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## Unplanned Educational Obsolescence: Is the 'Traditional' PhD Becoming Obsolete?

[Donna Lee Brien](#) [Volume 12 Issue 3 July 2009 'obsolete'](#)

Discussions of the economic theory of planned obsolescence—the purposeful embedding of redundancy into the functionality or other aspect of a product—in the 1980s and 1990s often focused on the impact of such a design strategy on manufacturers, consumers, the market, and, ultimately, profits (see, for example, Bulow; Lee and Lee; Waldman). More recently, assessments of such shortened product life cycles have included calculations of the environmental and other costs of such waste (Claudio; Kondoh; Unruh). Commonly utilised examples are consumer products such as cars, whitegoods and small appliances, fashion clothing and accessories, and, more recently, new technologies and their constituent components. This discourse has been adopted by those who configure workers as human resources, and who speak both of skills (Janßen and Backes-Gellner) and human capital itself (Chauhan and Chauhan) being made obsolete by market forces in both predictable and unplanned ways. This includes debate over whether formal education can assist in developing the skills that make their possessors less liable to become obsolete in the workforce (Dubin; Holtmann; Borghans and de Grip; Gould, Moav and Weinberg). However, aside from periodic expressions of disciplinary angst (as in questions such as whether the Liberal Arts and other disciplines are becoming obsolete) are rarely found in discussions regarding higher education.

Yet, higher education has been subsumed into a culture of commercial service provision as driven by markets and profit as the industries that design and deliver consumer goods. McKelvey and Holmén characterise this as a shift “from social institution to knowledge business” in the subtitle of their 2009 volume on European universities, and the recent decade has seen many higher educational institutions openly striving to be entrepreneurial. Despite some debate over the functioning of market or market-like mechanisms in higher education (see, for instance, Texeira et al), the corporatisation of higher education has led inevitably to market segmentation in the products the sector delivers. Such market segmentation results in what are called over-differentiated products, seemingly endless variations in the same product to attempt to increase consumption and attendant sales. Milk is a commonly cited example, with supermarkets today stocking full cream, semi-skimmed, skimmed, lactose-free, soy, rice, goat, GM-free and ‘smart’ (enriched with various vitamins, minerals and proteins) varieties; and many of these available in fresh, UHT, dehydrated and/or organic versions. In the education market, this practice has resulted in a large number of often minutely differentiated, but differently named, degrees and other programs. Where there were once a small number of undergraduate degrees with discipline variety within them (including the Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science awards), students can now graduate with a named qualification in a myriad of discipline and professional areas. The attempt to secure a larger percentage of the potential client pool (who are themselves often seeking to update their own skills and knowledges to avoid workforce obsolescence) has also resulted in a significant increase in the number of postgraduate coursework certificates, diplomas and other qualifications across the sector. The Masters degree has fractured from a research program into a range of coursework, coursework plus research, and research only programs. Such proliferation has also affected one of the foundations of the quality and integrity of the higher education system, and one of the last bastions of conventional practice, the doctoral degree.

## The PhD as 'Gold-Standard' Market Leader?

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is usually understood as a largely independent discipline-based research project that results in a substantial piece of reporting, the thesis, that makes a "substantial original contribution to knowledge in the form of new knowledge or significant and original adaptation, application and interpretation of existing knowledge" (AQF). As the highest level of degree conferred by most universities, the PhD is commonly understood as indicating the height of formal educational attainment, and has, until relatively recently, been above reproach and alteration.

Yet, whereas universities internationally once offered a single doctorate named the PhD, many now offer a number of doctoral level degrees. In Australia, for example, candidates can also complete PhDs by Publication and by Project, as well as practice-led doctorates in, and named Doctorates of/in, Creative Arts, Creative Industries, Laws, Performance and other 'new' discipline areas. The Professional Doctorate, introduced into Australia in the early 1990s, has achieved such longevity that it now has its own "first generation" incarnations in (and about) disciplines such as Education, Business, Psychology and Journalism, as well as a contemporary "second generation" version which features professionally-practice-led Mode 2 knowledge production (Maxwell; also discussed in Lee, Brennan and Green 281). The uniquely Australian PhD by Project in the disciplines of architecture, design, business, engineering and education also includes coursework, and is practice and particularly workplace (or community) focused, but unlike the above, does not have to include a research element—although this is not precluded (Usher).

A significant number of Australian universities also currently offer a PhD by Publication, known also as the PhD by Published Papers and PhD by Published Works. Introduced in the 1960s in the UK, the PhD by Publication there is today almost exclusively undertaken by academic staff at their own institutions, and usually consists of published work(s), a critical appraisal of that work within the research context, and an oral examination. The named degree is rare in the USA, although the practice of granting PhDs on the basis of prior publications is not unknown. In Australia, an examination of a number of universities that offer the degree reveals no consistency in terms of the framing policies except for the generic Australian Qualifications Framework accreditation statement (AQF), entry requirements and conditions of candidature, or resulting form and examination guidelines. Some Australian universities, for instance, require all externally peer-refereed publications, while others will count works that are self-published. Some require actual publications or works in press, but others count works that are still at submission stage. The UK PhD by Publication shows similar variation, with no consensus on purpose, length or format of this degree (Draper). Across Australia and the UK, some institutions accept previously published work and require little or no campus participation, while others have a significant minimum enrolment period and count only work generated during candidature (see Brien for more detail).

Despite the plethora of named degrees at doctoral level, many academics continue to support the PhD's claim to rigor and intellectual attainment. Most often, however, these arguments cite tradition rather than any real assessment of quality. The archaic trappings of conferral—the caps, gowns and various other instruments of distinction—emphasise a narrative in which it is often noted that doctorates were first conferred by the University of Paris in the 12th century and then elsewhere in medieval Europe. However, challenges to this account note that today's largely independently researched thesis is a relatively recent arrival to educational history, being only introduced into Germany in the early nineteenth century (Bourner, Bowden and Laing; Park 4), the USA in a modified form in the mid-nineteenth century and the UK in 1917 (Jolley 227). The Australian PhD is even more recent, with the first only awarded in 1948 and still relatively rare until the 1970s (Nelson 3; Valadkhani and Ville). Additionally, PhDs in the USA, Canada and Denmark today almost always incorporate a significant taught coursework element (Noble). This is unlike the 'traditional' PhD in the UK and Australia, although the UK also currently offers a number of what are known there as 'taught doctorates'. Somewhat confusingly, while these do incorporate coursework, they still include a significant research component (UKCGE). However, the UK is also adopting what has been

identified as an American-inflected model which consists mostly, or largely, of coursework, and which is becoming known as the 'New Route British PhD' (Jolley 228).

It could be posited that, within such a competitive market environment, which appears to be driven by both a drive for novelty and a desire to meet consumer demand, obsolescence therefore, and necessarily, threatens the very existence of the 'traditional' PhD. This obsolescence could be seen as especially likely as, alongside the existence of the above mentioned 'new' degrees, the 'traditional' research-based PhD at some universities in Australia and the UK in particular is, itself, also in the process of becoming 'professionalised', with some (still traditionally-framed) programs nevertheless incorporating workplace-oriented frameworks and/or experiences (Jolley 229; Kroll and Brien) to meet professionally-focused objectives that it is acknowledged cannot be met by producing a research thesis alone. While this emphasis can be seen as operating at the expense of specific disciplinary knowledge (Pole 107; Ball; Laing and Brabazon 265), and criticised for that, this workplace focus has arisen, internationally, as an institutional response to requests from both governments and industry for training in generic skills in university programs at all levels (Manathunga and Wissler). At the same time, the acknowledged unpredictability of the future workplace is driving a cognate move from discipline specific knowledge to what have been described as "problem solving and knowledge management approaches" across all disciplines (Gilbert; Valadkhani and Ville 2). While few query a link between university-level learning and the needs of the workplace, or the motivating belief that the overarching role of higher education is the provision of professional training for its client-students (see Laing and Brabazon for an exception), it also should be noted that a lack of relevance is one of the contributors to dysfunction, and thence to obsolescence.

## The PhD as Dysfunctional Degree?

Perhaps, however, it is not competition that threatens the traditional PhD but, rather, its own design flaws. A report in *The New York Times* in 2007 alerted readers to what many supervisors, candidates, and researchers internationally have recognised for some time: that the PhD may be dysfunctional (Berger). In Australia and elsewhere, attention has focused on the uneven quality of doctoral-level degrees across institutions, especially in relation to their content, rigor, entry and assessment standards, and this has not precluded questions regarding the PhD (AVCC; Carey, Webb, Brien; Neumann; Jolley; McWilliam *et al.*, "Silly"). It should be noted that this important examination of standards has, however, been accompanied by an increase in the awarding of Honorary Doctorates. This practice ranges from the most reputable universities' recognising individuals' significant contributions to knowledge, culture and/or society, to wholly disreputable institutions offering such qualifications in return for payment (Starrs). While generally contested in terms of their status, Honorary Doctorates granted to sports, show business and political figures are the most controversial and include an award conferred on puppet Kermit the Frog in 1996 (Jeffries), and some leading institutions including MIT, Cornell University and the London School of Economics and Political Science are distinctive in not awarding Honorary Doctorates. However, while distracting, the Honorary Doctorate itself does not answer all the questions regarding the quality of doctoral programs in general, or the Doctor of Philosophy in particular.

The PhD also has high attrition rates: 50 per cent or more across Australia, the USA and Canada (Halse 322; Lovitts and Nelson). For those who remain in the programs, lengthy completion times (known internationally as 'time-to-degree') are common in many countries, with averages of 10.5 years to completion in Canada, and from 8.2 to more than 13 years (depending on discipline) in the USA (Berger). The current government performance-based funding model for Australian research higher degrees focuses attention on timely completion, and there is no doubt that, under this system—where universities only receive funding for a minimum period of candidature when those candidates have completed their degrees—more candidates are completing within the required time periods (Cuthbert). Yet, such a focus has distracted from assessment of the quality and outcomes of such programs of study. A detailed survey, based on the theses lodged in Australian libraries, has estimated

that at least 51,000 PhD theses were completed in Australia to 2003 (Evans *et al.* 7). However, little attention has been paid to the consequences of this work, that is, the effects that the generation of these theses has had on either candidates or the nation. There has been no assessment, for instance, of the impact on candidates of undertaking and completing a doctorate on such facets of their lives as their employment opportunities, professional choices and salary levels, nor any effect on their personal happiness or levels of creativity. Nor has there been any real evaluation of the effect of these degrees on GDP, rates of the commercialisation of research, the generation of intellectual property, meeting national agendas in areas such as innovation, productivity or creativity, and/or the quality of the Australian creative and performing arts.

Government-funded and other Australian studies have, however, noted for at least a decade both that the high numbers of graduates are mismatched to a lack of market demand for doctoral qualifications outside of academia (Kemp), and that an oversupply of doctorally qualified job seekers is driving wages down in some sectors (Jones 26). Even academia is demanding more than a PhD. Within the USA, doctoral graduates of some disciplines (English is an often-cited example) are undertaking second PhDs in their quest to secure an academic position. In Australia, entry-level academic positions increasingly require a scholarly publishing history alongside a doctoral-level qualification and, in common with other quantitative exercises in the UK and in New Zealand, the current Excellence in Research for Australia research evaluation exercise values scholarly publications more than higher degree qualifications.

## Concluding Remarks: The PhD as Obsolete or Retro-Chic?

Disciplines and fields are reacting to this situation in various ways, but the trend appears to be towards increased market segmentation. Despite these charges of PhD dysfunction, there are also dangers in the over-differentiation of higher degrees as a practice. If universities do not adequately resource the professional development and other support for supervisors and all those involved in the delivery of all these degrees, those institutions may find that they have spread the existing skills, knowledge and other institutional assets too thinly to sustain some or even any of these degrees. This could lead to the diminishing quality (and an attendant diminishing perception of the value) of all the higher degrees available in those institutions as well as the reputation of the hosting country's entire higher education system. As works in progress, the various 'new' doctoral degrees can also promote a sense of working on unstable ground for both candidates and supervisors (McWilliam *et al.*, *Research Training*), and higher degree examiners will necessarily be unfamiliar with expected standards. Candidates are attempting to discern the advantages and disadvantages of each form in order to choose the degree that they believe is right for them (see, for example, Robins and Kanowski), but such assessment is difficult without the benefit of hindsight. Furthermore, not every form may fit the unpredictable future aspirations of candidates or the volatile future needs of the workplace.

The rate with which everything once new descends from stylish popularity through stages of unfashionableness to become outdated and, eventually, discarded is increasing. This escalation may result in the discipline-based research PhD becoming seen as archaic and, eventually, obsolete. Perhaps, alternatively, it will lead to newer and more fashionable forms of doctoral study being discarded instead. Laing and Brabazon go further to find that all doctoral level study's inability to "contribute in a measurable and quantifiable way to social, economic or political change" problematises the very existence of all these degrees (265). Yet, we all know that some objects, styles, practices and technologies that become obsolete are later recovered and reassessed as once again interesting. They rise once again to be judged as fashionable and valuable. Perhaps even if made obsolete, this will be the fate of the PhD or other doctoral degrees?

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