

To PhD or not to PhD

R. A. Hodgett

University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia

Alan.hodgett@unisa.edu.au

Abstract

To PhD or not to PhD

That is the question

Whether it should be acceptable to take other routes in academe

Or by acquiescing reject them.

This article questions whether the PhD remains the most relevant advanced qualification for the majority of academic staff in Australian universities given the changes in the environment of the universities over the past two decades.

Background

What is a Doctor of Philosophy, a PhD? The award of a PhD certifies that the holder has mastered the skills required, and has demonstrated the ability to, undertake original research that advances the field of knowledge in a particular field of study. This ability is demonstrated by the preparation of a substantial thesis reporting the foundations, methodology and results of a significant research project. Within the university system it is the driver's license to set foot on the academic promotion ladder and for credibility in engaging in continuing research activity. It can be seen as the apprenticeship for an academic career. It has historically been distinguished from the Masters by research and from a variety of doctoral programs by its concentration on a single research objective rather than a combination of coursework and lesser research projects and by the originality or innovativeness of the research.

Discussion

Who uses PhDs? While there are a number of people in business or non-research positions that have a PhD this tends to be the result of career progression rather than the need for the qualification as a prerequisite for the position. A number of programs have been developed, and are being developed, to fill this market sector such as the Doctor of Business Administration. The major demand for PhDs comes from private sector and government research establishments and from universities where the PhD is seen as the standard qualification for academic staff. The conventional wisdom is that a PhD is a necessary qualification for a career in academe, and this is reflected in university policies relating to the appointment of staff and is demonstrated in the

worldwide advertisements for academic appointments.

Why has this arisen? This position developed as a result of the historical development of universities. For a very brief survey and explanation of this development see "Degree, College" in the World Book Encyclopedia (2002) and "degree, also called

Material published as part of these proceedings, either on-line or in print, is copyrighted by Informing Science. Permission to make digital or paper copy of part or all of these works for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that the copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage AND that copies 1) bear this notice in full and 2) give the full citation on the first page. It is permissible to abstract these works so long as credit is given. To copy in all other cases or to republish or to post on a server or to redistribute to lists requires specific permission from the publisher at Publisher@InformingScience.org

ACADEMIC DEGREE” the New Encyclopedia Britannica (1998). They were the acknowledged centres of advanced learning and the major centres for research. As a result they attracted much of the intellectual talent of their times to lead in the search to extend the boundaries of knowledge and to disseminate that knowledge. This led to a master-student situation where much of the learning centred on discourse with the master and involvement in the master’s academic activities. The qualification to be a master was based almost exclusively on the academic’s depth of knowledge and research ability with little or no consideration of teaching or administrative ability.

The environment that Australian universities operate in has changed in the past two decades and gives every indication that it will continue to change in response to government policy and the requirements of society. Criteria for admission to universities have changed with a wider range of the population seeking to secure university qualifications. As a result the student mix has changed with a greater recognition of work experience, vocational training, mature age and retraining requirements and a wider range of qualifications from other institutions. The internationalisation of education and the recruitment of significant numbers of international students have increased the scrutiny of the university product as governments and society require universities to demonstrate the relevance, quality and integrity of their programs.

In addition, there have been greater demands placed on the universities in terms of finances, academic accountability and social responsibility. Federal funding support has been reduced in real terms for many activities including staff salary rises. This has led to a need for universities to find other sources of income and in the process to become more business oriented. Federal quality audits, professional accreditations and external evaluations of a university’s performance in a competitive environment has given rise to a climate where teaching roles are under scrutiny and an increased emphasis has been placed on quality teaching. Social pressure and legislation has given rise to increased responsibility and accountability in areas of social concern including discrimination, access and equity, harassment and bullying, occupational health and safety and the appropriateness of the universities education programs and research to society’s needs. All of this has given rise to a greater level of administrative requirements in terms of the development of policies and their implementation. It is not unreasonable therefore to suggest that there are different and stronger demands on the various facets of the academic role and that the requirements to carry out the duties of the role have changed in the current Australian university environment. It may be that the tertiary education environment in other countries has changed in a similar fashion. It is appropriate, therefore, to examine the work of academic staff and to suggest appropriate qualifications and skills to carry out that work.

The role has grown to be perceived as a mixture or blend of education, research and administration. Some positions are specified with limited roles, such as teaching or research fellows, and across discipline areas there may be a differing emphasis on the various aspects of the role, but generally in the first decade or so of an academic career there is an expectation of satisfactory performance across the range of requirements. What has changed is the expected level of performance in each of the education, research, administration aspects of the role, and the knowledge required to achieve those levels. There is a growing requirement to provide a quality education for students. In the past this was deemed to flow from the academics expertise in the discipline area. Students were expected to “sit at the feet of the master” who was a font of wisdom. While it was necessary for teachers in the primary and secondary education fields to undertake a program of study to qualify as a teacher, no such study or qualification was seen as necessary in the tertiary area. Today’s academic needs a much better foundation in education theory and methodologies and must be much more actively involved in the student-teacher education process. The education process needs to be seen as a partnership or journey together with the academic being a motivator, facilitator, coach, mentor, guide and a resource for students, facilitating and encouraging self

education, rather than a person who has all the knowledge and answers that simply need pouring into a student's head on the assumption that education will automatically follow. A PhD is neither necessary to deal with the educational requirements of most undergraduate students nor sufficient to provide the educational skills and pastoral support required, particularly in the large first year and sometimes second year classes. Even now it is suspected that a significant proportion of this work is undertaken by contract and casual staff with neither educational credentials nor knowledge of universities administrative requirements. Some universities have introduced make-up programs to compensate for this lack of formal education in learning and teaching. An example is the Graduate Certificate in Education (Higher Education) at the Queensland University of Technology. However, such programs are usually voluntary and in any case do not address the wider range of skills required by academics in the course of their range of duties.

It is expected that each academic will have a credible research output. Not all researchers can reach the achievements of icons such as Einstein, Rutherford, Fleming, Hawkins and similar leading edge researchers. While it can be argued that some minimum level of research is required to keep the academic in touch with contemporary developments in his or her field of knowledge, it can also be argued that a PhD is not necessary to produce the work that appears in many academic and professional journals or at conferences. The evidence would indicate that this is so. For example there are a number of education programs that require students to be accepted for publication in recognised leading journals and these programs do not require or qualify as a PhD. A large number of academics do not need this qualification to satisfy a recognised research output and there are other ways of qualifying to do such research. Nonetheless there appears to be a consensus that all academics should undertake research at some level to keep themselves abreast of developments in their field and to maintain their academic credibility. By analogy it would be expected that a teaching artist would continue to produce artworks and a teaching medical practitioner or dentist would continue to treat patients. On one hand it needs to be recognised that original research is not the sole prerogative of holders of PhDs while on the other hand a question needs to be asked about how many academics will go on to do the high level or advanced research requiring the research skills at the top end of the spectrum to provide leadership and output at the leading edge of knowledge. It is also evident that a number of staff, having achieved their PhD, fail to contribute any further relevant research.

Academics have growing, and more accountable, administrative responsibilities. They are responsible for administering, and adhering to, a growing range of policies as they apply to the education of students, the conduct of research and dealings with governments and society. In addition, as they assume various positions of responsibility, they require more management skills relating to finance, human resources, marketing and reporting for accountability. Indeed, as the academic climbs the career ladder, the greater the proportion of time that seems to be devoted to administration until in some cases it takes over entirely leaving no time for research or involvement with students in education programs. In the usual PhD program there is little if any preparation for the administrative skills needed in dealing with finance, human resources and the implementation of policy, and many of the administrative responsibilities do not need the credibility of the research based PhD.

In the light of the foregoing it is proposed that a more relevant qualification for an entry level academic would be one that combined education, research and administration skills with an advanced parallel development in the person's field of expertise. Models for such programs already exist. As an example the Doctor of Education program at Flinders University of South Australia requires a blend of coursework and research output in journals recognised within their discipline. Such a program could easily be adapted to serve as an entry level qualification for an academic career. It would provide a balance and blend of the concepts, knowledge and skills required for

research, education, administration and management tasks and reinforce expertise in the underlying discipline.

It could also provide the entry level research qualification currently provided by the “honours” program for those wishing to proceed to higher levels of research through a PhD program. In the United States of America and Canada it is not unusual for the preparation to undertake a PhD program to be embodied in a coursework masters program. Candidates deciding to work toward a PhD later in their career rather than at the outset would be making a more informed judgement to do so, should be more committed and take a more mature approach while having the skills and credentials to responsibly fulfil their ongoing academic responsibilities in a much more competent manner. While there may be modified versions of PhD and other doctoral programs few if any provide a satisfactory blend of educational, research and administrative skills relevant to a developing career in academe.

Summary

It is proposed that because of the changed environment in which universities operate in Australia that it is timely to review the appropriate qualifications for university academic staff. Historically these qualifications have been assumed to be satisfied by a PhD. With increasing demands requiring greater administrative responsibility, accountability for delivering quality education and more justification for research activities it is proposed that staff embarking on an academic career should have an entry qualification that more relevantly meets the broad requirements of the profession as with other professions. A joint coursework and research masters degree could be structured to meet the needs of the profession. This model might also in time be relevant beyond the shores of Australia.

References

The New Encyclopedia Britannica (Volume 3, p. 962). (1998). Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved from www.eb.com

The World Book Encyclopedia (Volume 5, p. 91). (2002)/ World Book. Retrieved from www.worldbook.com

Biography

Alan Hodget started out as a telecommunications engineer and then moved into programming and systems work in the early days of computing. He was recruited into the university system after decades in industry and has been involved in that sector since.