The narratives in this book were written by individuals who, despite residing in faraway countries, decided to pursue a doctorate in the United Kingdom. The decision for many was influenced by a multiplicity of factors which, when considered together, made pursuing a degree abroad a desirable choice. For some, the initial motivation to enrol in a Doctor in Education (EdD) programme had to do with external factors: to build professional expertise (Abdrabboh, Nygaard), to mitigate frequently changing job roles (Channon) or to respond to years of working in a casualised work environment (Paterson, O’Keeffe). For others, the decision was fuelled more by a search for something deeper or a way to find meaning both professionally and personally (Bukhatir, Poli, Savva). The initial factors considered were not static and sometimes changed along with new circumstances and information. The decision to switch from an EdD to a conventional PhD (Savva) or the decision to purposefully extend enrolment (Nygaard) are indicative of an evolving journey.

However, many of the authors would not have been able to pursue a doctorate in London were it not for a programme that was specifically designed to meet the needs of a very distinct population: mature and returning international students who could continue to reside in their home countries for the duration of their studies. To this end, the programme served as an important bridge, providing an extraordinary opportunity for the authors to access a degree at a prestigious overseas institution, without having to upend work or family responsibilities back home (Abdrabboh, Bukhatir, Paterson).

The ‘prestige’ factor associated with the particular university was not irrelevant and was described by several authors as a contributing
factor in the programme selection process (Abdrabboh, Bukhatir, Paterson, Poli). Indeed, most of the contributing authors were free to pursue a doctorate within their respective countries of residence. Besides being more cost-effective, the proximity of a nearby bricks-and-mortar campus would have likely provided easier access to both resources and faculty. Moreover, for the authors for whom English was an additional language, attending a university at home would have provided the added comfort of working in their first language. Even those who were native English speakers but were residing abroad had access to English-medium instruction in their countries of residence – a phenomenon that speaks to the widespread power and influence of the English language and its affiliated cultures (Doiz et al., 2012; Waters, 2018). Yet each author made a deliberate decision, of their own free will, to pursue their studies outside their country of residence, at a university that they believed would offer them something more.

As one can imagine, the scholarly endeavour was both enriched and further complicated by this choice. While the authors enjoyed the privilege of partaking in a programme offered by a prestigious university, they nevertheless continued to operate along the periphery of university life due to the distance nature of the programme. The narratives in this book provide a window into the lives of what we have described as the ‘peripheral’ student: the international student, the distance student, the more mature and returning student, the part-time student and the student pursuing a professional doctorate. These are characteristics that all the authors owned on their path to becoming scholars and became an important part of the identity work they would engage in. It is these characteristics that also influenced the most dominant themes across narratives.

In this chapter, we reflect on the themes that emerged both within and across chapters, focusing on four broad categories of challenges:

1. demands associated with being a ‘peripheral’ student and the function of social networks in developing a sense of belonging;
2. issues related to supervisory/faculty relationships;
3. struggles related to identity, language and/or culture; and
4. the role of expert, novice and ‘impostor’ labels in internalising a scholarly identity.

In the sections that follow, we unpack these challenges while also examining some of the personal characteristics and institutional features that contributed positively towards individual growth and the fostering of a
strong sense of community. After each section, we reflect on implications for institutional policy and planning.

The ‘peripheral’ student and belonging

Being a part-time, international and more mature doctoral student in a professional doctorate all make for what we have described as a ‘peripheral’ student, which contrasts sharply with the young, full-time undergraduate students that universities generally cater to (HESA, 2016). For many of the contributing authors, achieving a balance between full-time employment, part-time academic studies and family responsibilities posed significant challenges. Most continued to work full-time while pursuing their doctorate. To mitigate the competing demands between work and school it was not unusual for authors to draw their research topics from their work environments. This was a practically and professionally expedient choice that also enabled authors to deepen their professional knowledge through research, especially since the EdD emphasises becoming a ‘reflective practitioner’. Relying on access to a specific work environment, however, meant that unexpected life events such as job loss or job change made such planned research projects untenable for some (Channon, O’Keeffe, Paterson).

The distance nature of the programme further complicated the challenges faced by the authors. On the one hand, the programme allowed the authors to pursue a doctorate on a part-time basis without requiring them to change their employment status or relocate to the UK. On the other hand, this also meant limited physical access to the campus and its intellectual resources (Baker and Lattuca, 2010). Since visits were restricted to week-long modules each term, this predictably created a disconnect in the authors’ ability to integrate fully into the culture of university life (Lahenius, 2012). Few in the cohort, for example, were in a position to attend classes, seminars or workshops offered throughout the year. Nor were they able to take advantage of long-term opportunities to teach at the university. Although two authors did share their expertise by offering short lectures during their termly visits (Nygaard, Paterson), these were of a one-off nature. Furthermore, there was also limited access to university services such as writing help (Bukhatir) and counselling services (Necas). Thus, while the international EdD programme itself was designed to serve the needs of the peripheral student, the broader institution was not designed to do the same. It was this type
of disconnect that eventually prompted one of the authors to temporarily relocate to England (Poli).

As authors pursued their degrees, they also faced a variety of unexpected life events. For some, changes in employment required sudden changes to research questions (Channon, O’Keeffe), often rendering hours of writing and planning obsolete. For others, a temporary hiatus to deal with family, health or financial issues (Necas, Nygaard, Paterson) was necessary before rejoining or ultimately withdrawing from the programme. For one author, a difficult viva defence and the subsequent need to make substantial changes in the thesis required hours of additional time and energy (Channon). And for another, the decision to pick up and relocate, bringing family members along, also required change that deviated from original plans (Poli). Some of these challenges are described in the work of Sverdlik et al. (2018), who found that a variety of external and internal influences contribute to decreases in student well-being and can ultimately affect retention rates.

Personal qualities that emerged as being particularly important in navigating such challenges included a strong sense of agency, a willingness to adapt to changing circumstances and resilience. In the case of adaptability and resilience, these qualities have been closely associated with high levels of intrinsic motivation, or what Duckworth et al. (2007) refer to as ‘grit’.

The doctoral journey, with its inherent demands for building a new kind of expertise and academic identity, can also be a lonely one. While feelings of isolation are not unusual among doctoral students (Lahenius, 2012; Morrison Saunders et al., 2010) or international students in higher education more generally (Batterton and Horner, 2016; Marangell et al., 2018) they can be more pronounced for students who are working from a distance and are often cut off from student experiences. Some of the authors actively sought to alleviate such feelings in creative and resourceful ways. O’Keeffe discusses her use of online social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook for group support, while Poli tries to fully immerse herself into the English culture after her relocation. The search for comradery was particularly evident within the cohort, where close friendships were formed (Bukhatir, Poli) and communication with peers via group chats or email was ongoing (Nygaard, O’Keeffe, Paterson, Savva).

Among the cohort, the opportunity to connect with others in the programme who were in ‘the same boat’ was made possible through the required modules in London, where students would regularly meet and interact each term. It was through physical presence, a shared experience
and a sense of common purpose that group cohesion was able to take place (Pilbeam et al., 2013). The cohort model also allowed students to feel a sense of belonging, a feeling that is such an important part of developing a scholarly identity (Mantai, 2017, 2019). Although the primary purpose of the taught modules was to impart specific knowledge and skills related to research and the academy, the secondary (perhaps even inadvertent) social and emotional benefits provided through the modules proved to be especially valuable. This is because embedded within the inadvertent social network was also a professional network. As mature professionals, cohort members already came with knowledge in a wide range of education specialisms. These included corporate training (Abdrabboh), technology (O’Keeffe, Paterson), language learning (Channon, Necas, Paterson), research management (Poli), academic writing (Paterson, Nygaard), private schooling (Bukhatir), early years education (Bukhatir, Savva) and international education (Savva), to name only a few. Furthermore, with each member’s expertise came regional networks to professionals and institutions in other parts of the world.

Since these networks were geographically dispersed, a global educational network which members could readily draw upon surfaced as an unexpected but powerful resource. In this way, the cumulative contribution of cohort members created a type of social capital, whereby members of the cohort stood to gain through their relationships and connections with each other (Bourdieu, 1986). It is here that both the non-traditional and international nature of the doctoral cohort offered distinct advantages. It was through the shared experience of doctoral work that a community emerged, identities were forged and friendships continued long after the required modules were completed.

At an institutional level, therefore, the strategic planning of shared experiences as a way of fostering natural social networking opportunities holds immense value – not least in allowing students to reflect on their emerging identities as academics and what it might mean for them as professionals. Laying the groundwork for these shared experiences becomes particularly important when we consider that high dropout rates in higher education have been attributed, in part, to a lack of socio-emotional support (Lahenius, 2012; Ali and Kohun, 2007; Jaraim and Kahl, 2012; Pilbeam et al., 2013; Morrison Saunders et al., 2010). To this end, adaptable modes of study, including the ability of students to move from full-time to part-time status (or vice versa), is another structural feature that can provide non-traditional students with added flexibility. Similarly, the ability to access temporary, non-punitive pauses in
enrolment is helpful to those who may find themselves in difficult and unexpected life transitions. By anticipating potential stumbling blocks, adaptable modes of study can offer protective factors for students while also preserving the viability of the programmes themselves.

In the case of distance programmes, the cohort model, where students move through coursework as a single group, can have a positive impact both in mitigating feelings of mental isolation and building internal support mechanisms (Wesson, 1996). This type of model was particularly instrumental in creating a sense of community that authors felt they belonged to. Here, the regularity of meetings should not be confused with the frequency of meetings, as international cohorts do not have the benefit of attending frequently. For our own cohort, group activities within the modules were particularly beneficial because they provided students with opportunities to get to know each other better through their research topics (Hawkes and Taylor, 2016), creating fertile ground for the development of what would eventually become a self-generated learning community.

**Supervisory and faculty relationships**

The role of the supervisor is crucial for helping doctoral students learn how to conduct research and navigate the complexities of the university system. This is especially true when we consider the highly prescribed nature of the education leading up to the doctorate. Whereas undergraduate and graduate degrees operate with pre-determined coursework, syllabi and frameworks, a doctorate requires students to engage in original thought and take on greater control in negotiating their ideas, their research and their relationships with faculty and supervisors. Learning to take ownership of one’s research, therefore, is an important part of the doctoral journey. It is the student who must plan, gather, sort and analyse relevant research and data. Likewise, it is the student who must ultimately construct and defend their research argument. While supervisors play an important facilitative role (Chapter 1 in this volume), unexpected challenges may materialise when feedback from supervisors or other faculty members does not align with student intentions. Such a predicament can be even more challenging for students coming from geographical, disciplinary or workplace settings where respect for authority is given greater emphasis than independent thinking.

The struggle to maintain a sense of ownership is illustrated in several chapters, when authors find that the vision they have for their
research and writing proves different from that of their supervisors or other faculty members (Abdrabboh, Channon, Nygaard). In Channon’s narrative, we see deference to the recommendations of multiple faculty members based on the belief that they perhaps know better. This includes his supervisor, the internal reader and the examiners. In the first instance, his supervisor guides him in a particular direction that he feels hesitant about. In the second instance, the internal reader, who is charged with reading and providing feedback on his completed thesis prior to official viva submission guides him in yet another direction. In the third instance, he discovers that his initial instincts were correct but, by then, it is already too late. Throughout most of his journey he dismisses his initial instincts and ultimately finds himself slowly losing ownership of his thesis, watching it move in directions he is not fully comfortable with. Although he eventually reclaims his research, it is not before a very emotional viva defence followed by a period of deep and conflicted reflection. His narrative brings to light the role that non-supervisory faculty, like internal readers and examiners, can have on the trajectory of student research, with the former remaining an area where there is little research.

In Abdrabboh’s narrative, we see struggles related to ethical codes of conduct in a cross-cultural context. Whereas signed consent forms were considered standard ethical practice in the British context, they were viewed as suspicious and potentially offensive in the Saudi Arabian context. This creates a significant dilemma for Abdrabboh as he needs to balance university requirements with the reality of his research context. The contradiction between these two value systems was difficult to resolve not simply because they were different from each other, but because they were ideologically opposed to each other (Savva, 2017).

Finally, in Nygaard’s narrative we see the issue of ownership emerging when she struggles to reconcile a fledgling academic identity with a more established identity as a professional. As an academic writing coach, she not only found herself initially rejecting faculty recommendations but also taking offence to them – seeing them as threats to her own professional identity. After years of coaching others, she found herself in the uncomfortable position of being on the receiving end of criticism and being unsure about the best way forward. She had to find a way to tackle and incorporate feedback while still maintaining ownership.

Across these three narratives (Abdrabboh, Channon, Nygaard) we see the authors grappling with feelings of annoyance, anger, even resentment. Yet in every instance, we also see the authors engaging in self-reflection to find their own truth, one that would put them at ease with
their research work and allow them to move forward. This ‘emotional rollercoaster’ – with a ‘knee-jerk’ reaction followed by introspection and learning – is a key aspect of the doctoral journey (Morrison Saunders et al., 2010). It is possible that the reflective practices authors were required to engage in through their coursework facilitated important reflections beyond the formal learning environment (Cunningham, 2018). Once again, agency materialises as an important personal characteristic in the doctoral journey, along with increased self-awareness.

The reality is that faculty supervisors often have a long list of competing demands to attend to, of which student advisement is only one. Research has underscored how difficult and time-consuming supervision of doctoral students can be (Erichsen et al., 2014). Moreover, while faculty supervisors see themselves as guides or mentors, they also expect a certain level of independence from students and do not see themselves as editors (Roberts and Bandlow, 2018). That being said, the narratives suggest that supervisors could benefit from increased opportunities within their institutions to reflect on their roles, both in a context with other supervisors and with their students. None of the authors, for example, reported having engaged in a discussion with their supervisors about expectations regarding supervision, the relationship between the supervisor and student, and what it means to have ownership over their own doctoral learning. In fact, there are tools that have been developed to gauge and align expectations of both supervisors and students (Griffith University, 2020; Ulster University, 2020). Perhaps more institutions would benefit from formally integrating such tools into doctoral programmes. These tools could be used as a way to better match supervisors to students, or at the very least, as an activity that supervisors and students can engage in together to establish a strong initial foundation for the student–supervisor relationship.

From a student perspective, integrating expectations related to the student–supervisor relationship within the required teaching modules could potentially prove valuable. If students are expected to advocate for themselves and their ideas as researchers in their own right (Gurr, 2001; Roberts and Bandlow, 2018), then being able to sift through advice to deem what is relevant is an important developmental skill that should be explicitly taught in doctoral programmes. Such a programme feature would empower students to better exercise their right to accept, reject and, as we have seen in the narratives, negotiate ideas/directives coming from faculty that may differ from theirs. Indeed, during the development of this book we discovered that an instructional element entitled
'Managing Your Supervisor' has since been incorporated into the taught modules of a similar programme (Hawkes and Taylor, 2016).

Identity, language and culture

For international students, identity related to language and culture becomes increasingly relevant when it emerges as being distinctively different from the mainstream milieu. This can pose additional challenges for those residing in their home country while pursuing education abroad. In the case of the contributing authors, each one connected with a culture that was different from the host country of the United Kingdom. Even those who maintained British citizenship (Channon, Necas, Paterson) had been living in another country for many years prior to enrolment. Moreover, not only did all connect with a different culture, but most also connected with another language. Six out of the nine authors had English as a first language, and three had English as an additional language. All were living or working in a context that required the use of a second language on a regular basis. In this sense, the cohort was a unique amalgam of hybrid identities with each individual bringing varying levels of comfort relative to both the British culture and the English language.

Most of the authors who had English as a first language grew up in English-speaking countries but had moved to and were residing in other (non-English) countries. The editors of this book, both Americans, were living in Cyprus (Savva) and Norway (Nygaard) during their studies. Similarly, three of the authors were British citizens (two had grown up in England and one in Scotland) but had since become long-term residents in the countries of Italy (Necas), Myanmar (Channon) and Japan (Paterson). A sixth author held Irish citizenship and lived in Ireland (O’Keeffe). For several of these authors we see a very real struggle between national identity and their sense of belonging. This was communicated as the distinct experience of being vested in two countries or cultures without fully belonging to either one (Necas, Paterson, Savva).

The three authors who grew up in non-English speaking countries and whose first language was not English had Arabic and Italian as their first languages. Though one author from this group chose to temporarily relocate from Italy to England (Poli), the remaining two authors continued to reside in their home countries for the duration of their studies: one was a Jordanian national living in Saudi Arabia (Abdrabboh) and the other a citizen and resident of the United Arab Emirates (Bukhatir). Although
this latter group also struggled with developing a sense of belonging, their struggle was, for the most part, acute and specific to the UK context as opposed to chronic. Feelings of dissonance in this group were most often related to language fluency (not to be confused with ability) or perceived cultural stereotyping.

At first glance, these two groups would appear to have little in common beyond the shared doctoral experience. A closer look, however, reveals that the two groups mirrored each other in unexpected ways. Whereas the first group was made up of native English speakers, the fact that the majority resided in non-English-speaking countries was highly relevant. It meant that they arrived in the programme with a strong awareness of what it was like to operate in a national context where one’s identity, culture and language were different from the mainstream society. Such experiences have been shown to be salient in the development of intercultural sensitivity (Savva, 2013, 2015). This shared struggle of difference, albeit in flipped contexts, also became a vehicle through which the various members of the cohort bonded. A nuanced but noteworthy commonality among cohort members, therefore, was not so much about their experiences with the ‘other’ but rather about their experiences as the ‘other’ (Savva, 2017).

For the three non-native English speakers (Abdrabboh, Bukhatir, Poli), the difficulties associated with their status as non-native speakers of English had less to do with their actual language ability and more to do with how they were perceived by others. Abdrabboh and Bukhatir, for example, both recall a group of tutors stepping into a classroom session to observe and pair off with students for the first research assignment. By the end of the session, they both notice that they are in a pool of predominately non-native English speakers, none of whom has been selected by any of the tutors.

Similarly, Bukhatir observes how tutors converse with greater ease and at greater lengths with students who are native English speakers. This predictably affects her confidence which, in turn, affects her willingness to express her thoughts and ideas in class discussions. Likewise, Poli describes the disapproving facial expressions she observes when she uses excessive hand gestures to communicate. Picking up on the unspoken conventions and protocol of the English language and culture, she struggles to adapt and conform by limiting the use of her hands while speaking. In all three narratives, we see participation in class discussions becoming a carefully measured task involving the constant weighing of risks against benefits. In fact, avoidance has been reported as a common coping mechanism among international students (Sandekian et al.,
2015; Pham and Tran, 2015), with personal and social factors playing a central role in types of coping methods (Pham and Tran, 2015).

Though language ability was not a central issue in the narratives, one author did describe language fluency as a challenge (Poli). While individuals who speak English as an additional language may demonstrate adequate language ability, this does not necessarily mean that they can communicate in the same free and effortless way they would otherwise do in their first language. An analogy that comes to mind is one where a right-handed individual must suddenly use the left hand for all activities. Although the necessary tasks can still be accomplished, the speed and overall fluency of movement will inevitably be compromised. Moreover, the same individual will likely need additional time when compared to their peers who are not compromised in the same way. For Poli, a fear of being judged by her more fluent peers and professors, who may have equated a lack of language fluency with a lack of intelligence or aptitude, resulted in strategic withdrawal from group conversations. Yet here was an individual who came with extensive expertise in her field and had much to contribute to discussions, prompting feelings of both inadequacy and immense frustration.

Somewhat unexpectedly, language struggles and avoidance behaviours were also reported by Necas, who was a native English speaker but had been a permanent resident in Italy for many years. Despite studying in the country where she grew up, she nonetheless felt that her English had stagnated. This phenomenon has been reported in research on multilinguals who have been shown to experience greater communicative anxiety in their first language during stressful situations (Dewaele, 2007). Similarly, other research on first language attrition highlights how languages learned later in life can reshape the first language in profound and unexpected ways (Schmid and Köpke, 2017; Schmid, 2013). For Necas, her professional role as an English language instructor back in Italy further exasperated feelings of stagnation.

Beyond language, the two authors coming from more conservative Middle Eastern regions described a lack of cultural awareness among certain faculty and/or peers (Bukhatir, Abdrabboh). This included an unfamiliarity of power relations both in personal and professional exchanges. Whereas the university encouraged direct lines of communication, authors from this part of the world preferred a less direct approach. Abdrabboh describes how he receives contradictory feedback from his two supervisors, and in attempting to avoid any potential embarrassment or confrontation on their behalf, quietly chooses one set of feedback over the other, hoping that neither will take notice. In
another instance, he describes his frustration when faculty repeatedly ask him why he has not included women in his cross-cultural study, despite explaining on numerous occasions that women in Saudi Arabia do not hold jobs in the mining sector and that this is a cultural norm that is well beyond his control as a researcher.

Although countries in the Arab Gulf are far from being the same, both Abdrabboh and Bukhatir discovered that gross generalisations about the region and its people were frequent and recurring. Whether it was faculty continually alluding to anticipated shopping extravaganzas in London (Abdrabboh) or peers making inaccurate statements about driving laws for women in the Arab Gulf countries (Bukhatir), the behaviours described revealed beliefs deeply rooted in stereotypes and aligned most closely with literature on microaggressions (Altaf and Howard, 2017; Nadal et al., 2012; Nadal et al., 2010). Though microaggressions are often unintentional, they nevertheless send negative and denigrating messages to members of marginalised groups (Nadal et al., 2010). Moreover, individuals who are targets of microaggressions often feel angry and confused, questioning whether prejudice was involved in an interaction, and whether to confront the perpetrators (Nadal et al., 2012).

Microaggressions surfaced both outside and inside the classroom. Abdrabboh felt that female professors, in particular, were dismissive of his opinions when they did not align with theirs – perhaps viewing his comments as undermining their authority. Bukhatir reaffirms this treatment of her Arab classmate in a separate chapter, noting that his treatment caused her to take a more reserved and measured approach in class discussions. She made this decision to avoid being judged in a negative light as a result of her more conservative religious beliefs and values. While both authors successfully negotiated the various chasms, this was not without first having to work through difficult feelings of alienation.

These narratives suggest that even in the highly cosmopolitan and global city of London, a place frequently touted for its diversity and inclusivity, assumptions connected to place of origin, faith and appearance can affect how students are treated. While the existence of prejudice or simple ignorance about different cultures might be relatively uncontroversial, the implications for institutional policy are less so. On the one hand, it is perfectly rational to assert that the responsibility to adapt rests unequivocally on the student who has selected, of their own free will, to study in a different country. On the other hand, institutions have responsibilities to support the international students they accept into their programmes. As suggested by Abdrabboh and Bukhatir, cross-cultural training aimed at sensitising faculty to deep-seated assumptions
would be a beneficial institutional investment. Similarly, since international students arrive with varying levels of cultural knowledge about their host country, offering cross-cultural training (perhaps within new student orientations sessions) could help acclimate students to the cultural norms and values they are about to be immersed in. By incorporating cross-cultural training into existing programmes, both faculty and students are given the opportunity to better understand and appreciate the cultural and social protocols that they and others are working from.

**Scholarly identity: the expert, the novice and the impostor**

Though teaching, learning and leading were not new concepts to members of the cohort, switching from a professional mindset to an academic mindset was not always an easy task. Such a switch involved moving from an applied emphasis to one that was more conceptual, requiring the use of skills that most authors did not utilise in their day-to-day professional work. Moreover, several in the cohort had previous education in a different discipline, meaning that the development of academic identity also meant rethinking previous approaches to disciplinary knowledge and research. Paterson, for example, highlights the difficulties he faced with reflective aspects of educational research, something he was explicitly trained to avoid in prior research fields. Nygaard describes the difficulty of converting her professional knowledge into something that could be researched academically. And Necas writes about her difficulty reaching various doctoral milestones despite her strong qualifications as a native English speaker and an English language instructor, noting that by all accounts she should have been able to ‘just do it’.

And so, in many ways, the expert status the authors enjoyed in their professional work was challenged by the novice status they were relegated to as beginning doctoral students. Straddling the two worlds of expert and novice posed many challenges, not least of which was a compartmentalised sense of identity, which often involved a back and forth not only between two time zones but also between identity zones (Paterson). As one can imagine, the expert–novice divide provided fertile ground for increased feelings of vulnerability and insecurity in ways that some authors were not always prepared to deal with. Whereas most authors entered the programme feeling self-assured, some found themselves questioning whether they had taken on too much (Bukhatir, Poli).
Likewise, there was a heightened sensitivity around how feedback was communicated (Abdrabboh, Channon, Nygaard), underscoring the insecurities doctoral students can feel when facing judgement from academic staff and/or peer group members (Chapman, 2017).

Beyond formal learning associated with developing research questions, theory and methods, authors also began to learn about the more nuanced dimensions that were specific to the culture and language of academia – of belonging to an academic community. This was not necessarily something that was taught in a class, but rather involved the unspoken protocols of the academy: how to speak, write and gesture, how to network in ways deemed appropriate, when to say ‘yes’ and how to say ‘no’. These more subtle aspects of the academy brought an added layer of complexity to the process of becoming a scholar. Though the level to which authors engaged in this more implicit aspect of scholarly identity varied, there were several authors who made it a central part of their doctoral experience. Nygaard, for example, purposefully aimed to extend her enrolment in the programme precisely because she was looking to keep herself connected to the academy for as long as possible. Poli, who was particularly aware of academic culture due to her professional role as a research manager, relocated both for improved access to resources but also for a more direct line of entry into the academic community. After her upgrade interview, she too made a deliberate choice to slow down and extend the period of her studies. Their cases challenge the notion that the success of doctoral programmes should be measured by time to completion.

Despite difficulties, the novice role emerged as one of a protagonist. It was through the novice role that authors began to explore and cultivate their academic identities. Education was a far-reaching and expansive field through which each author had to find a niche area to carve out their own space (Nygaard). Beyond looking outwards to relevant literature, creating such a space also involved delving inwards to better understand internal motivations and interests (Savva, Nygaard). As the programme progressed, it was the novice role that became central to merging the personal, professional and academic roles into a scholarly identity. The term ‘blended professional’ (Whitchurch, 2009) materialised explicitly in two chapters (Nygaard, Poli), referring to the overlap of professional and academic identities, and demonstrating an eventual shift away from a purely professional identity.

The expert–novice discussion would not be complete, however, without also referencing what is commonly referred to as impostor syndrome or impostor phenomenon, a rather common experience having
to do with a faulty sense of self-esteem. Breeze (2018: 194) describes impostor syndrome as:

Feelings of not belonging, of out-of-placeness, and the conviction that one’s competence, success, and likeability are fundamentally fraudulent, that it is only a matter of time before this is discovered, before being found out [italics in original].

The steep fall that cohort members experienced going from expert to novice created exactly this kind of vulnerability. Ironically, we see this in the narratives of some of the most established cohort members. Nygaard, for example, who had spent years helping other academics publish their papers, describes recurring feelings of self-doubt about her worthiness as an academic. Similarly, despite her expertise in social media, O’Keeffe looks to gather strength and support through participation in social media support networks initially as a quiet observer, testing the waters from a distance, before gradually joining conversations and becoming a full and active member of the academic community. These examples support other research which underscores the prevalence of impostor syndrome/phenomenon in academia and its role in developing a scholarly identity (Hutchins and Rainbolt, 2017; Vaughn et al., 2020).

From an institutional perspective, transitional opportunities served as important socialising mechanisms (Baker and Lattuca, 2010; Weidman et al., 2001). Presenting at conferences or seminars, running workshops, publishing and joining academic groups offered both external and internal validation, helping to scaffold the development of a scholarly identity (Mantai, 2017). These opportunities were key because they provided a space whereby students could ‘rehearse’ the role of the scholar, or what one author described as a shuffling back and forth between the professional and academic spheres (Poli).

It is here also that a strong sense of agency surfaced as a powerful personal characteristic. Authors were eager to take on new initiatives, including initiatives that they created themselves (Nygaard, Paterson). Despite the restrictions which were inherent in the distance programme, most authors in the cohort capitalised on opportunities for growth above and beyond their thesis work. These transitional activities served as important precursors to what would eventually become a transformative experience – fundamentally changing the internal landscape of each author’s sense of self. In this way, the doctoral journey can be seen as a crucible of sorts, whereby how students entered the programme was fundamentally different from how they finished.
Collectively, these narratives point to the various ways that transitional opportunities serve as important stepping stones for developing academic identity, combating impostor phenomenon/syndrome and developing a sense of belonging. Such opportunities enable students to build expertise and demystify academia, through activities such as publishing their work, participating in conferences, running workshops or even teaching courses. Because these activities make up a large part of what it means to be a practising academic, taking part in them during the doctoral period seems to make identifying as an academic somewhat easier. Although the emphasis of many doctoral programmes is unequivocally on the completion of the taught modules and production of the thesis, student participation in these ‘supplementary’ activities has been highlighted as playing a very important role in the development of a scholarly identity (McAlpine and Amundsen, 2009). This also suggests that although such participation might delay completion of the doctoral degree, programmes that encourage students to take part in these activities may end up producing ‘researching professionals’ that are more likely to continue to produce research.

Concluding remarks

The stories in this book have mapped out the scholarly journeys of nine individuals whose paths briefly converged in an international doctorate programme in London. While the life circumstances and trajectory of each author were unique, this chapter has sought to highlight the most notable patterns and themes among them. Most evident is the centrality of identity in the process of becoming a scholar and the powerful need to belong somewhere. All of us arrived in the programme already belonging to an array of social groups related to our age, faith, gender, nationality, language(s), profession, values and beliefs. Yet nested within these broader categories were still finer, more nuanced, categories. Language, for instance, was nested within culture, and small things like having a particular accent or mannerisms could have repercussions for both how we perceived ourselves and how others perceived us.

Despite differences in our stories, each of us entered the programme with expectations that were challenged in unanticipated ways. We struggled to align who we were on the inside with who we could be on the outside – all the while adapting and negotiating the multiple identities nested within us. Becoming a scholar was a transformative journey borne out of the daily external and internal struggles each of us faced.
Beyond challenges, the journey also revealed personal characteristics and institutional protective factors that helped us navigate an otherwise difficult academic terrain. Personal characteristics included adaptability, resilience, self-awareness and agency. Comparably, institutional protective factors included providing flexible modes of study and creating opportunities for shared social experiences, as well as offering auxiliary academic opportunities to enhance and support the development of a scholarly identity.

It is our hope that prospective and current doctoral students will glean important insights from the narratives in this book and that they will resonate and spark discussion among those who read them. Faculty members who work with doctoral students also stand to gain deeper insights into the unique challenges of students who operate on the periphery. Last but certainly not least, those who are charged with the planning and design of international doctoral programmes may find the themes and institutional protective factors presented here useful in informing future programme development.

References


