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Understanding doctoral research for professional practitioners

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Introduction

In many nations, especially those with ‘developed’ economies, the growth in doctoral enrolments is often strongly influenced by increases in doctoral enrolments in professionally related disciplines, such as education, nursing, business and social work. (For some international comparisons of doctoral enrolments see, Evans et al. 2008; 2009.) Of course, not all doctoral candidates and graduates are professional practitioners in those disciplines, and likewise not all doctoral candidates who are professional practitioners in those fields undertake their doctorates in their professional disciplines. Experience suggests that it is reasonable to assume, however, that there is a considerable majority – for example, of professional educators and educational administrators – who undertake their doctorates on a topic related to their fields. These are the people – professional practitioners undertaking doctorates in their professional disciplines – who are the focus of this chapter.

Part-time study (candidate) is a common feature of professional practitioners undertaking doctorates. This is especially the case in education, which is generally the professional discipline with the highest proportion of part-time candidates; a feature that is common to many nations. In Australia, for example, in 2005, 687 students commenced doctorates in education, of whom two-thirds (455) enrolled part-time (DEST 2006). In contrast, China has a very small proportion (3.6 per cent) of part-time candidates in total, although, again, education is higher at 4.6 per cent (Ministry of Education 2007). There are difficulties, however, in interpreting what ‘part-time’ means internationally and in practice, these matters are discussed later.

This chapter considers the complexities involved in providing doctoral programmes for people in professional fields. It encourages students, supervisors and others to recognise and value these complexities and not to see them as difficulties from which to retreat or as risks to control.

Doctorates for the professions

As stated above, professional practitioners undertaking doctorates in their professional disciplines are the focus of this chapter. ‘Professional’ here is viewed broadly to include
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people who are engaged in a career within a field in which they are undertaking a
doctorate. This focuses the discussion in this chapter on the people, rather than on the
definition of what is a profession and what constitutes a professional discipline. In other
contexts, such definitional debates are important and they raise some important questions
and matters in understanding and interpreting national data and in shaping policy. So a
caveat is required here: the chapter focuses on professional people undertaking doctorates
related to their professional fields; in other contexts this operational definition would leak
profusely!

In many respects, professional or practice-based doctorates are undertaken at the mar­
gins of the academy and rarely attract much attention in international reports on doc­
torates. For example, a recent report by the League of European Research Universities
entitled ‘Doctoral studies in Europe: excellence in researcher training’ (LERU 2007) is
strong on the importance of doctoral education for the knowledge economy, but its
focus is almost entirely on PhD students undertaking their PhDs full-time in the acad­
emy and then finding work in industry. It makes only brief reference to part-time study
for people in the professions, that is those who are already working in the knowledge
economy. National, international and institutional documents and policies are slowly
recognising that PhD programmes are not (just) apprenticeships for academic appoint­
ments (the destination for about 40 per cent of PhD graduates in most industrialised
nations). In 2005, the European University Association (EUA 2005) produced a report
entitled ‘Doctoral Programmes for the European Knowledge Society’ in which it noted:

With changing demographic trends in Europe, doctoral training may be seen as
part of ‘life-long learning’ in line with the Lisbon objectives. This, however,
requires a more flexible approach with regard to both the organisation and duration
of doctoral studies for part-time candidates.

EUA 2005: 24

Furthermore, a UNESCO report on postgraduate education — ‘Trends and Issues in
Postgraduate Education: Challenges for Research’ — acknowledged that doctorates ‘in
high demand often focus on specific work-related fields as they can lead to professional
advancement’ (UNESCO 2007: 7).

Although the aforementioned reports indicate that there is the emergence of recogni­
tion of the existence and potential of doctoral candidates undertaking research within
their professional fields, such recognition remains swamped by the policy discourses that
intrinsically assume that PhDs are undertaken by young, full-time students who, on
graduation, then need to find a useful ‘place’ in the knowledge economy. Some col­
leagues and I addressed this matter in a submission to the Australian parliament through
the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation.
The Committee conducted a review and produced a report entitled ‘Building Australia’s
Research Capacity’ (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science
and Innovation 2008). The report cites part of our submission in which we said that
Australia’s government and institutional policies ‘have a monocular policy focus on
younger, full-time scholarship holders “preparing for work” which is blind to the needs
and potential of the many candidates who are older, and often mid-career, part-time,
salaried and in a good job’ (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry,
Science and Innovation 2008: para 5.18). Despite the widespread policy and mass media
discussions of the importance of new ideas, inventions, discoveries and knowledge for
the future sustainable development of humanity, societies and economies; and the incentives and imperatives for universities and industry to work more closely together on research and its application — indeed, Gibbons et al. (1994) strongly shaped these moves through their proposition of Mode Two research 15 years ago — there is little impact on doctoral policy and pedagogy. (‘Professional doctorates’ are a small exception in some nations, such as Australia and the UK.) Furthermore, Florida (2003; 2005) has been very influential over policy makers, planners and others internationally in his arguments about the ‘creative economy’ and the environments in which creative professionals live and work. Indeed, Florida’s later work (2005) noted the significance of doctoral candidates and postdoctoral fellows to the US creative economy.

One might have thought that PhD candidates working on research leading to significant and original contributions to knowledge in their professional fields would be seen as a rich vein of creative potential for future societies and economies and that governments, universities and industries would be keen to mine this lode. Pushing the analogy a bit further, it’s as if they are wandering the country, metal detectors in hand but deaf to the high-pitched scream indicating ‘gold’. Or maybe they can hear the scream but they don’t like the digging. And ‘digging’ (work) there is to be done if these (potential) doctoral candidates are to yield their potential. There are two areas of work that we shall address now in this chapter that are fundamental, in my view, to providing good-quality doctoral education for professional people undertaking their doctorates in their professional fields.

**Diversity**

Diversity has become a ‘buzz-word’ of recent educational and other social policies. It is usually concerned with encouraging and ensuring appropriate representation and inclusion of the minorities in any particular society. Given education’s capacity either to perpetuate differences and exclusion, or to eliminate and include them, it is no surprise that education is often a focus of such policies. Given the foundational nature of schooling for effective participation in civil society and employment, it is obvious that schooling is likely to be particularly emphasised in policies related to respecting diversity. In more recent times, the matter of diversity has affected universities and their policies and practices in the selection and support of students and staff. Although these matters have been less prevalent in policy on doctoral education, as is discussed below, there has been an increasing awareness of responsibilities concerning diversity in this respect.

Arguably, the typical primary school faces less complexity over matters of diversity with its pupils, than does the typical university with its doctoral students. Yet, I suspect that the typical primary school takes the matter more seriously, than does the typical university and this is partly reflected in the way universities exude apathy for professional people undertaking their doctorates part-time. The complex diversities embodied in such mid-career adults are usually much greater than for the five-year-olds attending primary school; the former have lived approximately half their lives, learned and thought about much, experienced likewise, and occasionally been afflicted by life’s physical, health, emotional and mental misfortunes. Furthermore, a primary school usually mirrors the diversity of its local community; the doctoral students in most universities represent a wider diversity of international, national, regional and local communities. Basically, if the world’s got it, a university can expect it! Intellectual impairment is generally the
exception, but not entirely. The admission requirements and selection processes for doctorates act to shape the representation of people from the wider community, so, for example, the successive academic requirements of the degrees that earn admission to a PhD mean that almost invariably only highly intellectually capable people are enrolled; we also know, for example, that students' academic performance is related negatively to poverty and positively related to parents' academic achievement. In a sense this does not matter in terms of the range of diversity, rather it affects the proportions of people enrolled in doctorates from particular diverse backgrounds. That is, universities should still expect to have doctoral students from poor backgrounds with parents who did not attend university, but it is unlikely, unless there was some particular programme to redress the under representation, that the proportions would match the proportions of the poor in the national population, let alone the globe.

In a recent article (Pearson et al. 2008), colleagues and I analysed Australian government data on doctoral enrolments between 1996 and 2006, together with our own data from a research project (funded by the Australian Research Council) that involved, in part, producing a discipline-coded database of Australian PhD theses from 1948 to 2006. We discussed the implications for diversity in the doctoral population from these data and made the following general observation:

From 1996 to 2004 the doctoral populations in Australia grew strongly from 22,696 to 39,531 candidates. Enrolments of women grew from 41 per cent in 1996 to 49 per cent in 2004. The age profile overall became flatter with fewer in the 30-39 age group, but with more aged over 50 years of age.

Pearson et al. 2008: 360

In 2007, women comprised 50.2 per cent of the new doctoral enrolments in Australia, which matches trends in other industrial nations, such as Canada, the USA and the UK. There are disciplinary differences, of course, with our study showing that women are over represented in the fields of 'society and culture', 'education' and 'health', and under represented in the fields of 'natural and physical sciences' and 'management and commerce'. It is important to emphasise, however, that men and women were in all disciplines in significant numbers, as are people of all ages. Therefore, in terms of government and institutional policy related to these two broad demographic characteristics that we all share (age and sex), it is necessary to assume that doctoral candidates, in any field, will include men and women of ages from mid-20s to over 50 (most Australian universities have several doctoral candidates in their 70s and sometimes a few aged over 80).

In the aforementioned article (Pearson et al. 2008), the matter of enrolment modes (full-time/part-time) and types (on-campus/off-campus, sometimes called internal/external) were discussed, both as a response to diversity within the doctoral student population, and as a form of institutional diversity (in the sense of means of offering doctorates) in itself. In some respects, the categories full-time and part-time, and on-campus and off-campus, are robust and mutually exclusive. In Australia, part-time candidature is calculated and funded by the Government and universities as half-time. Australia has a long history of distance education -- across the school, college and university sectors -- and so on-campus and off-campus enrolments have been part of the educational landscape and lexicon. Generally, there is little, if any, difference in funding or fees for these types of enrolment. This is especially the case for undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programmes. The research, however, shows that doctoral
students float around within these categories, not just collectively, but individually, too. Research by Pearson and Ford (1997) on the 'openness and flexibility' of Australian doctoral programmes concluded that the categories masked, rather than exposed, the enrolment, study patterns and locations of doctoral students. A moment's reflection from those experienced in doctoral programmes would confirm this conclusion. For example, the anthropology, agriculture or archaeology PhD candidate enrolled full-time and on-campus who spends a substantial proportion of his/her candidature in a remote part of the world doing fieldwork does not sound very 'on-campus'; nor does the history PhD in a distant archive. In fact, the doctoral students who do their research on-campus are likely to be in the minority and to include especially those who need their university's lab or other specialist facilities. Certainly, most social and behavioural science students, including those in education, are likely to do their research (data collection) off-campus. Many full-time on-campus students may well spend part of their time working at home, especially when there is thesis writing to be done; and there are the part-time candidates who attend the campus for meetings, seminars, library work and to use specialist facilities.

Research (funded by the Australian Research Council) which I conducted with colleagues on the work of full-time and part-time PhD candidates in Australia involved, in part, a national survey of all doctoral candidates in mid-2005. We published an overview of the findings that also illustrates the complications of enrolment categories (Pearson et al. 2008). For example, 20 per cent of candidates changed their enrolment status between part-time and full-time, with 60 per cent or more of those who were enrolled for five years or more having changed their enrolment in this way. In the week preceding their completion of the survey, 42 per cent of respondents reported undertaking the majority of their doctoral work on-campus, 33 per cent at home, and the balance elsewhere (5 per cent gave no response). Government figures showed that 60 per cent of doctoral students were enrolled on-campus, and the balance off-campus in 2005 (see Pearson et al. 2008: 262), so our research showed that for a typical week of doctoral study, only 42 per cent was conducted on-campus.

Candidates' non-doctoral work responsibilities are another aspect of diversity that bears on them and, arguably, on the universities in which they enrol. The aforementioned survey (Pearson et al. 2008) showed that of full-time candidates 79 per cent of men and 82 per cent of women spent up to 20 hours on family and/or domestic responsibilities in the week prior to their completion of the survey; and 12 per cent of women and 9 per cent of men spent 21-40 hours. Of part-time candidates, 66 per cent of women and 78 per cent of men reported devoting up to 20 hours on domestic and/or family activities, and 18 per cent of women and 12 per cent of women devoted between 21 and 40 hours on such activities (Pearson et al. 2008: 21). Our research identified other trends, such as those related to age, national background, and family size, that have a bearing on the interpretation of such figures; however, these are beyond the scope of this chapter. The important considerations here are that almost all doctoral students undertake significant family and/or domestic activities each week, whether they are full-time or not. (Of full-time candidates, only 2 per cent of women and 6 per cent of men reported no such work; of part-time candidates the equivalent figures are 1 per cent and 3 per cent.) Similarly, complexities were identified in the area of paid work, both academic and non-academic, undertaken by respondents. In the week prior to completion of the survey, 35 per cent undertook paid non-academic work and 30 per cent undertook paid academic work; perhaps surprisingly, 19 per cent of respondents said they worked on academic activities but were unpaid for this work (Pearson et al. 2008: 17).
Two important conclusions for this chapter emanate from this research: one is that most candidates, full-time or part-time, undertake paid and unpaid work and so, it may be assumed, most of these are engaged professionally (a few, especially full-time, who are engaged in non-academic paid work may not be in what one might call 'professional' work); the other is that, not only is there diversity across the doctoral population, but also there is diversity within the categories used to describe the population. These matters have implications for both national and institutional policies, as the following quotes illustrate.

The (Australian) House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation (2008) observed as follows:

The Committee is apprised of the diversity of postgraduate research students and recognised that a one-size-fits-all model is not suitable for developing Australia's research capacity and strength.

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation 2008: para 5.17

We believe that diversity is a strength of Australian doctoral education and we call for policy that eschews homogeneity and which values diversity and flexibility.

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation 2008: para 5.19

The Committee recognised the need for flexibility in what might be called both (government’s) bureaucratic dealings and also for (institutional) doctoral pedagogies. The European University Association reached similar conclusions.

[A] doctoral candidate was, in most cases, a person with a deep interest in research and a future career in academic research and teaching. This is not true anymore, although society still tends to maintain the stereotype of people with doctoral degrees as scholars living on the isolated worlds of academia ... there is) a growing number of students who pursue doctoral training for professional; knowledge and skill development (for) industry, government and administration, medical and health provision, legal and financial services, NGOs, etc. There are many students who (undertake) doctoral training for personal development ... and to widen their employment opportunities ... The doctoral candidate today is a very diverse figure. Doctoral ... programmes are reflecting and tackling this reality through finding the right balance between research, which remains the core element of doctoral education, and the necessary orientation to the wider labour market.

BUA 2005: 26–7

How should universities respond? And what should the new generation of doctoral candidates expect? To conclude, some suggestions are offered below.

**Being professional: doctoral practices for the new professionals**

Arguably, there are two fundamental problems with the way universities generally (and there are exceptions within universities: they have diversities, too!) understand and
practise their doctoral administration and programmes. One is that they find it very hard to see doctoral candidates – whatever their backgrounds, expertise, seniority – as, well, students. They might be the most senior students, but they are still regulated, controlled, defined and understood as students. The other is that professional part-time doctoral candidates are mostly out-of-sight and out-of-mind. Neumann and Rodwell (2009) in their research with part-time students talk of their ‘invisibility’. They are marginalised, almost invariably seen as ‘different’ and ‘other’ to the on-campus, full-time, in the lab, down the corridor, doctoral student. Part-time, students are a problem to be accommodated or even minimised (by giving preference to enrolling full-time candidates). Their strengths (self-supporting, applied research, potential impact, industry connections) are largely ignored (somewhat ironically, as noted previously, given that universities are under increasing pressure to do useful research and work with industry) (Barnacle and Usher 2003; Evans 2002).

Some readers (supervisors, candidates, graduates) may have experienced the tensions between a high achieving professional pursuing a doctorate and the banal and bureaucratised administrative procedures of universities. If such a candidate has an important task thrust on them at work and needs to extend a doctoral deadline, forms have to be completed, permissions granted. They don’t conform to the ‘normal’ progress of a ‘typical’ full-time doctoral candidate – notwithstanding that this typicality is based on myth. It is not their candidature it is the university’s, so it will decide what time they need and may have. There are other examples, such as those that relate to the support given to doctoral students. Seminars, workshops, social events, they are all on-campus next week, never mind that many candidates work during the week, and live miles away or even overseas. There are examples where doctoral programmes within universities do much better than this; in Australia and the UK, some professional doctorate programmes do so, but one senses it is against the tide of their universities. (Professional doctorate publications and conferences in Australia and the UK have many stories from people trying to make a difference, for example, Green et al. 2001; Maxwell et al. 2005; McWilliam et al. 2002; www.ukcge.ac.uk/profdocs)

What is required is a professional approach by universities (administrations, managers, supervisors, etc.) and candidates. Professional, part-time candidates need to be seen as highly important and potentially very influential clients. Clients who bring their skills and expertise to bear on a research project they wish to undertake and that is likely to have a benefit in a profession or workplace. The diverse attributes and characteristics they bring are not problems to be ‘worked-around’, but strengths of diversity that will strengthen the quality and impact of a doctoral programme. Serving these candidates’ needs should be a privilege for universities and a source of inspiration for those who work with them. Anticipating these needs and reflecting their diversity requires creative pedagogical and administrative processes. Being solely reactionary is not good professional practice, although reacting promptly to unexpected matters is. It requires supervisors to recognise that the ‘master-apprentice’ relationship is counter productive (arguably, this is the case for all doctoral supervision). The relationship is better characterised as professional (supervisor) and client (candidate) – although some professional practices in the world beyond academe are not worth emulating. Perhaps the best way to characterise the relationship is as a team where the team-memers have particular strengths and interests that they bring to bear to get the research done and the thesis written. In many respects, the candidate is the team-leader: it is their project. In many cases, the research will be in a professional or workplace context in which the supervisors may find
it very difficult to undertake such research themselves because they are not members of that community (Evans 2007). (Elsewhere I have discussed the implications of supervising professional (part-time) candidates in their workplace-based research.)

Professional part-time candidates also need to bring their skills and expertise as professionals to bear on their candidature. I have discussed (Evans 2006) the strategies professional (part-time) candidates can use to manage their candidature. In the context of this chapter it is important that they recognise that they belong to a diverse population of doctoral candidates and that their diversities are as important as those of anyone else. That is, candidates may feel privileged to be undertaking a doctorate, they may feel particularly so if their supervisor is eminent in their field, but that does not mean they are 'just' 'peculiar' students; indeed, they are at the university mainly to produce knowledge not to consume it through another course of study. If candidates recognise that they are, in some respects, clients of their university, then they should expect service, and service broadly tailored to their needs; they should not apologise for being difficult because they don't fit the established, ill-fitting, procedures of the university. If, however, they also adopt the view that by undertaking a doctorate they are responsible for a team being established to complete their research and thesis, then other complementary perceptions of their doctoral identity follow. They may have eminent supervisors, but these are part of the candidate's team. The candidate needs to manage them respectfully as any good team-members should be managed. Candidates need to recognise their own weaknesses and how the other team members' strengths can help them complete the whole project (e.g. with research design, research ethics, identifying literature, doctoral writing). There are also other supporters of the team, perhaps none more so than those in the library (see Macauley's (2006) discussion of the librarian as 'the candidates' forgotten friend'), but also in IT, student services, etc. A wise candidate will identify these resources to support their project and manage them professionally, too.

Conclusion

There is evidence that doctoral candidates reflect the diversities of the world and that this enables them to bring to their candidature and to universities' doctoral programmes considerable strengths as a result. Although there are some national and international reports on doctoral education that recognise these strengths, universities have been slow to respond. Yet it is universities who have much to gain by building on the diversities of doctoral candidates, especially those that are embodied in those part-time candidates who are working in their professions and undertaking related research. It has been argued that there is work to be done by universities, both administratively and pedagogically, and by candidates, in terms of managing their doctoral identity, expectations and candidature. Such work could lead to much more creative and responsive (to diversity) doctoral programmes, leading to more productive doctoral research, and, finally, to superior national research capacity residing in the skills, expertise and knowledge of the doctoral graduates.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of my colleagues, Peter Macauley (who read and commented on an earlier draft) and Margot Pearson with whom I have worked
on the research behind our publications cited here, and to Kevin Ryland (who completed his PhD with me on part-time PhD students) and to Jim Cumming (who completed his PhD on full-time PhD students) as part of one of the aforementioned projects.

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