience part-time research graduates are less satisfied with the infrastructure support provided and have a less favourable perception of the research climate of their department, than full-time research students. More specifically, the analyses in the case study highlight the varying issues that are the best predictors of time to completion by mode of study for doctoral students. The paper proposes that universities and departments can employ a two-stage approach where they (i) improve the contextual foundations that underpin the research student experience and then (ii) develop processes for student-tailored support.