

THE FIRST AMONG EQUALS: THE PHD - ACADEMIC STANDARD OR HISTORICAL ACCIDENT?

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A quick scan of the tertiary education ads in the employment section of any major newspaper will find the phrase “must have PhD” fairly frequently. However a small but increasing number of adds contain phrases such as “must have PhD *or equivalent*”. But what makes something equivalent to a PhD? What are the hallmarks of a PhD and why in this era of professional doctorates is it still the yardstick. Is it about research skills, discipline expertise, teaching skills or simply perseverance and is it the only way of achieving the desired outcomes (whatever they may be). Does the increasing acceptance of “equivalents” indicate a temporary lessening in the status of the PhD or the beginning of the end of it’s reign as the predominate academic qualification, and what of the growing number of other doctorates should they be seen as complementing or competing with the PhD? This paper will propose some answers to these questions based on the history and current practice of the PhD and other doctorates.

Introduction

“There is not even a consensus as to what should be the nature and purpose of the PhD. There has always been confusion surrounding the purpose of the PhD as training, learning or knowledge generation and this uncertainty remains unresolved.” (Wright and Lodwick 1989)

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Simpson (1984) documents how the PhD began it’s modern existence. Originally a postgraduate qualification for German scientists it quickly became identified by students from other countries as a hallmark of a rigorous tertiary education. This led to it’s adoption by first America then Canada and finally England and Australia. However as the PhD spread throughout Europe and into the English speaking world it was adopted in an idiosyncratic fashion in each of it’s new homes. The Americans favouring a programmed approach where the student embarks on their dissertation only after completing the required period of coursework (Bowen and Rudenstine 1992, Noble 1994) . The English on the other hand instituting a more free form approach with the student undertaking a period of solo research under the guidance of a supervisor (Gregory 1995), with the Australians following the English model. However as this diversity of format indicates what actually spread was not the PhD as a course or curriculum with common goals and processes but simply the title and status of the PhD.

The PhD became the badge of a scholar, qualifying it’s recipients to research, teach, act as disciplinary experts and possibly most important of all to hold jobs at a university (Cude 1987, Noble 1995, and Simpson 1984). A situation not that far removed from the degree's 15th century antecedents.

“...if the student passed this public and final examination he became a master or doctor, and automatically received an ecclesiastically sanctioned license to teach anywhere in Christendom. As a bachelor he had taught with an uncovered head; now he was crowned with a biretta, received a kiss and a blessing from his master...” (Durant 1950 in Noble 1994).

Still the question remains, what about the PhD process enables a candidate to learn how to fulfil these various roles?

What is a PhD?

Most early attempts to answer this question have focussed on the more obvious manifestation of the PhD experience - the supervisor student relationship and the thesis or dissertation (Delmont and Eggleston 1982, Moses 1984, Rudd 1984, Spriestersbach 1978). More recently there has been some discussion of "quality" issues in PhD education (Cullen 1992, Moses 1994, Moses 1984, Nightingale 1984, Zuber-Skerritt 1994) though these discussions seem to wind up still focussing on either the thesis or the supervisor. Part of the problem resides in the supposed experiential nature of the PhD process, the insistence that the years spent working on a PhD are a lived experience of research and therefore an idiosyncratic process, not amenable to pedagogical critique or analysis. According to this view each PhD candidature is an individual relationship between the supervisor and the student and it is pointless to try to identify common experiences or establish a common set of goals which all students must achieve. There are some supposed commonalities, most notably the writing of a thesis or dissertation but more often than not the criteria governing these activities are sufficiently vague or idiosyncratic as to make comparisons nigh on impossible

"It's almost impossible to get any clear information on what a thesis is or should be. Marvellously ambiguous phrases like "a contribution to knowledge" are bandied about..." (Massingham 1984 in Nightingale 1984).

This of course is not particularly helpful in trying to determine what a PhD actually is, or working out how other experiences could be considered equivalent to it.

To view the PhD as a personal transformation or metamorphosis denies consideration of the broader educational outcomes of the degree, such as the characteristics and abilities the experience is meant to have fostered in those who have completed it. Those characteristics and abilities being screened for by employers when they include the phrase must have PhD in job advertisements. This lack of consideration for the learning outcomes that a PhD is meant to engender has been thrown into sharp relief by the development in recent years of increasing numbers of professional doctorates. These programs are presented as paralleling but not competing with the traditional PhD yet they are still compared to the PhD as the standard by which doctoral education should be judged. As a consequence those developing such programs have gone to some trouble to document their objectives and how their programs might help their students achieve these objectives, ironically giving themselves and their students a much clearer indication of what is being offered than the traditional PhD program.

Even more ironically the response in England and Europe to criticisms of the PhD has been to make the degree more like it's professional counterparts (Huber 1986, Kyvik 1986, Van Hout 1986, Winfield 1987). Increasingly the degree is being talked about in terms of training for research with attempts being made to introduce rigid program structures, large coursework components and "consistency" within the degree. This debate came to a head in England in 1987 following the release of the Winfield Report (Hockey 1991). This report addressing the allegedly high rates of non-completion of PhD's in some disciplines at English universities made a number of radical proposals concerning social sciences PhDs in England. In particular it recommended a programmed model of PhD progression closer to the American model (the report recommended that this form of PhD run parallel to what it referred to as a "knowledge based" PhD but there are those who see it as superseding the older style degree). The intention of the new degree was to better "train" researchers, a recommendation which sparked considerable controversy.

This debate is well documented in Hockey (1991) and seems to primarily revolve around pragmatic rather than pedagogic issues. Completion rates and employability seem the major concerns of those championing the programmed PhD's (Silk 1988, Stranks 1984) whereas those opposed to their introduction see them as government intervention in university business and an unnecessary waste of time (Gray and Flowerdew 1987, Unwin 1987). However some of the debate has moved on to curriculum issues such as the advantages or otherwise of a transitional phase between undergraduate and postgraduate work, the benefits of studying how to research before trying to do it and how much students can learn from each other even at a postgraduate level (Noble 1994, Silk 1988). However those arguing for such changes find themselves fighting a phantom since it is next to impossible to assert that an alternative approach is as good or better than the traditional approach in the absence of any clear indications as to what the purposes, processes and outcomes of the traditional approach might be.

It is at this point that the debate becomes confusing. On the one hand we have the traditional "knowledge based" PhD, the gold standard by which all other doctoral degrees are measured (and usually found wanting). On the other hand we have the new improved programmed PhD which is supposedly an improvement on the

traditional degree because it more closely resembles the professional doctorates which were never believed to measure up in the first place.

Things become even more confused when you examine closely the difference between the professional doctorates and the PhD. According to Gregory (1995) there is currently little difference between the goals of newly formed EdDs and PhDs and Nelson and Coorough (1994) having done a content analysis of dissertations claim no difference in the end products they produce either. Downs (1989) claims a similar inability to differentiate between Nursing doctorates and PhD's and Stark et al (1992) propose developing yet another Nursing doctorate for the coming century, one that can actually be distinguished from a PhD.

But is this a problem, surely it just means that all doctorates are equivalent to a PhD.

If this is so however, why do employers demand a PhD or equivalent, why not simply a doctorate. Fields (1988) would suggest that it is a matter of reputation. Ashworth (1978) and O'Neill (1988) would argue for more concrete reasons though in the end they seem to be invoking the degree's reputation as much as anything. Determining if a PhD, particularly a traditional knowledge based one, has more to offer than just reputation would require some analysis of the educational processes and outcomes which it involves, which brings us back to where we started.

The push for pedagogical analysis of the PhD has probably been strongest in Australia. Lee and Green (1995) (in a volume of Australian Universities Review dedicated to Postgraduate Pedagogy) call into question the accepted view of the PhD process. They follow Connell (1985) in arguing that the degree is more about learning to research than doing research and present a convincing argument for the reintroduction of pedagogy in it's most abstract and theoretical form to the discussion of the PhD. Pearson (1996) presents a similar though less esoteric argument for viewing the PhD as an educational activity with all the complexity that that involves and positioning all PhD students as first and foremost learners. Pearson suggests that both the training model and the apprenticeship model are too limited to encompass what should and does go on within the PhD framework. All these articles however still focus on research as the key to the PhD, the shift in focus to learning about research rather than simply doing it is a step in the right direction but a full understanding of the process will need to look at how the PhD prepares graduates for all aspects of academic life.

Hodge (1995) attempts to do this and in doing so turns the entire debate about PhDs on it's head. Hodge claims that the PhD experience goes beyond education to actual indoctrination. He asserts that the current structure of the PhD process far from promoting individual creativity, originality and critical scholarship, promotes conformity and maintains the status quo.

"The Ph.D. in these regulations is simply the next stage in a career of study, a further qualification that allows the person to take up a position in academia. Industrious conformity is the prerequisite, with conceptual power or disciplinary innovation neither mentioned or desired." (Hodge 1995)

Previous authors have addressed the apparent tension between the requirement for originality in the PhD and the need to still be acceptable to the hierarchy of the discipline who supervise and mark the thesis (Bargar and Duncan 1989, Moses 1984). Usually these authors have seen this tension as incidental to the process and something to be overcome. By casting the demand for originality as a myth Hodge does away with this tension. He sets up a view of the PhD as having the purpose of producing tame academics who can be safely let loose on undergraduates and having a set of educational constructs which allow it to achieve this end.

Having considered the PhD in it's totality Hodge arrives at a controversial conclusion, yet in the absence of viable alternatives why shouldn't he. If the PhD is seen to be producing tame, careerist academics, then it is valid to claim that that is it's purpose and to search for the processes by which it achieves this purpose. If Hodge is to be refuted then a multi faceted pedagogic analysis of the PhD must be used to reveal what the degree is actually intended to achieve, what is meant to be learnt by those who complete the degree and how they are meant to learn it. Then we might not only be able to refute Hodge but also work out whether a programmed or knowledge based approach is more likely to yield results, distinguish between PhDs and professional degrees and establish what is equivalent to a PhD.

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