

VALUING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE: THE ROLE OF THE UNIVERSITY IN PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATES

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ABSTRACT

Professional doctorates in Australian universities have been a growing and controversial area recently. A major unresolved problem in seeking to understand and place the professional doctorates in the universities is their uncertain identity. In this paper it is argued that professional doctorates should be primarily concerned with advancing professional practice and that the research component of a professional doctorate program should be orientated towards making a contribution in the professional practice arena. In this way they can distinguish themselves from the PhD degree.

To meet needs of the wider society in areas of professional practice education, universities will have to change. Professional doctorates are one aspect of such change. A professional doctorate should be a different type of doctorate to the PhD; there is no point in having it exist as a weaker version of the PhD. The central feature of that difference is that professional doctorates should value other types of knowledge, namely knowledge of and in professional practice. There is resistance to moving the university in the necessary direction to be overcome. For example, "Guidelines for Professional Doctorates" were widely promulgated in Australia in 1998. If enforced in universities these would seriously impact negatively on the educational standing of professional doctorates

INTRODUCTION

Professional doctorates in Australian universities have been a growth area in the decade of the 1990s (Trigwell, Shannon & Maurizi 1997, ch 2; McWilliam et al. 2002). Whilst the lead has come from education faculties with Doctor of Education programs (Evans 1998 p. 5), business faculties with Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) programs have been a clear and rapidly gaining second major area for professional doctorates in the later part of the decade (Jongeling 1996, pp. 4-5).

The development of professional doctorates as a new form of doctoral education has been controversial in predominantly educationally conservative Australian universities. Discussion of professional doctorates has given a lot of attention to comparisons with the traditional, research focused Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree and the issues of maintaining standards in doctoral education. Not undermining the standing of the PhD has been an important consideration for many (e.g. Evans 1998; Jongeling 1996; Morley 1999).

A major unresolved problem in seeking to understand and place the professional doctorates in the universities is their ambiguous character and uncertain identity (Seddon 1998). For example, are they to be primarily a continuation of Masters level course work,

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with a focus on advancing professional practice, or are they a research degree, like the PhD but more structured and with some course work component (Brennan 1995)? Present practice seems to see them fall somewhat uneasily somewhere in between.

In this paper it is argued that professional doctorates, in particular the DBA, should be primarily concerned with advancing professional practice and that the (necessary) research component of a professional doctorate program should be orientated towards making a contribution in the professional practice arena. That is, unlike the PhD, the DBA should not be a research apprenticeship; it should be the highest level of professional education that the university can offer. It is argued that pressure to push the professional doctorates in the direction of advancing research is wrongly directed and will lead to a diminution (not maintenance) of standards, as it tends to force the professional doctorate into being a weaker, lower-level PhD, rather than a program with its own distinct rationale and standing (and standards). This calls into question the role played by the university in this new form of doctorate, particularly in relationship with the other key aspects of the professional doctorates—the profession and the realm of practice.

Universities do not have to help meet the needs coming from the professions and practice—they can leave this field to others. But, if the universities are to choose to help meet such needs from outside, the university itself will have to move. These issues are considered in the following section, leading into a discussion of what a professional doctorate should be and the role of the university in them, in the subsequent section. The discussion then takes up aspects of future shape of universities and especially the issue of standards, as this is a common rallying cry for those opposed to change. Some concluding remarks then follow.

THE UNIVERSITY AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

If it is to have a meaningful existence, the professional doctorate should be distinguishable in important ways from the PhD (the academic doctorate). For, if a professional doctorate is to mimic the PhD closely (perhaps in the name of maintaining standards), with much the same research component, style of research and form of presentation, and with the same assessment procedure carried out by academics as they would for examining a PhD, then with so much similarity why have a different name? If a professional doctorate requires a nearly 100,000 word thesis, in academic style, making a significant contribution to knowledge as judged by two or three PhD-qualified academics, then it is a PhD in all but name (despite any extra course work requirements) and may as well go under that label. PhD degrees with an element of course work are not unknown in the academic world, so a course work component is not enough to distinguish a professional doctorate from a PhD. Also, there are many areas (engineering, law, medicine, etc.) that grant PhDs for applied research with implications for practice, so the applied nature of the research in a professional doctorate is not sufficient to distinguish the professional doctorate. The established PhD qualification can accommodate, perhaps with some small stretching, the incorporation of course work and an emphasis on applied research results. There is no need in these aspects of the professional doctorate to create a different category of doctorate.

However, there is a rationale for having professional doctorates distinguished from the PhD. The PhD is primarily intended as a research apprenticeship for academics. It has recently been the subject of strong and wide ranging criticism from business and industry

(e.g. Clark 1996; see also Jongeling 1996) for the quality and skills of its graduates. The academic research apprenticeship training is not yielding the outcomes that other (i.e. outside academia) areas of professional endeavour are wanting. There are needs for a similar level but different type of education, well beyond the Masters level, indeed at the highest level of education that the university can provide (Morley 1999).

Accepting such needs, the conventional view is expressed in the following diagram (Figure 1). There are three importantly relevant areas involved in a professional doctorate: the university, the profession and practice. A conventional PhD can be located anywhere in the university sphere, and quite acceptably have nothing to do with profession or practice. A professional doctorate, in this view, is located in the area where university, profession and practice overlap, and involves all three.

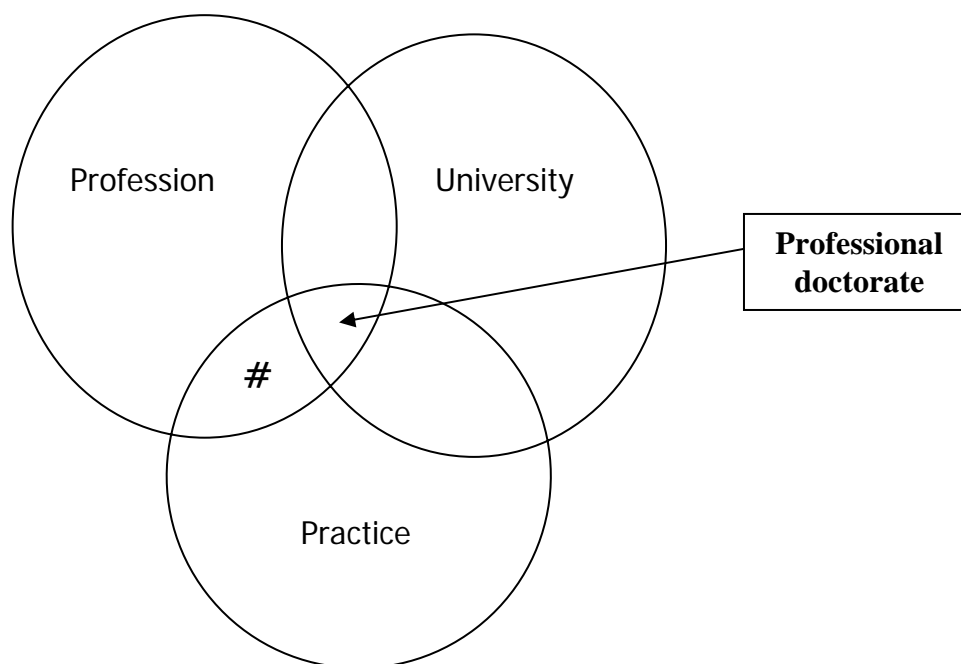


Figure 1: A conventional view of the place of professional doctorates

Adapted from Maxwell and Shanahan (2001, p. 20)

An important problem with this view is that it is static. In response to newly expressed needs from the world outside the university, the university does not change its boundaries but seeks to accommodate them within its old self. This approach leads to the professional doctorate being established under the rules, regulations and forms of the PhD, perhaps with some minor adaptation but not any major changes (which, from an admittedly limited review of Australian universities, appears to be how most have done it). Adding an applied, professional practice flavour to the doctoral program is accepted, but only as an approved deviation from the standard of PhDs.

There is no reason to expect this strategy to be successful from the viewpoint of the professions and practice, i.e. the university's clients. The clients are dissatisfied with the current university in many ways: it is the university that needs to change. To argue otherwise, that the academics know most and best and that the clients should change their perceived needs to align with academic priorities (as some, such as Clark 1998 discussed

below, appear to believe) is arrogant and doomed to fail. A way for the university to change, using the professional doctorate, is to extend the university's bounds further into professional practice (into the area marked with a # in Figure 1). It is argued that the university's intellectual property, knowledge and skills can be used to advantage in this extended area.

The matter of how professional doctorates can and should differ from PhDs, and why, is considered in the next section.

PRO PROFESSIONAL: A VIEW OF PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATES IN UNIVERSITIES

Professional doctorates are an opportunity for universities to embrace some new thinking and ways of achieving their aims. Thinking that could to advantage move outside both the square and the usual circles. For example, the complexity of professional doctorate learning leads Morley and Priest (2001) to use spirals and learning loops to describe a DBA learning process and structure. This view of the opportunity for new thinking is in sympathy with those expressed by McWilliam et al. (2002) in their recommendations for the future of professional doctorates. Although coming from a different perspective and analysis, they call for professional doctorates to be based in deep linkages with industry partners, engagement with industry and professional bodies and collaborative research with industry. Pursuing this line of argument requires that 'universities revise their assumptions about research training in higher degrees, in order to acknowledge and take advantage of the different contributions and outcomes of all doctoral programs' (McWilliam et al. 2002, p. 104).

The rationale for professional doctorates derives from them being founded in different research and learning objectives to those of the PhD, significant differences in the backgrounds and ambitions of the students they accommodate, and consequential differences in the program designs, structures and teaching. For example, RMIT University expresses the research objective of their DBA program as to make 'a contribution to professional practice', compared to a PhD thesis requiring a 'contribution to knowledge'. In other words, the epistemology of the DBA research is particularized in the context of professional practice, meaning that the contribution to knowledge of the DBA thesis is in reference to a particular arena of knowledge. Indeed, RMIT designates the research supervision sessions of candidate and supervisor 'supervised professional practice' in the program structure and timetable to emphasise this vital connection. The context of professional practice is then taken as a source of much of the complexity and sophistication necessary for the work to be at doctoral level. It should be noted that this particularizing of the professional doctorate epistemology does not necessarily restrict the choice of research methodology (although experience shows that some, such as postmodernism and phenomenography, can involve some work to establish the professional practice relevance of the results without betraying the methodology itself).

In order to realize this professional practice focus, DBA candidates are required to have extensive professional experience, a significant extent of which is post a professional, postgraduate business qualification (usually an MBA degree). The MBA (or equivalent) and experience requirements are instead of the research training (Honours or research Masters degree) usual for PhD candidates.

It is recognized that aspects of expertise in the professional doctorate's designated form and arena of knowledge lie outside the university. This challenges the standard supervisory and teaching arrangements: for example, it necessitates taking very seriously the candidate's own expertise and knowledge, which can surpass the supervisor's (or course work component lecturer's) in some important aspects. The supervisory relationship in a professional doctorate thus needs to respect the candidate's experience, maturity, practical judgment and knowledge. From the nature of practice-based research with such candidates derive implications and challenges for the relationship of supervisor and candidate that differ from those common in PhD programs. The professional doctorate candidate is less dependent on the supervisor as a content expert and provider, and more reliant on the supervisor in presenting the research in an academically rigorous way (Morley 2002).

Professional doctorates then are both an opportunity and an imperative to change from the one to one, apprentice (Sharp & Howard 1996, p. 28) and paternalistic (Moses 1994, pp. 20-21) style of supervision common in PhD program supervision. They enable other forms of supervision, ones that recognize the aspects outlined immediately above. These can also utilize the fact that a professional doctorate may be done by the candidate as part of a cohort of candidates, all proceeding at a similar pace through the program, dictated by the coursework component timetable. Common issues, such as research methods initiation, research ethics, intellectual property matters and advanced content knowledge can be provided in classes to the cohort. The candidates are thereby able to build a supportive group. Both the supportive group and the common issues, notably including much vital knowledge relevant to the research, can be developed apart from the research supervisor.

Similar issues arise in the framing and delivery of coursework components of the professional doctorate. The candidates usually have strong, high level, very relevant practical experience in relation to many subjects and topics of the curriculum, but they do need to be initiated into the academic literature and thinking underlying both practice and what they will have learnt in their MBA. Taking this experience seriously requires the academic to join in the learning and adapt their teaching style, whilst continuing to respect their own important expertise and knowledge.

New ways to the doctorate qualification are thus mapped in a professional doctorate that is true to its professional nature. A key requirement is to not sacrifice standards and depth whilst embracing such change.

CONTRA PROFESSIONAL: VIEWS CRITICAL OF THESE DIRECTIONS

Bound up with the imperatives impelling change in universities coming from the needs for different forms of education, are other changes which have impacted on Australian universities in the last decade, such as:

- substantially increased student numbers;
- less substantially increased funding; and
- The unified tertiary system.

There is a view, for which Clarke (1998) can be taken as a spokesperson, that sees the major consequence of these developments as a drastic reduction in educational standards or, as he puts it, a ‘dumbing-down’.

Clarke (1998) identifies a vicious circle of declining academic standards, declining quality of university administration and a downgrading of the leadership role of professors. Aspects of this downward spiral include a much reduced emphasis on teaching theory and academic skills, replaced by increased vocational relevance and a wider range of student abilities.

There may be a large amount of nostalgia in this analysis: in the past the professors were not always benign and wise, and collegiality as much a myth as how things actually were. Hierarchy and bureaucratic authority were essential parts of university governance then as now (Cassidy 1999).

A further issue is that a ‘vocational orientation is problematic in universities’—except for law and medicine. Especially problematic, to Clarke and those of his persuasion, are courses in areas which are believed to be pedestrian and lacking a clear rationale, notably business. Applying this position leads to the conclusion that vocationally orientated universities, such as the universities of technology, are not legitimate universities and business faculties are not a legitimate area for university education. Other examples, cited by Clarke, of ‘dumbing down’ subjects are:

- computer science
- management
- tourism
- marketing
- women’s studies
- ethnic studies.

That some form of major structural change has taken place can be acknowledged. This is inevitable in moving from a system where about 5% of the population went to university, towards one where a much higher percentage go on to university. Teaching the 5% intellectual elite has to be very different to teaching a bigger proportion of young people, with necessarily a much wider range of abilities. So, many of today’s students may not be as good, in academic intellectual intelligence terms, as most of yesterday’s. They may be better prepared. However that may be, the central issue is, should university be confined to just the intellectual few, or should access be broader? Clarke is arguing for the old days of the few going to university—that is the consequence of maintaining the old academic standards. If wider education is a good thing, then change in such standards has to be accepted. A letter to *Quadrant* in response to Clarke’s paper (Patak 1998) ends by noting: ‘I can envisage the day when every Australian will have been to university’. The tone of the whole letter suggests that this may be a bad thing (because of the inevitable decline in standards it entails). But in the modern world, is wider access to and provision of education really bad?

It is arguable that a wider educated population is a good direction to be going in—socially and economically. The world will be better for having more tertiary educated people than fewer: more rational, more of a learning society, more creative, more critical and hence (in an information-driven economy) more prosperous. Changes in content, teaching and

perhaps standards, in some narrowly defined ways, is a corollary of going in this direction.

Further, much of the perception of ‘dumbing down’ is really academic snobbery. It is built on the idea that there are proper academic disciplines (like the ones we learnt at university) and ‘Mickey Mouse’ ones that have come along subsequently. Hence, for example, Clarke’s view that students should study economics, not business or management. Or the argument that students should study classics, not vocational areas. The counter argument is that students can learn the disciplines of clear thinking, structuring an argument, logical thought, etc. through disciplines other than the traditional ones—for example, through studying management.

The issues involved in studying vocationally orientated disciplines (including management, law and engineering) can be just as intellectually challenging and personally confronting, just as sophisticated and complex, requiring just as much depth of understanding and effort to master, as traditional disciplines such as history, physics or mathematics.

This leads to a position favouring the teaching of both types of subjects—philosophy and accounting, classics and hospitality, physics and computing. It is a contention that all have a place in a university (not necessarily all in the one university, but all at university level). Times having changed, there are now more disciplines worth studying. The needs of the labour market, the economy and society cannot be ignored if universities wish to continue to generate revenue to support their activities. Many would go further and argue that they should not be ignored (nor, of course, totally pandered to); that most learning should maintain some contact with reality. Students no longer study such internally consistent and intellectually challenging subjects as medieval cosmology, for this reason. What is taught should have some relationship to what the students want to learn (otherwise they won’t learn it), and so should be, to some extent, responsive to demand.

Productivity and innovation are central to success in this modern world we live in. Achieving them relies very strongly on education and learning. If the universities will not provide the education and learning wanted then they will be sourced elsewhere. Learning, in the areas and ways that people want them, will happen. The universities will lose out if they retreat to their past and refuse to countenance new disciplines or vocational education. This disparagement of new thought is not new: the introduction of the sciences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries aroused similar disdain. No one seriously wishes universities to go back to only teaching theology, grammar, law and medicine.

Other academics look to the future, not the past, for inspiration. They accept that education (particularly management education) does not stand apart from changes in society. Fagg and Ramm (1999), for example, embrace using words like ‘customers’ instead of ‘students’; they are willing to try to see things from the perspective that implies, and to ask some of the questions it raises. They write:

The customer will be asking: Why is it that management education must occur at the beginning of a career? Why is it that management education must embrace the MBA style spread of topics? Why is it that the student must come to a campus? Why is it that the workplace is not a better class room than the university? Why is it that learning should take place in pre-defined time blocks? Why is it that a

discipline focus is used rather than an integrative, action learning focus? Why is it that studies for qualifications occur over such narrow time periods, organised by a single university?

(Fagg & Ramm 1999 p. 527)

There is a great deal more to the issue of where Australian universities are going in the next decade, but this is not the place to consider it further. With the context outlined above in mind, returning to the specific issue of professional doctorates leads to consideration of some guidelines issued by the Council of Australian Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies.

These 'Guidelines for Professional Doctorates' were widely promulgated in 1998. They exemplify how enforcing thinking in terms of the PhD model of doctorates on professional doctorates can be a retrograde step and seriously impact negatively on the educational standing of professional doctorates. This is because whilst most aspects of the guidelines are a commendable attempt to ensure standards and quality, in some particular aspects they would have the opposite effect.

The guidelines are based on a misunderstanding of the rationale for professional doctorates, and a consequence of this misunderstanding is that they would actually be a hindrance to the maintenance of very high standards in professional doctorate programs. The effect of their enforcement would be to create in professional doctorates a substandard version of the PhD—for which there is little rationale or demand. To some extent the guidelines appear to be based on a negative and suspicious view of professional doctorates. There may be some valid grounds for this in some cases of programs at some universities, but it is not a true picture of all professional doctorates. For those programs that are not properly seen in negative and suspicious ways, the guidelines are an unnecessary intrusion into the running of the program.

The thinking behind the guidelines appears to arise out a view that the model for a doctorate is (the British-Australian version of) the PhD, and that there can be no other. The knowledge valued and accredited in this model is academic.

For example, one requirement spelt out in the guidelines is that applicants normally hold a good Honours degree or a good Masters degree (with at least one-third research methodology and practice). This requirement repeats the requirements for entry to a PhD program, and does not allow for other pathways to doctoral studies. One of the reasons for having professional doctorates is to open up such other pathways. The requirement is a narrow and restrictive one. It asserts that the qualification for commencing doctoral studies is prior academic research experience. It means that a twenty-two year old straight from university, with no other experience but academic study, can be qualified for doctoral work, but a forty-five year old senior manager, with over twenty years managerial experience and a coursework Masters degree cannot be. The twenty-two year old is indeed qualified for one type of doctorate in a way that the forty-five year old is not, but the opposite is also true. The professional doctorate recognises and values the knowledge and experience of professional practice that the forty-five year old can have, but the twenty-two year old cannot. The guidelines do suggest that 'professional experience in the field should normally be recognised as part of the selection criteria'. This is too weak, significant experience of this sort should be mandatory for selection, and should override the requirement for research experience, as it is more relevant and

important to the type of program a professional doctorate should be. There is a failure in the guidelines to take seriously and value the professional practice knowledge that is the foundation of the professional doctorate.

There is a danger that the effect of the guidelines as a whole would be to ensure that professional doctorates are created as, and remain, watered down versions of the PhD degree. There is no good purpose served by that. Such a degree is still really a PhD, and should be properly labelled as such. A watered down PhD means a slackening of standards and an easier pathway to doctoral status, for which there is little rationale (apart from meeting a short term demand, which can be rejected as insufficient reason for a poor program). Professional doctorates, if they are to maintain standards and their standing, have to be different in important ways from the PhD. The heart of these important ways, it has been argued above, is the centrality of professional knowledge and the professional development aspects of professional doctorate programs. Imposition of the guidelines would have the effect of weakening these critical aspects of professional doctorate programs. Universities in accrediting their professional doctorates have generally understood and accepted the arguments about the centrality to the program of professional knowledge and professional development: it is too late now to try and reformulate them as a lesser version of the PhD.

CONCLUSION

There is a danger of rules and regulations being promulgated that would allow and encourage a slackening of standards and the turning of the professional doctorate into a lower level version of the PhD. Maintaining standards and quality is critically important to the university, and the reputation and standing of a professional doctorate is vital to its success. Approaches such as the 'Guidelines for Professional Doctorates' would weaken, not strengthen (as, presumably, they intend) professional doctorates, as they are founded in an inadequate understanding of such programs.

A professional doctorate is intended to be a different type of doctorate to the PhD; there is no point in having it exist as a weaker version of the PhD. A professional doctorate has its own rationale and model, different from (but necessarily equal in important ways to) the academic doctorate (PhD). The central feature of that rationale and model is that professional doctorates should value other types of knowledge, namely knowledge of and in professional practice.

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