

Is the Doctorate in Crisis?

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<Abstract>

This paper examines recent claims by university, business and government leaders that the doctorate is in crisis. It examines recent changes to the doctorate and the development of new sorts of doctorates, such as professional doctorates, and analyses the social, political and economic factors that have contributed to these changes. It argues that there has been a radical shift in what the doctorate means in the twenty-first century and that has profound implications for the pedagogy and practice of the doctorate. The analysis draws primarily on data from Australia, the United States of America and the United Kingdom but these trends are typical of elsewhere in the world including Europe, and are important to understanding of the contemporary challenges confronting the doctorate as an internationally recognised and transportable qualification that operates in an international community and marketplace.

1. Introduction

The doctorate is an internationally recognised qualification that has a controversial history. As early as 1903, it was savaged by American philosopher William James as “a sham, a bauble, a dodge, whereby to decorate the catalogues of schools and colleges” (p. 338). Disquiet about the doctorate that has intensified in recent years, particularly in Australia, the United Kingdom and Europe. Symptomatic of this concern have been the calls for a critical rethinking of existing doctoral programs by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as part of its five year

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This essay provides an overview of conversations about the crisis with the doctorate. It draws primarily on developments in Australia, the United States of America of America and the United Kingdom, but makes reference to trends in other countries. As the UNESCO analysis, *Doctoral Studies and Qualifications in Europe and the United States* testifies (Sadlak, 2004), universities operate in an international community and global marketplace and share similar concerns and challenges with their doctoral programs.

The essay comprises three parts. Section I, *Concerns about the doctorate*, describes some of the key concerns about the current state of the doctorate. Section 2, *Reshaping the doctorate* examines the factors that have reconfigured the doctorate and universities in recent times. Section 3, *Crisis or Comprehension?* examines the erroneous premises of claims about a doctoral crisis but contends that we have entered an era of more conscious comprehension of the challenges entangled with the doctorate. Finally, in Section 4, *Future Directions*, two major challenges for the future of doctoral policy and pedagogy are detailed and discussed.

2. Concerns about the doctorate

The current state of the doctorate is a cause of concern and heartache for policy-makers, university administrators and education leaders. In the United States of America, Canada, and Australia, the attrition rate from doctoral programs is 50 percent or higher (Elgar, 2003; Golde & Walker, 2006; Martin, Maclachlan, & Karmel, 2001). Typically the attrition rate is higher in the Humanities and Social Sciences than in the Natural Sciences and Engineering. In France, the drop-out rate averages 12 percent in Science subjects and 51 percent in the Humanities and Social Sciences (Kehm, 2004, p. 288). Similarly, Cohen and Cherwitz (2006), citing a study by the US Council of Graduate Schools, report that completion rates after 10 years of study are 64 percent in engineering, 62 percent in life sciences, 55 percent in the physical sciences and social sciences and 47 percent in the humanities.

High attrition rates are socially and economically costly for individuals, institutions and societies, but they are only part of the problem. In Canada over the last three decades, time-to-degree has nearly doubled from 6.3 to 10.5 years (Council, 1995). In the United States of America, the average time-to-degree is 8 to 9 years but has risen in Education to 12.6 years (Hoffer et al., 2005). In Australia, the Commonwealth government has issued trenchant criticisms of the time required to complete research degrees (Kemp, 1999).

The quality of doctorates in some disciplines has also attracted criticism. Felbinger (1999) cites a decade of research testifying that public administration dissertations lack the explanatory, interpretive and critical analysis of those in the social sciences. Lee Shulman and colleagues (2006) from the Carnegie Institution recently damned professional doctorates in education as a “PhD-Lite” that is blighted by “chronic and crippling” problems (Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, & Garabedian, April 2006, p. 27).

The increase in the number of doctoral graduates has prompted concern that there are too many doctoral graduates (Fox, 1997). Yale University awarded the United States’ first PhD in 1861 and a total of 406 universities now award doctoral degrees, resulting in the award of about 45,000 doctoral degrees each year (Altbach, 2004, p. 261), producing 5,700 engineering doctorates, 6,000 doctorates in the physical sciences and 8,800 doctorates in the life sciences annually, in addition to those from other disciplines (Hoffer et al., 2005).

Commentators are unanimous: there too many doctoral graduates for the number of available academic posts and progression from a doctorate to a university appointment is the exception rather than the rule. This state of affairs has prompted questions about the relevance of the PhD for future employment, with commentators from Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia arguing that the PhD does not prepare graduates for the *sort* of work they eventually do, particularly in professional fields like education, engineering, and business. In Australia, the government has been blunt. It has criticised research degree programs as too narrow, specialised and theoretical, and for producing graduates with inadequate communication, interpersonal and leadership skills to

contribute to the knowledge economy, the workplace and national innovation (Kemp, 1999). Such criticisms have triggered a groundswell of calls for doctoral graduates to be equipped with 'life-skills' and the skills to teach and to work in industry (Adams & Mathieu, 1999; Baldauf, 1998; Gilbert, Balatti, Turner, & Whitehouse, 2004).

Anxiety about the well-being of the doctorate has been shored-up by studies that report high levels of student discontent (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Harman, 2002; Phillips & Pugh, 1994) although the findings of such studies vary across disciplines and institutions because they use different student satisfaction surveys with different student populations. Nevertheless, there is strong evidence of disciplinary differences in student satisfaction. Illustrating this point, an Australia-wide survey of doctoral graduates found that 81.7 percent of education graduates reported they were satisfied with their doctoral supervision compared with 69.9 percent of Engineering graduates and 58.2 percent of Architecture graduates (Ainley, 2001).

The belief that there *is* a crisis with the doctorate has triggered a plethora of institutional, national and international initiatives including: new program structures; modes of delivery and support for doctoral students; new quality standards and funding models; new procedures to monitor and account for student enrolments, attrition rates, progressions, completions, and research training support; compulsory training for thesis supervisors and advisors; and cross-institutional graduate exit surveys. Nevertheless, as Magner (2000) commented in the *Higher Education Chronicle*, critics agree that a change is required but are uncertain about what should be done and how to go about it.

3. Reshaping the doctorate

Claims that the doctorate is in crisis are vulnerable to ignoring or over-simplifying the complex entanglement of social, political, economic factors that shape the doctorate and universities in current times. The formidable challenges confronting contemporary higher education have thrown into doubt the hitherto taken-for-granted assumptions about the

meaning and purpose of the doctorate. Concerns about a crisis with the doctorate tend to fall into two strands. The first relates to quality issues, such as retention and completion rates, time-to-degree, quality and structure of programs and supervision etc. The second relates to graduate employment including the acquisition of generic and specific employment skills, labour market demands for doctoral qualifications and the relevance of research versus professional doctorates for the world of work (see also Sadlak, 2004). In this paper, I trace some of the key changes that have had a particular impact on the doctorate and have helped construct these concerns.

3.1 The 'massification' of higher education

The modern university evolved during the Enlightenment under the influence of Kantian rationality and from this base emerged the notion of the university as a centre for research, scholarship and critique, and the assumptions of personhood that lie at the heart of the production of the credentialed, licensed 'doctor'. At first, doctoral students were a small and elite group within universities who could expect to be offered a university appointment when their degree was conferred.

The expansion and democratisation of universities from the 1960s changed universities from institutions for an elite into a system of mass higher education. The change had a dramatic impact on the doctorate. For example, in Australia in the early 1970s, only around 15 per cent of school-leavers progressed directly to university but between 1975 and 2001, the participation rate in universities doubled (Marginson, 2004). The "massification" of higher education established "favourable long-term conditions for basic research and doctoral training in all fields of study" (Marginson, 2004, p. 1). In Australia between 1979 and 2000, the number of doctoral students increased from 5,753 to 28,629, and the profile of doctoral students changed dramatically with the number of part-time doctoral students increasing from almost zero to close to 40 percent, with nearly half enrolled in areas related to the professions rather than the disciplines (Evans & Pearson, 1999). The pattern has been similar elsewhere in the world. In the United Kingdom, the number of doctoral students has in-

creased by 220 percent over the last 30 years, including a 700 percent increase in female enrolments and a 354 percent increase in part-time enrolments (Taylor, 2004). The same trend is evident at a discipline level. If we take Education doctorates in the United States as a case in point, the first education PhD was awarded by Teachers College, Columbia University in 1893 and the first EdD was awarded by Harvard University in 1920. Today, more than 250 universities in the United States grant a PhD or EdD, producing about 6,500 education doctorates each year (Hoffer et al., 2005).

3.2 The knowledge economy and epistemological shifts

Governments, business and industry have a vested interest in the production of high quality doctoral graduates who can provide leadership and a competitive national advantage in an internationalised market place. International organisations like OECD and UNESCO identify educational attainment as an important and influential variable in the economic performance of nations and the higher education sector as a key mechanism by which countries can grow and sustain high-skill economic prosperity (OECD, 1999; Sadlak, 2004). In more social terms, the provision of high quality doctoral education is a commitment to the social development and well-being of the constituent communities within national and international societies.

Consequently, the doctorate is an investment in social and human capital and the doctoral graduate is now expected to have the capacity to engage with different social groups and communities, including business, industry, and to work in partnership with others. While a doctorate provides long-term employment advantages, it does not guarantee a job for life and graduates also need transferable and flexible skills. In this new environment, knowledge can not be the sole *weltanschauung* for the doctorate or its sole desirable outcome. This change represents a fundamental shift in the epistemology of the doctorate as a continuing project of the Enlightenment, replacing it a new epistemology where knowledge is also valued and legitimated, as Lyotard (1984) describes, by its performativity or capacity to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the

socio-economic system.

This epistemological shift has not been unitary or universal. It has been taken-up in different ways in different sorts of doctorates and in different disciplines, departments, institutions and countries. What is important is that the shift has created different kinds and modes of knowledge production that have opened up the possibility of different ways of *thinking* about and *doing* a doctorate.

3.3 The corporatisation of universities and the education market

At a pragmatic level, “the three ‘C’s’ - competition, corporatism and consumerism” (Marginson, 2004, p. 4) have become the key drivers of university decision-making as governments have sought to reduce public funding of universities and shift the financial burden of a university education to consumers. In practice, these changes have transformed publicly funded universities into a quasi-privatised, corporate higher education sector. In the United States and the United Kingdom, universities wrestle with rising tuition fees and diminishing state support (Barnett, 2004; Brint, 2005). In Australia, expenditure on higher education halved between 1975 and 2001, despite a two-fold increase in the participation rate in higher education¹).

The move to a performance-based, corporatised, market model of universities has impacted on the funding of doctoral education. In Australia, public funding of universities is increasing performance-based and publicly funded doctoral places have been significantly reduced. Similar funding approaches have been adopted in the United Kingdom and other countries where, until recently, high levels of public funding for universities and doctoral education were sacrosanct.

These changes are part of wider international changes whereby the performance of universities in research and teaching are ranked in international league tables, and universities compete in an international market for high quality students and academic staff. In this new world, a university’s doctoral programs generate institutional income, academic jobs and institutional prestige and standing in a competitive, international, tertiary education system. The changes do not obviate the ideals of the

doctorate or the prestige it confers but they do mean that a high quality doctoral program is part of a university's armoury for ensuring its own social and economic well-being in a competitive education market-place.

3.4 A diversity of doctorates

Growing out of this conflation of changes has been emergence of new forms of doctorate. These have included the PhD by publication and portfolio; professional doctorates; group research doctorates; two and three track and time-limited doctorates, and Britain's New Route PhD involving a consortium of 34 universities. The new doctoral forms have been accompanied by changes in structure and pedagogy, including more structured programs, week-end intensives, summer school programs, distance education, etc.

The new forms of doctorate have been controversial. Advocates argue that they are a response to student and employer needs and merely provide a different route to the same qualification while opponents consider them a dumbed down version of the PhD that lowers the standing and prestige of a doctoral award. Nevertheless, the emergence of new doctoral forms has broadened the market and interest in the doctorate, as this is evident in increases in student numbers and the number of doctoral programs. In Australia, for example, the number of professional doctoral programs increased from one in 1990 to 131 in 2001 (McWilliam et al., 2002).

The diversity of doctorates has not been restricted to the type of doctorate. It has extended to differences between the same doctoral programs. For instance, there are substantial variations within and between professional doctorates in business, engineering and education in the United Kingdom (Scott, Brown, Lunt, & Thorne, 2004), while dramatic inter-institutional diversity in examination procedures and practices led Tinkler and Jackson (2000) to conclude that the PhD in the United Kingdom is "conceptualised and operationalised in diverse ways" (p. 179).

3.5 Quality assurance

The changed political economy of universities has occurred in tandem

with the infiltration and adoption of quality assurance processes and new managerial forms of governance, audit and accountability including: expanded procedures for monitoring and auditing student enrolments, progression and completions; training of dissertation supervisors/ advisors and committee members; and stricter accountability for on-going funding of doctoral candidates.

Such measures signal the passing of the *laissez faire* approach to the doctorate of the 1970s and 1980s but they have not been universally welcomed by academics, particularly in Australia, the United Kingdom, of the United States (McInnis, 2000; Tierney, 2003) and have been criticised for reducing the doctorate “to a mere exercise to demonstrate certain skills” that make students consumers rather than producers of knowledge (Smith, 2000, p. 4).

Despite such protests, quality assurance is part of the responsibility and accountability of universities to their multiple constituencies. Moreover, such strategies are also concerned with the effectiveness and quality of the doctorate and with “the knowledge and skills of the graduate—the finished ‘product’ of doctoral study (Cullen, Pearson, Saha, & Spear, 1994, p. 22). Nevertheless, as discussed below, this new environment has challenged assumptions about how the doctorate should be organised and what a doctorate should involve.

4. Crisis or Comprehension?

While claims of a doctoral crisis are based on legitimate concerns that university administrators and policy makers need to address to ensure quality doctoral education and doctoral graduates, the rhetoric of a crisis is also based on number of misconceptions about the doctorate.

The first misconception is that problems such as poor retention and completion rates are a recent phenomenon and a radical disjuncture from the way things were in the past. These problems are not new but they have become comprehensible in recent years because universities, governments and international organisations, like UNESCO, have access to better empirical data about the doctorate in different countries - much of

which has been collected as part of the new quality assurance regimes that some commentators have criticised as an undesirable bureaucratisation of the doctorate. Viewed in this light, however, the alleged crisis with the doctorate is not necessarily a new issue or problem but one that has only become comprehensible through improved information about the doctorate.

The second misconception hinges on romanticised assumptions of the past that ignore the empirical evidence and the long history of concern about the doctorate amongst policy makers, university administrators and scholars. In Australia, for example, policy leaders have complained consistently about the failure of universities to address problems with the doctorate ever since the national Review of Tertiary Education, nearly 40 years ago. As an influential, former senior bureaucrat described

We all know people who have spent years studying towards research degrees who have pulled out before they finished. Equally, many who complete find the experience frustrating and demoralising, particularly if at the end of their degree they have no immediate, attractive employment prospects (Gallagher, 2000, p. 11).

The third misconception arises from the erroneous belief that the doctorate is static and unchanging entity. There is considerable historical and national discontinuity about the meaning and use of the title ‘doctor’. It has been used ever since universities first began for those who had “completed an apprenticeship in the guild (*universitas*) of teachers” (Cullen, Pearson, Saha, & Spear, 1994, p. 12) but the application of the term for graduates of a doctoral degree is much more recent. It dates from Humboldt’s establishment of the PhD in 19th century Germany whereby doctoral candidates developed an independent program of study and moved between institutions before producing and defending a thesis and being conferred with the award of doctor.

This original notion was taken up in very different ways in different countries. The United States adopted a model of mandatory coursework followed by the production of a dissertation assessed by an internal

committee and conducted in Graduate Schools. In the United Kingdom and Australia, many professional doctorates use the coursework/dissertation model but a PhD involves a major piece of supervised research that is examined by external experts in the discipline. Thus, it is inaccurate to assume that the doctorate has a continuous linear history, or is based on long, well established traditions, or that it has had consistent identity over time and between different disciplines, universities and countries. As the emergence of new doctoral forms demonstrates, the doctorate is a discursive entity, fashioned by history and by social, political and economic circumstances, changing in response to and as part of the broader changes that have refashioned the identity, purpose and operation of universities.

The fourth misconception involves assumptions about doctoral standards and what constitutes a doctorate, and how much time and work is required for the award of a doctoral degree. There are historical and disciplinary differences in notions about what constitutes a doctorate. In general, most Australian universities currently require a doctoral thesis in the social sciences and humanities to be an original piece of research that is 80,000-100,000 words long. However, the first Australian PhD, awarded in 1949, was a detailed, interpretive literature review of 30,000 words; and that a doctorate in science can be as brief as 5-10 pages - apt reminders that it is the weight of the intellectual work rather than the weight of the tome that decides the quality of a doctorate.

The notion that the doctorate is *not* a uniform or unchanging entity with long and well-established traditions is unsettling because it dissolves the sense of security that comes with the certainty of knowability. In this chaotic condition, it can be more comfortable to remain loyal to idealised notions than to tackle the trickier challenge of how the doctorate should be constituted in the changing context of contemporary higher education.

5. Future directions?

While claims of a crisis overstate the case, the doctorate *is* in a phase of radical transformation. Two fundamental challenges are likely to shape foreseeable future of the doctorate. The first is the pedagogical challenge

of moving beyond the supervisor/student binary that has haunted the history of doctoral pedagogy (Halse, under review) to a more structured pedagogy and program design. This trend is already evident in many countries. For example, a key feature of doctoral programs in the 13 countries that participated in UNESCO's analysis of doctoral studies and qualifications in Europe and the United States has been the move to more structured doctoral programs.

The second challenge will be the establishment of common, international quality standards. The danger of construing the changes in the doctorate's past as anticipating a perpetually fluid future is that it undermines the capacity to reach an agreed understanding about the quality and standard that warrants the award of a doctoral degree. In Australia, national quality audits have increased the pressure for cross-institutional benchmarking of doctoral quality and performance. The United Kingdom has introduced common criteria for the award of a doctorate. In the United States, the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate worked with departments and faculties to reform their doctorates based on a shared vision of the doctoral graduate as a 'steward of the discipline'. The collaboration of 45 nations in the Bologna process to harmonise the higher education systems of Europe is likely to have a particularly profound effect on the doctorate elsewhere in the world. As part of Europe's goal to become the world's leading knowledge-based economy by establishing the European Research Area and European Higher Education Area, the third cycle of the Bologna process involves abandoning national degrees for a uniform architecture for the doctorate. If universities and countries wish to maintain the comparability of their doctoral qualifications and the employability of their graduates in an international, global market place, the changes to the doctorate arising from the Bologna process are likely to have a significant effect on the doctorate elsewhere in the world.

In this respect, therefore, it might be said that the doctorate is truly at a stage of radical transformation - a transformation that does not arise from current crises or concerns but from the transformations that will emerge from the doctorate's formal designation as a uniform, global qualification.

Notes

- 1) The same trend is evident in Japan where national universities have been transformed into corporations that are expected to be economically independent.

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危機にたつ博士課程

クリスティン・ハルス

<要 旨>

本稿では、博士課程は危機にあるとする近年の大学界、産業界、官界からの批判について検証する。博士課程にまつわる近年の変化や、プロフェッショナル・ドクターなどの新しいタイプの博士課程の発展を検証し、これらの変化をもたらした社会的、政治的、経済的要因を分析する。21世紀における博士号の意味がこれまでとは大きく異なることを議論し、博士課程における教育や訓練に対しても重大な示唆をする。分析にはオーストラリア、アメリカ、イギリスのデータを用いるが、傾向はヨーロッパを含む世界中に共通である。この傾向は、国際的なコミュニティおよび市場で認知され通用可能な「資格」としての博士号が対面している課題を理解するために重要である。
