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Australian PhD Theses in Selected Professional and Academic Disciplines 1987-2006 and the Implications for Future Research Capacity

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Australian PhD Theses in Selected Professional and Academic Disciplines 1987-2006 and the Implications for Future Research Capacity

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Abstract: The authors (with colleagues) have conducted research into Australian doctoral education for over a decade. Two recent projects have produced as part of their outcomes: a database coded by discipline of all Australian PhD theses (dissertations) from 1987–2006. This paper commences with an overview of this work in terms of its purposes, research methods and outcomes. It is contextualised in terms of the current Australian and international debates about the nature, substance and impact of doctoral education on nations, societies, communities and economies. The paper presents some analyses of trends in the 1987–2006 Australian PhD theses. The period 1987-2006 covers several major changes in university education in Australia from the impact of the establishment of the Unified National System in the early 1990s, through the implementation of the Research Training Scheme (RTS) from 2001, the deliberations and demise of the Research Quality Framework (RQF), the rise of Excellence in Research Australia (ERA), through to the review of research training and the research workforce in Australian universities by the House of Representatives. The paper presents and tabulates a variety of trends from the bibliometric and bibliographic data, in particular those relating to the ebb and flow of PhDs in particular disciplines. The implications for national, institutional and disciplinary planners and policymakers with interests in the development and sustainability of research capacity are discussed.

Keywords: PhD Graduates, Doctoral Education, Research Capacity Building

Introduction

The development of (human) research capacity in a nation is largely seen as a responsibility of universities through their research degrees (see, for examples, House of Representatives, 2008 and European University Association, 2005). This is especially the role of PhD programs through which an individual demonstrates their capacity to design and implement a piece of research and scholarship that constitutes a ‘significant and original’ contribution to knowledge. A PhD graduate is then, arguably, the embodiment of a piece of research capacity which is then deployed in various academic, professional, government, business and other fields.

It is partly with this matter in mind that the authors have conducted research into Australian doctoral education for over a decade. In particular, one recent project (with M. Pearson, and funded by the (then) Department of Education, Science and Technology) that informs this paper produced, as one of its outcomes, a database coded by discipline of all Australian PhD theses (dissertations) from 1987–2006 (Macauley, Evans & Pearson, 2009). This project arose from a larger project that was funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC).
The paper commences with an overview of the research methods and outcomes. It is contextualised in terms of the current Australian and international debates about the nature, substance and impact of doctoral education on nations, societies, communities and economies. Four professional disciplines (architecture and building, education, librarianship and nursing) and four academic disciplines (astronomy, chemistry, cultural studies and demography) are selected for analysis of their 1987–2006 PhD thesis records. These selections were made to reflect a range of professional and academic disciplines in Australia and to illustrate the changes that have occurred over the past two decades. The period 1987–2006 covers several major changes in Australian university education and PhD education in particular (see Evans, Evans & Marsh, 2008). It includes the establishment of the Unified National System in the early 1990s (Dawkins, 1988), through the implementation of the Research Training Scheme (RTS) from 2001 (Kemp, 1999a, 1999b), the deliberations and demise of the Research Quality Framework (RQF), the rise of Excellence in Research Australia (ERA) (see, http://www.arc.gov.au/era/default.htm), through to the review of research training and the research workforce in Australian universities by the House of Representatives (2008).

Academic fields differ from the professional fields to the extent that they are ‘basic disciplines’ of the academy and are not formally related to, or governed by, employment within a registered profession. Indeed, often the most common form of employment for PhD graduates in these fields is within the academy itself or in related government or non-government research institutes. In effect, professional disciplines are ‘applied’ in nature and their undergraduate and postgraduate curricula are controlled or influenced by professional bodies, registration boards etc. However, to the best of our knowledge there is no such influence over PhDs, although there are examples of such influence over professional doctorates. Of course, the distinction between professional and academic disciplines is far from pure and mutually exclusive. We are making the distinction largely in terms of the differences in the primary orientation and operation within the academy.

The period 1987–2006 saw an increase in doctoral enrolments from approximately 15,000 to about 40,000. For the first five years (1987–1991) our data show 6817 PhD theses were completed and submitted to their libraries, the corresponding figure for the final five years (2002–2006) is 18,873.

Research Design

Part of our research relating to this paper involved building a discipline-coded Database of Australian Doctorates (DAD). DAD has been constructed from bibliographic records of all Australian PhDs downloaded in bar delimited format from the National Bibliographic Database of Libraries Australia. The National Bibliographic Database includes PhD thesis records submitted periodically from every Australian university library. This enabled importation into MSExcel where the records were sorted and checked, and duplicates and false drops removed. Currently, there are approximately 76,000 PhD records in DAD (1948-2008) from which 53,715 records for the two decades covered by this paper (1987-2006) were separated. The records for 2005 and 2006 are incomplete because a few universities enter and upload their bibliographic records irregularly.

The thesis records in DAD are coded using the Research Fields Courses and Disciplines (RFCD) classification scheme for classifying research in Australia. The RFCD classification is arranged in a hierarchical structure with 24 divisions, 139 disciplines and 898 subjects.
(ABS, 1998). One RFCD discipline code was allocated to each of the PhD bibliographic records. (In March 2008, the RFCD was revised and replaced with the Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification (ANZSRC) (ABS, 2008).) Ten people coded the records using the bibliographic records produced by librarians from all Australian universities. The RFCD classification allocated to each thesis record was assessed on the basis of: the thesis title, subject heading(s) and call number, the Department/School/Faculty, and (where provided) an abstract. Additional resources were used to clarify terms including specialist print and online dictionaries, and connecting online to Libraries Australia for relevant links. To ensure consistency a number of processes were implemented. All coders were provided with training and newer coders were partnered with a more experienced coder. While there were some face-to-face meetings, most of the conversations occurred by email with all coders.

1987–2006 Thesis Record Data in the Selected Professional Fields

Architecture

Figure 1 shows the numbers and distributions of Australian PhDs in architecture (108) for the period 1987–2006 is over double those in librarianship (43), but it is still quite small with an average of about five per year. There is a marked increase in the numbers of PhD theses being completed from the mid-1990s, but with a marked reduction from 2000 to 2004, before returning to the level of the late 1990s.

![Figure 1: Distribution of PhDs in Architecture by Year, 1987-2006](image)

The numbers of universities offering undergraduate and postgraduate architecture courses increased during this period to fifteen (there are now seventeen). Architecture is a university discipline, like law, which employs some academic staff who are experienced practitioners without PhDs. Therefore, it does not entirely require PhD graduates to sustain its staffing, but it is questionable if the current PhD graduation levels are sufficient for a viable research effort across all the architecture schools in Australia. It should be noted, however, that research within architecture schools is conducted on topics that draw on research expertise (and, therefore PhDs) outside of the discipline, such as, engineering, materials science, environmental science and construction management.
Education

The number of Australian PhDs in education (2795) awarded during the period 1987–2006 shown in Figure 2 is the largest of any professional field and it constitutes an average of 140 per year for the period. As for the other disciplines, the growth rate rises noticeably from the mid-1990s. The apparent reduction in 2005 and 2006 is probably caused by a delay in cataloguing of PhD theses in universities and submitting the records to the National Library, that is, the trend is likely to be no less than a levelling and may be an increase.

Figure 2: Number of PhDs in Education, by Year, 1987-2006

Almost every university in Australia offers undergraduate and postgraduate education courses. Education is a university discipline that generally employs academic staff with PhDs, although in some curriculum areas where PhDs are under-represented—such as, creative and performing arts—emphasis may be placed on employing experienced classroom practitioners. Although education is a large discipline area in Australian higher education, it appears that there is a strong supply of new PhD graduates to sustain academic staff levels. A consideration of other data, below, suggests that matters may not be as good as they seem.

The age of PhD students in Education is relatively old and, one assumes, many are already employed in careers in education. National enrolment data (DEST, 2006) show that, in 2005, of the 687 PhD students in education, 451 (66%) were aged over 40 years and only 59 (9%) were aged 29 years or less. In addition, two-thirds of the PhD enrolments in education were enrolled part-time—this supports the assumption that many were employed in education—suggesting that ages at graduation are likely to be three to four years higher than these enrolment figures show. Therefore, although the numbers of PhD graduates in education appear strong for the sustainability of the university discipline, because they are mostly aged above forty (some will be much older) and in careers in education (including universities) suggests that the supply of PhD graduates for long careers in education is less than one might expect. In comparison with non-professional disciplines that may recruit recent PhD graduates (or recent postdocs) in their early thirties, it seems that in education, recruitment of recent PhD graduates in their mid-forties is likely to be the case. Therefore, a twenty-year academic career is likely to be usual, rather than thirty years or more. Furthermore, university education schools are less likely to be able to recruit recent PhD graduates because they are already employed in careers and may be relatively well-paid and, unlikely to be attracted to junior academic levels.
Librarianship

Figure 3 shows that very few PhDs (43) were undertaken in the discipline of librarianship in Australia for the period 1987-2006. While the numbers of completions peaked in the mid-1990s with 4–6 PhDs there was an average of two PhD completions per year for the two decades. Based on an analysis of the 1987–2006 database, many of the Library and Information Studies (LIS) academics (mostly) and practitioners known to the author Macauley completed their PhDs in fields other than librarianship. At least forty such people completed PhDs in fields including Business Information Systems, Education Studies, History, Information Systems, Literature Studies, Psychology, Sociology and even Zoology. Arguably, this demonstrates the transferability of the skills and knowledge gained through doctoral research and the multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary nature of some doctorates.

Figure 3: Distribution of PhDs in Librarianship by Year, 1987-2006

The data also show the implications for research training and succession planning for LIS. Many, if not most, LIS academics in Australia are ‘Baby Boomers’ and likely to retire over the next decade or so. The data show that there are not enough PhD graduates produced to replace these staff. For example, Charles Sturt University has Australia’s largest LIS academic department, but employs many of its LIS academics from overseas. While such international diversity has its strengths, it illustrates the lack of Australian LIS PhD graduates and signifies the fragile sustainability of the LIS discipline in Australia.

Nursing

Figure 4 shows the numbers and distribution of Australian PhDs in nursing for the period 1987–2006. A total of 327 nursing PhDs were awarded; this represents an average of sixteen per year. Again a strong increase is observed, from a low of zero in 1987 to a high of forty in 2003, in the numbers of PhD theses being completed during the period. The later years, as noted previously, are likely to be below the actual totals when all universities have uploaded their thesis records to Libraries Australia.
Prior to the early 1990s nurses were trained in hospitals under an apprenticeship system. By the mid-1990s the training of Division 1 registered nurses moved to the universities and entry to the profession became graduate entry. The Division 2 nurses continue to be trained through hospitals and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college studies. The shift from hospital-based apprenticeships to university-based undergraduate pre-service courses created a demand for staff with postgraduate qualifications, especially PhDs, to build the new schools of nursing in universities. These new schools of nursing soon introduced postgraduate courses and enrolled PhD students. Therefore, the growth in nursing PhDs was even stronger during the 1987 to 2006 period than was the case for other professions that had been based in CAEs or universities for a long time. Hence, nursing has the largest growth in relative terms of the professional disciplines covered in this paper.

**Comparisons of Numbers of PhD Theses between the Professions**

In general, the tables and figures above show large increases in the numbers of PhDs completed in the four professional disciplines. It is impossible to describe proportional increases for Librarianship and Nursing because their number was zero at the beginning of this period. However, their growth from their first PhD record in the period to their maximum number for a year is six times and forty times, respectively. Architecture (which also recorded zero in one year, but not 1987) increased seven times from its lowest year of two, and education increased almost four times, but from a much higher lowest year of 57 thesis records. These figures must, of course, be reconciled with the size of the professions themselves, although calculating or estimating the size of a profession is fraught with difficulties as to who is included and how to obtain the necessary data. It is clear, however, that education is a massive profession with many primary and secondary school teachers employed and many others in other levels and forms of education. Nursing is also quite large, whereas architecture and librarianship are small in comparison.
Table 1: Number of PhDs in Architecture, Education, Librarianship & Nursing: 1987-2006

| Year | 87 | 88 | 89 | 90 | 91 | 92 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 | 98 | 99 | 00 | 01 | 02 | 03 | 04 | 05 | 06 | Total |
|------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|
| Edu  | 67 | 69 | 87 | 59 | 57 | 78 | 80 | 94 | 115| 162| 173| 178| 200| 195| 176| 218| 205| 224| 179| 179| 2795|
| Nur  | 0  | 1  | 4  | 1  | 3  | 6  | 6  | 5  | 7  | 18 | 17 | 25 | 18 | 22 | 24 | 39 | 40 | 36 | 32 | 23 | 327 |
| Arc  | 2  | 1  | 0  | 3  | 2  | 3  | 3  | 1  | 7  | 4  | 11 | 7  | 13 | 8  | 0  | 4  | 6  | 14 | 8  | 11 | 108 |
| Lib  | 0  | 1  | 2  | 1  | 2  | 1  | 3  | 3  | 4  | 6  | 5  | 3  | 0  | 4  | 2  | 1  | 2  | 1  | 1  | 1  | 43  |

Total 69, 72, 93, 64, 64, 88, 92, 103, 133, 190, 208, 213, 231, 227, 202, 262, 253, 275, 220, 214, 3273

Figure 5: Distributions of PhDs in Architecture, Education, Librarianship & Nursing: 1987-2006

Table 1 and Figure 5 show the ways the distributions between PhD thesis records for the four professions have changed over the period 1987 to 2006 (with the caveat that the final two years are likely to be less than the eventual totals for those years). In particular, Figure 5 shows graphically how each professional discipline has changed and also how they have changed in relation to each other. It also shows very starkly how much larger the number of Education PhDs is in comparison with the other professional disciplines. It is notable that the disciplines show a decline in 2001. In 2002 the Australian Government introduced a new approach to funding research degrees that was called the Research Training Scheme (RTS). A notable feature of the RTS was that half the funding for new research Masters and Doctoral students (the vast majority of whom are PhD candidates) was based on the numbers of doctoral completions in the preceding two years. This probably contributed to universities reporting some late 2001 PhDs in the first period of 2002. It also had the effect of universities encouraging PhD candidates who were beyond the funded period of candidature (four years full-time equivalent) to finish their PhDs, often with the threat of being excluded from their program if they did not do so. These are likely to have contributed to the trough in 2001 and the sharp reversal in 2002.
1987–2006 Thesis Record Data in the Selected Academic Fields

**Astronomy**

Astronomy is a relatively small and specialised field of physical and mathematical sciences within Australia. As a consequence, the numbers of PhDs awarded each year are small and they vary considerably between one year and the next. For example, only four PhDs were recorded in 1987 whereas this number had nearly quadrupled in 1988. Figure 6 shows the trend more clearly over the two decades. There has been a gradual increase that has tapered in recent years. The five-yearly counts make this clear: 51 theses in 1987-1991, rising to 78 in 1992–1996, a peak 102 in 1997 to 2001, then a decline to 82 in 2002 to 2006.

![Figure 6: Distribution of PhDs in Astronomy, 1987-2006](image)

**Chemistry**

Compared to other fields of research in this paper, Chemistry has a significant number of completions each year from a low of 69 in 1989 steadily climbing to a high of 163 in 1997. Since 1997 numbers declined to 92 in 2006, a figure close to the 1987 completion rate of 98, the commencement year of this study. On a five-yearly basis there were 432 theses in 1987-1991, increasing to 607 in 1992-1996, peaking at 746 in 1997-2001 before falling back to 614 in 2002-2006. However, unlike the professional disciplines, Chemistry has been a major player in Australian PhDs since their inception in the late 1940s with the first recorded PhDs in chemistry 1949 at the University of Melbourne.
Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies is principally a humanities field that has grown from being a relatively small area for PhDs—about six to eight per year in the late 1980s to over 50 per year in recent years. Figure 8 shows a significant climb in PhD numbers during the 1990s, again with a lesser growth since. The five-yearly analysis of the figures shows that there were 34 theses in 1987-1991, more than doubling to 76 in 1992–1996, then doubling again to 185 in 1997 to 2001, then reaching a peak of 252 in 2002 to 2006.

Demography

Demography is a relatively small and specialised social science field in Australia. The field includes migration, fertility, family and household studies and demography not elsewhere classified. With some annual exceptions, its numbers have remained relatively stable over the twenty-year period. For example, seven PhDs were recorded in 1987 and eight in 2006, which given the total PhD graduations in Australia have trebled is a major relative decline. Due to the small numbers and annual fluctuations, Figure 9 shows an erratic trend over the two decades. The five-yearly analyses show that there were 28 theses in 1987-1991, rising
to 36 in 1992–1996, a peak of 39 in 1997 to 2001, then a decline to 35 in 2002 to 2006. This field did not gain the large increases that most disciplines experienced in the late 1990s, although its peak was during this period. It is possible that PhDs in the area of geography known as ‘population geography’—which is closely allied to demography, but which is not named as a field in the RFCD classification scheme, may be coded as ‘geography not elsewhere classified’—may account for some additional PhDs.

Figure 9: Distribution of PhDs in Demography, 1987-2006

Comparisons of Numbers of PhD Theses between the Academic Fields

Table 2 and Figure 10 comprise and aggregation of the data and trends for PhD completions for the four academic fields. Table 2 enables a comparison to be made between the actual numbers of PhDs per year for the academic disciplines; Figure 10 illustrates both the relative numbers and also the relative trends for the academic disciplines.

Table 2: Numbers of PhDs in Astronomy, Chemistry, Cultural Studies & Demography, 1987-2006

| Year | 87 | 88 | 89 | 90 | 91 | 92 | 93 | 94 | 95 | 96 | 97 | 98 | 99 | 00 | 01 | 02 | 03 | 04 | 05 | 06 | Total |
|------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|     |
| Chem | 98 | 94 | 69 | 106| 85 | 114| 117| 118| 140| 118| 163| 143| 148| 145| 147| 128| 137| 148| 109| 92  | 2419 |
| Cult | 6  | 8  | 8  | 8  | 4  | 11 | 4  | 15 | 19 | 27 | 25 | 32 | 40 | 31 | 57 | 55 | 49 | 53 | 44 | 51  | 547  |
| Astro| 4  | 15 | 16 | 8  | 8  | 16 | 19 | 16 | 12 | 15 | 17 | 24 | 20 | 23 | 18 | 15 | 20 | 19 | 11 | 17  | 313  |
| Dem | 7  | 2  | 6  | 8  | 5  | 4  | 7  | 10 | 11 | 10 | 7  | 5  | 9  | 8  | 5  | 4  | 10 | 8  | 8   | 138  |

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Table 2 and Figure 10 show relatively modest increases in the numbers of PhDs completed in the four academic disciplines, with the exception of Cultural Studies which sustained significant growth during the period. Astronomy and Demography have relatively tiny numbers of PhD graduations per year and, given the increase in the PhD graduations nationally, their proportions of the total declined to roughly one-third of their 1987 levels. Chemistry is a much bigger field and produces far more PhDs than the other selected academic disciplines. It accounts for 71 percent of the PhDs for the four disciplines. However, Chemistry’s numbers appear to be declining from its peak around the turn of the century and, again, in proportional terms, it has declined in comparison with trend for total number of PhDs in Australia between 1987 and 2006.

**Comparisons of Numbers of PhD Theses between the Academic Fields**

Figure 11 plots the relative numbers of PhDs for the entire eight disciplines considered in this paper; it also illustrates the relative trends that have occurred in PhD graduations in these disciplines.
Figure 11 shows that there are six professional and academic disciplines in 1987 that had very small numbers (in the case of Nursing zero) of graduations, in this respect each had a very low rate of producing new researchers for their fields. Hence, the research capacity at the time (in the academy and beyond) is likely to have been relatively low. Chemistry and Education had much higher numbers of graduations in 1987 and they both went on to grow considerably in the late 1990s and early 2000s: Education growing by over 300%, and Chemistry by just over 50%. Hence, their research capacity in 1987 (both in the academy, industry and the professions) is likely to have been relatively high and this strengthened considerably over the period. However, it is worth re-emphasising that the total number of Australian PhDs grew by about 300% over the period and so Education has contributed its share to that, but Chemistry has declined relatively. The two disciplines that have grown most strongly in percentage terms are Cultural Studies and Nursing, although the latter has experienced some decline since 2003. If we compare the 1987–1991 period with the 2002–2006 period, then Cultural Studies grew by 738% and Nursing by 1867%. The capacity for research in these fields grew considerably. In the case of Nursing there was little research in the academy in 1987 (there were no schools of nursing) and little capacity for nursing research within clinical settings. By 2006 this had changed markedly with many doctoral graduates in Nursing in both academic and, to a lesser extent, in clinical practice. As was noted previously, Astronomy, Architecture and Building, and Demography have shown modest growths, but relative declines, over the two decades. Librarianship is the lowest performing of the professional disciplines and would appear to be in a crisis in terms of both its academic and professional research capacity.

Concluding Comment

The data presented in this paper show four examples each of the PhD graduations professional and academic disciplines in Australian universities. They show that there are professional (for example, Nursing) and academic (for example, Cultural Studies) fields that have grown strongly over the past two decades and have, consequently increased their research capacity.
within both the academy and society in general. Others (for example, Librarianship and Demography) have declined, especially in relation to the tripling of total Australian PhD graduations over the period. The data in this paper show a strong growth in PhDs over the past twenty years and indicate a commensurate growth in research capacity. This suggests that those fields where PhD graduations are expanding are consequently developing a greater research capacity and may well be best placed to contribute and compete in the knowledge economy. However, it also calls into question the marked relative declines in other disciplines and what the consequences are of these for the academy (especially in terms of the supply of new academics) and for the nation in general as its capacities to produce, publish and use new knowledge in these areas declines.

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