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## **Professional Doctorates: Working toward impact**

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The following selected and refereed papers are from the Fifth Biennial International Conference on Professional Doctorates held between 25<sup>th</sup>–26<sup>th</sup> November 2004 at Deakin University in Geelong, Australia. Professional Doctorates is a field of study that has increasingly interested academics, professionals and policy makers, especially in Australia (see, for example, Maxwell & Shanahan, 1997, and McWilliam and others, 2002). For some, the emergence of Professional Doctorates has created a new structural entry point into academe, while for others their interest emanates from their overall dissatisfaction with the PhD. Whatever the motivation for one's interest in Professional Doctorates, there is a broad recognition that valuable (new) doctoral knowledge is created outside academe in professional and workplace contexts. In an evolving global landscape, where knowledge and information are being increasingly decentralised, and universities are increasingly corporatised and privatised, the activities of academe are becoming intertwined with those of the professions. To this end, the development of Professional Doctorates has made an impact within higher education in general, and to doctoral education in particular.

Structurally, Professional Doctorates gained their impetus in Australia among the widespread changes to Higher Education that were introduced by the Labor Federal Government in the late 1980s. Among the core messages driving (then) Minister Dawkins's Higher Education reforms, was a demand for institutional training to connect with the needs of the economy and industry. The development of Professional Doctorates was, at least partly, an attempt to connect the doctoral enterprise with the demands of industry. By making more explicit connections with professional workers and their workplaces, it was anticipated that doctoral programs would be able to tailor their practices and outcomes to the particular needs of industry. By strengthening these connections it was hoped that the tertiary sector in general, and doctoral programs in particular, would be better placed to contribute to the economic development of the country.

Therefore, an outcome of the Dawkins reforms to higher education during the 1980s was the growth of Professional Doctorates. The number and variety of Professional Doctoral awards and the number of students enrolled increased dramatically across Australia during the 1990s. It is apparent now that the momentum for Professional Doctorates in Australia was also felt in the UK and beyond. Not only was the development of Professional Doctorate programs similar to those being consolidated in Australia, but the rhetoric around 'meaningful' research agendas that underpinned their progress was also remarkably consistent (Bourner, Bowden & Laing, 2000).

Despite their proliferation in the early 1990s the place and implementation of Professional Doctorates were not generally well understood among the academic, let alone professional, community. Numerous models arose offering an array of

alternatives to accessing Doctoral qualifications that were distinct from the 'traditional' PhD. Under the guise of a Professional Doctorate, doctoral candidates were offered anything from on campus course work programs to distance education research programs, and everything in-between. By 1996, such was the ambiguity and diversity surrounding Professional Doctorates that the inaugural Professional Doctorate Conference was conceived and convened (Maxwell & Shanahan, 1996). In direct response to emerging concerns and anxieties about what was taking place in the name of Professional Doctorates, the Conference sought to nurture cross-disciplinary discussions about the question, *Which way for Professional Doctorates?* Such was the robustness of interest and interaction around this gathering it was determined that the International Conference on Professional Doctorates was to become a biennial event.

With graduates gradually emerging from their programs, Professional Doctorates seemed to grow rapidly in stature and legitimacy throughout the 1990s. Early anxieties about Professional Doctorates was replaced by interest and enthusiasm for the innovative programs that had sprung up around them (Maxwell & Shanahan 1998). This was reflected in the theme of the second annual Conference, titled *Professional Doctorates: Innovations in Teaching and Research*, where delegates were encouraged to share innovative aspects of their programming and practice. In some ways this Conference was a celebration of what had been achieved and the exciting future that lay ahead for Professional Doctorates. Having consolidated its existence/legitimacy in the academic 'marketplace' it was time to think about the impact and penetration of Professional Doctorates. Driving this were ongoing concerns about the place of industry in the programming and implementation of Professional Doctorates.

The 2000 Conference, titled *Doctoral Education and Professional Practice: The Next Generation*, focused on the relationship between academe and industry in nurturing the 'professional' dimension of these programs. Among other things, the Conference confirmed that links between academe and industry were far from complete, and that decisions about the nature of Professional Doctorate programs were overwhelmingly controlled by academe (Green, Maxwell & Shanahan 2001). In 2002 the Conference focused on what academe was actually doing to provide appropriate research knowledge and training in its Professional Doctorate programs. Under the theme of *Research Training and the Knowledge Economy* the 4<sup>th</sup> Professional Doctorate Conference questioned the relevance and utility of the research training that was taking place in these programs. In this way conference discussions connected with wider concerns about the sorts of graduate attributes that can reasonably be expected to flow from doctoral programs (McWilliam 2003).

The current 5<sup>th</sup> Professional Doctorate Conference in 2004 adopted the theme, *Working doctorates: The impact of professional doctorates in the professions and workplace*. This signalled a shift from practices and processes to outcomes. In this way the theme reflected a growing concern about the impact of Professional Doctorates. Having now been on the scene for some fifteen to twenty years, and delivered over a thousand graduates from its programs, questions about professional impact were seen to be timely. This was not merely a moment of reflection or introspection, but Professional Doctorates, like many other programs, were feeling

renewed pressure to justify and validate their existence amid the contemporary scrutiny and changes to doctoral funding arrangements by government.

The backdrop to the 2004 Conference was very different to the one that gave rise to the early formulations of the Professional Doctorates in Australia. By 2000 the pressures on universities were being felt in a number of ways as they were increasingly forced to compete with each other for students and resources. In their search for viable numbers of students, some turned to attracting international students. Such students' fees also provided additional income at a time when Federal Government sources were being spread more thinly. The Howard Government pressured universities to obtain outside funding by following a market approach to funding the higher education sector. By 2004 there were concerns that some universities would become gradually impoverished, especially in terms of research and doctoral education, as the larger and more prestigious universities attracted increasingly larger funds, especially in research. In this context, it was feared that Professional Doctorates might be pushed aside in the pursuit of other more lucrative ventures.

Compounding these concerns are criticisms being levelled that some Professional Doctorates are leading to a 'dumbing down the doctorate' or at the very least contributing to unwelcome credential creep based on the lure of the doctoral title, rather than the substance of the learning and research involved. There was evidence of the former as some universities seek markets without carefully considering the medium to long term impact of 'quick fix' professional doctorate programs. Using examples from EdD programs and practices as examples, Evans (2001) showed that the Professional Doctorates may well be contributing to credential creep. The Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies entered the fray in 2004 with the publication of guidelines on the quality and standards of doctorates offered in Australian universities (subsequently revised, see Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies, 2005).

Simultaneously, many universities were working on using the flexibility of the PhD regulations to liberate themselves from what had become the 'tradition' of PhDs in Australia (for a critique and exploration of this 'tradition', see Pearson & Ford, 19997). For instance, increasingly coursework (for credit or non-credit) has been introduced, new media incorporated in the examinable products, and forms of research dissemination encouraged or required during candidature.

In this environment after more than a decade of work in professional doctorates in Australia, McWilliam and others (2002) conducted a study for the Australian Government in which it was found (amongst a range of other things) that peak bodies had not been greatly influenced by the Professional Doctorates in their field. The research showed that most Professional Doctorates had failed to establish 'deep' links with their professions against the following criteria:

- Their establishment is driven by a particular industry or professional association (eg, peak industry groups define the nature of the training to be undertaken and the skills/attributes that are to be developed);

- Industry and/or professions are partners in the delivery and supervision of programs, and this is built into the funding arrangements that exist between universities, participants and external bodies;
- Industry/professional bodies play a substantial role in the assessment and credentialing process;
- Research training outcomes are of a nature and in a form that is recognisable as beneficial to the industry/professional partner; and
- The community of learning built around the program includes both academic and non-academic participants (McWilliam and others 2002, p. 100).

McWilliam and others indicated that most Professional Doctorates had only been able to establish what they called ‘surface’ links between the nature of the Professional Doctoral work supported through the universities and the work of professions themselves. The more likely understanding is that universities saw potential for students in the environment above, went ahead with the development of Professional Doctorates because they were doctoral gatekeepers and mostly left professional members out, or involved them only peripherally. Historically, links between academics and professionals at the peak level have been weak, except in the notable exception of the Australian Psychologists’ Association.

While it might be possible to assert that the Professional Doctorates are under-developed in their relationship to the professions to which their awards are supposedly addressed, such a claim appears to miss an important point. In relation to Professional Doctoral programs in Australia and New Zealand, Maxwell and Shanahan (2001, 33-4) found that:

approximately half of the Professional Doctoral programmes (N=37) indicated, in one way or another ([through their] concerns, distinctiveness or titles), that their interests were to be located at the heart of the Lee, Green and Brennan (2000) model [ie at the interaction of academe (U), profession (P) and workplace (W)]. We note especially that twenty or so of these gave a P/W/U site response on the distinctiveness of their programme.

Professional doctorates are fundamentally an alternative to the PhD and they gain their credibility from their professional as opposed to their academic orientation (see, Maxwell & Shanahan 1997, Green, Maxwell & Shanahan 2001).

As we have indicated, the theme of the 2004 Professional Doctorate Conference was *Working doctorates: The impact of professional doctorates in the workplace and professions*. The conference attracted delegates from Sweden, the UK, New Zealand and, of course, Australia. Three keynote speakers were engaged during the two day conference. The first of these, provocatively and ambiguously titled, ‘When are professional doctorates going to work?’, was delivered by Erica McWilliam, an academic with research interests in the field (cited above). The second keynote

presentation was delivered by Laurie Spark, Chief Engineer for the Holden motor company, and an Adjunct Professor at RMIT. Himself a graduate of a Professional Doctorate, Laurie discussed how the goals of industry and academe can be brought into alignment with positive effect. The final Keynote, titled 'Making a professional doctorate work for industry' was presented by Peter Hodgson. Peter, a Professor of Engineering and an ARC Federation Fellow, reflected on his experience in designing and delivering a professional doctorate program to raise a wide range of issues about the viability and utility of such programs. These presentations provoked a good deal of thought and discussion about what was missing and what was possible in doctoral education in Australia in relation to the needs of the professions and industry.

Several participants presented papers at the conference. Participants could choose to have their paper refereed or not before the conference, or they could choose or not to submit their revised paper after the conference for refereeing. Refereeing has been conducted blind, and at least two independent referees were used for each paper. What follows is an outline of the papers that were accepted as fully refereed submissions to the Conference.

The opening paper, titled *Demonstrating Significance of Contributions to Professional Knowledge and Practice in Australian Professional Doctorate Programs: Impacts in the Workplace and Professions* is one that directly addresses the theme of the conference. In it, Michael O'Mullan explores potential approaches of significance of contribution to professional knowledge and practice. The paper develops criteria for "measuring" significance of contributions and tested these in a case study.

Terry Evans, Peter Macauley, Margot Pearson and Karen Tregenza also directly addressed the conference theme, but did so provocatively for adherents to the Professional Doctoral form of higher education. Their research shows that there are increasing numbers of students in professional fields of study choosing to undertake PhDs, much more so than is the case for Professional Doctorates. Their bibliometric and other data show that the 'PhD has produced more qualified researchers in the professions than have the professional doctorates'. They question the viability and sustainability of Professional Doctorates in the current funding and performance-based climates in Australian higher education.

The next three papers in the collection provide evidence for changes in particular Professional Doctorates in order to provide impact for the award. Susan Danby and Erica McWilliams's paper shows how the Doctor of Education program at Queensland University of Technology has developed to provide candidates/clients with intellectual challenges whilst respecting their professional experience. They argue the new, second generation program makes stronger claims to recognising and forging a more authentic relationship between academia and the profession, that is, one which moves toward a deep rather than a superficial linkage. Helmes and Pachana's paper addresses the potential of the Doctor of Psychology (DPsych) award for impact on psychologists' practices. They document its growth, comment on conflicting pressures, and provide examples of possible structures for the DPsych in the context of competing regulatory, academic, and professional interests. In his paper Appelquist explores how the University College of Borås in Sweden has adopted the

idea of the Professional Doctorate and discusses the relation between knowledge and practice in learning for professional activity and performance.

The 2004 conference attempted to address the issue of impact. The conference was no different from others in that several case studies were presented. None appear to have been presented in the area of design in any of the previous Professional Doctorate conferences in this series. The Professional Doctorate in Design at Swinburne University of Technology identified the need to focus on the practice and skills that were unique to practitioners of design. Barron, Anderson and Jackson reflect in their paper on that program and position it as a catalyst for the continuing development of project-based research and the act of designing as a scholarly research methodology.

Alison Lee's paper starts from the pressures that are being applied to academics in the form of top-down quality management frameworks, including sets of framing documents for 'best practice' in doctoral education that offer 'guidelines' for the specification and regulation. She argues that there is an urgent need for a more educationally-based engagement with these developments from within the practice sector.

Reflecting on these papers provides a mixture of hope and caution. From Evans, Macauley and Pearson's paper it appears possible that the Professional Doctorate may not even survive in Australia. However, an effect may be the broadening of the PhD encompassing the potential of the Professional Doctorates. If this occurs then this means that higher education will have become enlivened and widened by their introduction. Alternatively there are papers here that provide evidence for the development of teaching and learning in higher education as well as the broadening of research into new areas, and of the impact of some Professional Doctorates. However, the impact is apparently quite minimal from the evidence of the papers presented here. It was a small conference of just 35 persons with most of those academics and, as impact is notoriously difficult to show, it may be that there are residual direct and indirect benefits which may unrecognised to date. Unfortunately, the 'preferred model' for the Research Quality Framework in Australia (see, [http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/research\\_sector/policies\\_issues\\_reviews/key\\_issues/research\\_quality\\_framework/](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/research_sector/policies_issues_reviews/key_issues/research_quality_framework/)) is weak in its consideration of doctoral education and its impact and so there is unlikely to be much recognition of Professional Doctorates there.

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