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► **To cite this version:**

David Kember, Chan Kwok Ying, Chan Shun Wan, Chan Siu Yung, Chan Tze Wai, et al.. How students cope with part-time study. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 2005, 6 (3), pp.230-242. 10.1177/1469787405057662 . hal-00571931

HAL Id: hal-00571931

<https://hal.science/hal-00571931>

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

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How students cope with part-time study

*An analysis of coping mechanisms through
an on-line forum*

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ABSTRACT This study provides a qualitative test and illustration of a model of how students cope with the demands of part-time study. The model shows that students who are successful in finding the time to complete the requirements of part-time courses do so by adopting three mechanisms; sacrifice, support and the negotiation of arrangements. All three mechanisms operate in four domains, namely work, family, social lives and the self. The mechanisms and domains were related together in a three by four matrix. Data to verify and illuminate the model were gathered by the researchers through an on-line forum discussion on the topic of coping with part-time study. The researchers themselves were studying part-time in a course called Adult Education and Professional Development. Analysis of the data showed that the work domain was very important but little adaptation was possible. The family was seen as the most important domain and all three mechanisms were used. Time was commonly found for part-time study by sacrificing social lives. The self-domain was interpreted as important in establishing motivation and self-determination.

KEYWORDS: *attrition, coping mechanisms, model, part-time study, persistence*

A model of coping mechanisms

The demands for lifelong learning have resulted in movements towards mass higher education, which in turn means that an ever increasing number of students are engaging in part-time study (Daniel, 1993). The mode of study is very challenging because the students have to find time and motivation to attend classes, study course material and complete assignments alongside their work, the demands of their family, and any time they still manage to find for a social life. Many do not cope. Not surprisingly the completion rates for part-time courses tend to be lower than for comparable full-time courses (Tight, 1991). Despite the greater attrition from part-time courses, research into college persistence has mainly followed the seminal work of Tinto (1975), which was based on full-time study by on-campus residents.

An attrition study which did focus on part-time students was that of Yorke (1999). The limitation of this work is that it employed two methods which the mainstream research into attrition from full-time courses found to be unfruitful. One approach examined the relationship between persistence and demographic variables such as age, gender and social class. Very few significant differences were found, indicating that students are not predestined to fail because of their background. What they and their teachers do makes a difference. The other method sought reasons for withdrawal from non-completers. As is usual with autopsy studies, all the attributions were to factors beyond the control of the students, the most common, as usual, being demands of employment. Attribution theory (Weiner, 1972) predicts that those who see themselves as unsuccessful will give reasons outside the locus of their control. Accordingly, such studies offer limited insights into attrition by failing to inquire why students who face similar external pressures, such as employment demands, do succeed in completing their programme.

A study of part-time completion, which went beyond seeking attributions or correlations with demographic factors, attempted to develop a model of coping mechanisms for part-time study (Kember, 1999). The model contained three coping mechanisms which successful students adopted to fit in study requirements alongside existing commitments; these were sacrifice, support and the negotiation of arrangements. Sacrifice implied the need to give up something previously enjoyed. Support referred to the need for psychological and material help from others. Negotiation implied determining how to accommodate competing goals and fit them into a timetable. The model showed evidence of these mechanisms existing in three domains pertinent to the significant commitments of part-time students; namely, work, family and social obligations. A further study

(Kember & Leung, 2004) added the self as a fourth domain. Qualitative data suggested that the previous model had not taken sufficient account of the importance of motivation and determination in coping with part-time study. The framework was therefore expanded to three coping mechanisms and four domains. This model was then tested quantitatively. Structural equation modelling showed a good fit of the data to the mechanism by domain model. The coping mechanisms were shown to be related to a measure of sense of belonging, which was interpreted as an indicator of likely persistence. The expanded four domain model was then tested with qualitative data gathered from interviews with 53 part-time students (Yum et al., 2005). This article reports a further qualitative test and illumination of the model with a different sample of students using data gathered from an on-line forum.

Method

Data were gathered from students enrolled in a course about adult education, studied in the part-time mode. The students were asked to submit, to an on-line forum, suggestions of factors which influenced likely completion and examples of how they or colleagues coped with part-time study. The researchers were also the subjects of the study as they were the entire enrolment in a course called Adult Education and Professional Development in an articulated PgC/PgD/Masters in Teaching in Professional, Vocational and Higher Education. All of us were teaching in one of these sectors at the same time as completing the course by part-time study. We had, therefore, both a practical and a theoretical interest in the topic of this article. The first named author was the coordinator of the course.

The course was offered by a university in Hong Kong, so all the students were resident there. Completion rates were high for a part-time course, though this probably was mainly caused by the past educational experiences of the enrolees and the positive efforts to develop class coherence. Possible effects of Confucian-heritage culture are discussed where appropriate. These may have had a small effect on the degree to which coping mechanisms were employed, but do not appear to affect the nature of the mechanisms as these were the same as those in a study of students in three countries (Kember, 1999). The course was an option which was normally taken in the second year of enrolment following the completion of mainly compulsory introductory courses in the first year. Thirteen of the 14 students enrolled in the course were in their second year of the programme so had themselves experienced at least one year of part-time study. The remaining student was in her first year. Most of the students had enrolled

in the course because they themselves taught in adult or vocational education, or had a role in training or professional development, so they were also very familiar with pressures on other part-time students, including their own students.

The mechanism for collecting data was through contributions to an on-line forum conducted through the course's website which made use of the standard WebCT forum facility. The majority of the course was conducted through face-to-face classes in the evening, but several sessions were devoted to virtual classes, so there was experience of the types of flexible learning modes often employed in courses for adults. Part-time study was designated as a major topic, since the course aimed for students to understand modes of offering courses and training to adults. This section was one of the ones covered through on-line forums. To provide some basis for promoting, ordering and framing the on-line discussion, contributions were in response to two questions of which the first was quite broad. The students were asked to comment upon the framework generally and to discuss its appropriateness. The usefulness of the framework was probed by asking the students to identify the least important elements of the framework. About half of the comments responded to the question indirectly. The relative importance of the domains is discussed in the sections which follow. If there were a broad consensus that particular parts of the framework were not relevant, then the model would be questionable. On the other hand, the ability to have a meaningful discussion of the topic around the frame would provide evidence of its conceptual soundness. The second topic asked for examples of the use of coping mechanisms. The examples could be of students themselves, colleagues, their students, family or friends. The examples were expected to be given in a similar form to interview quotations, though as it turned out the messages were quite full and considered compared to many interview comments.

The 14 students contributing input to the forum can be equated to a respectable number of interviews in a qualitative study. The students were quite typical, at least by age and gender, for part-time students in Hong Kong. Representativeness was not a particular issue since the study aimed to provide an explanatory construct, rather than analyse attributes of a population. A total of 68 messages were posted on the forum. The distribution was fairly even, with each student contributing at least three messages. Moderation messages by the course coordinator were not counted in this total. As many of the messages were surprisingly long, compared to typical email messages or items of input to computer conferences, the volume of data was sufficient for a thorough study.

The first part of the analysis consisted of sorting the comments to the elements within the matrix. This took place before the end of the forum

Table 1 Number of messages for each element of the framework

	<i>Sacrifice</i>	<i>Support</i>	<i>Negotiation</i>	<i>Total</i>
Self	3	2	1	6
Work	3	8	3	14
Family	4	8	5	17
Social	2	2	1	5
Total	12	20	10	42

discussion to allow the participants to comment on the distribution. It was significant that there were no comments which did not fit within the framework. This is taken as an indication of the adequacy of the model for describing coping mechanisms. All the messages were analysed for consistent themes. The initial analysis was by the first author as the forum proceeded and the outcomes were posted on the forum for discussion. A draft report was discussed in class at the end of the forum. Based on this class discussion, a first draft of this article was written and distributed to each of the authors for contribution and comment. The article uses typical quotations from the overall dialogue to illustrate points and constructs. The quotations are from the posted messages, and are normally shortened.

Importance of domains and sectors

In response to the second discussion topic, asking for examples relating to specific elements of the framework, a total of 42 messages similar to examples or quotations were posted. The number of examples for each sector of the framework is given in Table 1.

Mechanisms

Of the three mechanisms, there were nearly twice as many examples of support as sacrifice or negotiation. It seems clear that support from the family and the workplace is important for success in part-time study. It should, however, be noted that a significant proportion of examples were given for all three mechanisms, showing that all are important.

Balance

Of the responses to the initial discussion question, five students argued that no individual domain was necessarily most or least important, but students needed to maintain a balance. A further two indicated that self-sacrifice was important, and this involved trying to cater to all domains. A good example of trying to achieve a balance is given below.

As I had four days off last week, I tried to allocate my timeslots so as to satisfy every domain. I attended a forum (for work) last Saturday, visited my old classmates on Sunday (social), had a meeting with the colleagues in this course to discuss the teaching project on Monday (for study), and treated my family to a big buffet to celebrate the Moon Festival on Monday night (family), and took my driving lesson on Tuesday (self). I think I had a well spent holiday. Honestly, I was a bit exhausted. But I think that's the way I should live my life.

Work

Most of the remainder of the article will consider the four domains in turn. Within the discussion of the domains will be illuminations of how selected mechanisms apply to that domain. Work is dealt with first.

The importance of the work domain is clear. The second highest number of examples related to the work domain, and the number was well ahead of either the self or social domains. In responding to the first question, which asked for indications of the least important domain, four students responded by stating that work was the most important domain. The one assertion that work was the least important domain was essentially saying that work was of such significance that students should only enrol in a course if they were clear that work demands would not prevent them completing course requirements.

Work is a very important domain to consider before deciding to enrol in a part-time course. However, once the student gets enrolled, this becomes the least important one.

Work/sacrifice

The sacrifice mechanism in the work domain had three comments, but all were concerned with the difficulty of maintaining standards at work while still managing to find time to complete the course requirements, particularly at times when assignments were due. There was no one prepared or able to significantly compromise their standard of work to participate in the part-time course. This is not at all surprising as very few employees would be in a position to unilaterally cut back on their commitment to work in favour of devoting time to study.

Work/support

The highest number of messages relating to an individual element of the matrix was tied between work and family support. Of the work support comments, five referred to receiving support from superiors to enrol and study in the part-time programme. It is gratifying that those in educational positions do themselves recognize the need for their own staff to participate in education and staff development.

I had consulted my supervisor before I enrolled in the programme, who gave me positive and encouraging feedback. Study is quite related to my current job, the knowledge learnt or experience obtained could help me reflect and enhance my professionalism in the workplace. My supervisor also commented that I got more insights and my horizon seems broadened to contribute more and better ideas at work. In addition to support in the initial stage, the continuous advice I got from my supervisor further motivated me to integrate work with study in harmony.

Work/negotiation

The support offered by the employers did in some cases extend to negotiating arrangements to facilitate study, usually by making sure that the student was free to attend classes. The process normally involved re-arrangement rather than a reduction in load. Several of the comments sorted into the work support element contained a subsidiary aspect of this type.

Since I worked on shift duty for the past few years, my boss needed to arrange my duty roster in order to help me to attend all the lectures. It increased the workload for him and caused inconvenience for my colleagues. Although I liked that post very much, I have changed to a non-shift post to minimize inconvenience for them.

Family

There was some discussion of whether age and family status would influence the perceived importance of the family and social domains. There was a suggestion that older students might have to take work and family responsibilities more seriously. Others suggested that the relative importance of the family and social domains might depend upon marital status. The messages show that family was interpreted according to the students' own situation. This has been found with other research in Hong Kong (Kember, 1995). Those with spouses, and particularly children, interpreted family mainly as being the immediate family of their spouse and children. In common with many other part-time higher degree programmes in Hong Kong the intake included students in their early 20s, a number of whom were still living with their parents. Such students interpreted family as being mainly their parents and any siblings. Extended families are important in Chinese societies (Bond, 1996; Ho, 1996; Wu, 1996), so a number of the examples did imply wider interpretations of family. The number of examples given in the family domain was the highest. No one suggested that the family was the least important sector. Examination of examples suggests that just about everyone considered that family was an important domain, but that age and marital status affected interpretations and implications.

Family/sacrifice

The examples of the sacrifice mechanism within the family domain generally referred to a family member, most commonly the spouse, accepting that part-time study implied that there was less time available for previous activities. One example is of a case cited in one of the messages.

Since she had spent only a little time with her daughter, the mother-and-child relationship was not as close as the father-and-child relationship. Sometimes the little girl preferred spending time with her father rather than her mother.

Family/negotiation

The negotiation mechanism implied the family working out ways to reorganize their schedules to allow time for study and attending classes. Commonly one member of the family took over tasks or obligations which had previously been handled by the student. In families where both spouses were studying, which can be quite common in Hong Kong, considerable juggling with time could be needed.

My husband needs to work three evenings per week and I am teaching an evening course on Friday. Moreover, we have a six-year-old daughter who requires much of our attention. My husband and I have to take turns to take care of her activities, homework, etc. It is difficult to fit any more in my timetable. Fortunately, the adult learning classes are scheduled on Tuesday; I can still squeeze myself a bit for the classes.

Family/support

In Chinese society achieving motivation has traditionally had a strong family or community reference (Lee, 1996; Yu, 1996), in contrast to its portrayal in western psychology texts as an individual competitive drive (Kember et al., 1999). It is consistent with this tradition to find strong support from family members for those who study, and this frequently includes the extended family, particularly older members (Salili, 1996).

I am very lucky that I have a lovely mother. She supports me very much in my study. Since I am released from all the housework with her help, I can concentrate on my study at home. When I am busy doing my assignments and preparing for my examinations, she always cooks my favourite food to release pressure and turns off television and radio for me to have a silent environment to study. I am sure that my study life would be much harder without her.

Social

The direct responses to the question of the least important domain were eight comments all citing the social domain. The social domain also had the least number of examples given, and half of these referred to sacrificing the social domain. The substance of the responses to both topics was

consistent. To complete a part-time course tends to imply some level of sacrifice of social lives, often to the extent that there was not a great deal of a social life left, particularly at times when assignments were due.

Social/sacrifice

Longstanding social relationships were sacrificed in the name of study. The course was taught mainly through face-to-face classes so that meant that anything clashing with scheduled classes was dispensed with. Even if the course had been in flexible mode, though, the result would probably have been much the same.

I have been scheduled to play badminton with seven colleagues from 5:00 to 6:00pm every Tuesday and Friday over the past eight years. We can keep fit and also have a chance to chat and share the pleasant or unpleasant experiences in school. However, my classes are usually conducted on Tuesday. So I have to sacrifice an enjoyable weekly social gathering during my period of study.

Social/negotiation

In place of social meetings with previous friends, the class group became a social reference point for many. The programme had encouraged social cohesion through activities, discussion sessions and group assignments. By the second year of the programme some well-established social groups had formed within the class.

I must admit the fact that social life is more difficult to maintain after graduation, especially when the largest portion of time and energy of the day is devoted to work. However, most of my friends are engaging in the various modes of self-development or lifelong learning activities. They understand the difficulties to arrange gatherings and are used to the long planning and negotiating period, before any socializing activities can be successfully organized. I am glad that I could also make friends with the colleagues in the course, which, I believe, is built by strong group coherence, through collaborative and co-operative modes of learning, which should always be encouraged in part-time study.

Self

The second least number of examples was given for the self domain. This may be a somewhat misleading figure as the examples attributed to other sectors gave indications of widespread and significant acts of personal sacrifice, high levels of personal self-determination, and of students developing routines to enable them to complete study tasks. It is possible that the students found it easier to provide more concrete examples involving others than to give personal examples describing their state of mind. It is well accepted, for example, that interviewed students are rarely able to detail

their general approaches to learning, so these are inferred from answers to questions which ask the students to explain how specific study tasks were undertaken (e.g. Marton et al., 1984).

Self/sacrifice

With the sacrifice mechanism there is something of an overlap between the self and social domains. When sacrifices are made it is normally the social life which is forfeited.

To study part-time means you have to sacrifice much time with your family, your social life and even your hobbies. It may be a very high opportunity cost.

Self/support

The support mechanism for the self domain was interpreted in terms of motivation and self-determination to complete the course. A combination of intrinsic interest in the course and motivation through career development and professional advancement has been found to be common among Hong Kong students (Kember et al., 1999).

I take months to adapt since I have to adjust my life by going out for more evenings, leaving my children for my husband. It is because of interest, and motivation is an intrinsic one. Sometimes, when I got conflict with my job, I have struggles and feel stressed. Somehow, when I reflect on my objectives of studying on this course, I become more relaxed and encouraged.

Self/negotiation

There is also a strong motivational component to the self/negotiation element of the framework. There is a need to find the motivation to re-arrange commitments and time allocations. Self-negotiation implies having the determination and discipline to devise and stick to plans for setting aside sufficient time for study.

It seems besides . . . not many classmates talk about the effect of the 'self domain'. I would see it as a very important factor. One has to take the initiative to re-arrange one's life to accommodate the extra workload and demand from the part-time study. It may mean putting aside one's hobbies, sacrifice sleeping and leisure time, etc. Without self-motivation (internally, not attributed), even if all other sectors are in a positive status, one may still fail the study. My profession and my major interest have always been about making and watching films. Normally, this has taken up lot of my time. Now I have decided to pursue this course hoping to improve my teaching skills, I have to negotiate with myself the priority between the two different things. I need to give up watching films on Tuesday evening in order to attend classes. I need to postpone some filming projects in order to gain time to study. However, I can't give up everything or I will become out of touch with my profession and

also with the industry which will in turn affect my teaching. And this will need a self-negotiating process to maintain the right balance.

Conclusion

There are a number of indications of the legitimacy of the framework for explaining how students cope with part-time study. It was possible to hold an extended forum discussion of the topic of part-time coping mechanisms around the framework. All contributors managed to find several examples which fitted the framework. There were no counter examples which did not and no-one argued that it was not possible to explain how they or students they observed coped with part-time study through the mechanisms in the model.

Perhaps the most important argument for the value of the model was the degree to which it was able to draw out and integrate previously tacit notions of how the students had adapted their lives to cope with part-time study. The richness of the examples given for every sector indicates that this framework provided a graphic, useful and valid picture of how students cope with the very demanding task of fitting in the demands of part-time study alongside other commitments in their busy lives.

The utility of the model was not explicitly addressed in the study, but it is reasonable to visualize it as having value in counselling part-time students. Many new students fail to adapt to part-time study because they do not adopt coping mechanisms. If there were counselling sessions at the time of enrolment students might be warned of the time demands posed by part-time study. Discussion of mechanisms which need to be adopted could then enable the prospective students to be better prepared by making plans on how they will fit the study time demands alongside their existing commitments.

The rates of attrition from part-time courses can often be quite appreciable. The research which led to the framework for this study (Kember, 1999) included examples of difficulties in adopting coping mechanisms as well as cases of successful adoption. There is, therefore, evidence that failure to adopt coping mechanisms is a significant cause of attrition from part-time courses. With prior counselling, based upon the framework it may well be a cause which can be alleviated to some extent. It would appear to be easier for both colleges and students to try to prepare plans for coping with the pressure of being part-time than to deal with potential academic study problems.

The method adopted for the study is interesting in several respects. Gathering data through an on-line forum is much less common than the normal approach of using interviews. The status of the researchers as being

part-time students themselves, as well as students enrolled in a course in which part-time study was legitimately a major topic, created a motive for serious reflection upon the issue.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the contribution of David Murphy and Paula Hodgson, the other teachers in the course, to its planning and development. We also thank Paula and the MegaWeb team for building the website.

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