

WHEN IS A DOCTORATE DISSERTATION READY FOR SUBMISSION?

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The quality of doctorates not only differs from university to university but they also differ within the same university from faculty to faculty and, for that matter, from Department to Department and from individual to individual. There are in fact no clearly precise rules and very little consensus concerning the standard of a doctorate degree. Some universities do not attempt to offer different levels of achievement – in these cases, the degree candidate is either awarded the doctorate degree or not. Others do award a pass or a distinction or even a *cum laude* doctorate.

The process of the doctoral degree is well established. The degree candidate, having been accepted by the university, needs to work under supervision for a period, which varies depending on whether the research is full-time or part-time. The degree candidate needs to choose a research question and a research strategy with the help of one or more supervisors. There are a variety of research strategies and tactics available and the degree candidate's choice in this respect will determine the actual research work that will take place. The degree candidate will present his or her work for evaluation, which will normally take between two and six months to conclude. The awarding of the doctorate allows the recipient to use the title of doctor.

In general terms, most academics would agree that a doctorate is awarded only to those who demonstrate that, through their research, they have *added something of value to the body of knowledge*¹. This

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¹ Traditionally, the doctoral degree candidate actually needed to add something of value to the body of theoretical knowledge and, without a

demonstration takes both the form of a written submission of a monograph, which is usually about 80,000 words, and an oral examination referred to as a *viva voce*. A successful *viva voce* typically lasts two hours. In some cases, a series of perhaps five high quality academic papers may be submitted in lieu of the monograph. This academic papers option is available to many universities, but is not that popular with supervisors or degree candidates. It is usually offered to established academics, who have already been recognized in their field, and have already held reasonably senior positions in universities for some years. It confirms academic status that, in a sense, they already have. It would be unusual for a completely new researcher to be able to apply to undertake a doctorate through this route².

Before the doctorate is awarded to the degree candidate, the dissertation and/or the papers and the *viva voce* are examined. At least in Ireland, the UK and in other Commonwealth countries, this is usually by one internal examiner and one external examiner (if the degree candidate is a member of the university's staff, then it is usual to have two external examiners) and normally there needs to be consensus from all examiners that the degree candidate has achieved the objective of the degree. The objective of the doctorate is also sometimes referred to as the contribution made to the body of knowledge, which needs to demonstrate some originality of thought, a theoretical underpinning, relevance to the discipline and rigour in execution. Although it is generally agreed that the contribution required from a doctoral candidate must be evident and clear, it can actually be quite modest. Every *viva voce* candidate must be well prepared to answer this question³.

significant theoretical contribution, the work would not have been considered of adequate quality to be awarded a doctorate. In the field of business and management studies, there is a considerable debate, which is yet unresolved, as to the extent of the required theoretical contribution.

² The doctoral degree awarded on the basis of a series of papers written under supervision is not the same as a senior doctorate awarded on the evaluation of a portfolio of publications produced as the life work of an individual.

³ As a general rule, Commonwealth countries in the southern hemisphere do not hold *viva voces*. Australian, New Zealand and South African universities show a preference for the dissertations of their doctoral candidates to be examined by academics from leading universities in the Northern hemisphere and they are unable to fund the travel costs of such examiners. Therefore, the dissertation is read by the external examiner

It is important to note that good research, and good doctoral research does not necessarily arrive at the answers to problems. Particularly when research *tests theory*, it often produces the next layer of *good questions* rather than good answers. Good questions are an entirely respectable and useful output from a doctorate, especially if they help extend the current theoretical framework – the bottom line is that the research must engage with current theories.

The primary objective of doctorate degrees is for individuals to be able to demonstrate that they can undertake independent academic research. In this respect, the doctorate degree process is often compared to an apprenticeship, and the degree candidate to an apprentice, in which the degree candidate demonstrates that he or she has learnt the skills of research by completing a substantial or material research project. In this sense, a doctorate is actually a classical learning-by-doing project. Also, at the end of the degree process, the newly graduated individual is really only a beginner in the academic research field and will possibly take a few years to hone his or her skills in order to become a fully-fledged academic researcher. The analogy with the apprentice, the journeyman and the master-craftsman is often thought to be useful in describing the development of an academic researcher⁴.

The question that continually arises is how does one know when the doctoral degree candidate has done enough work of sufficient quality to submit his or her dissertation so that it may be evaluated and found to be worthy of the degree. There is no simple answer to this conundrum. A guideline that we have found useful is to base this decision on an idea in the works of Wittgenstein (1969), which states “*Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgment*”. This thought focuses the doctoral degree candidate on the fact that he or she is part of a community that will need to regard the research work and the findings produced as being of sufficient quality to merit the degree.

or examiners and written reports and queries are submitted to the degree candidate.

⁴ The term apprenticeship is sometimes thought to suggest a highly controlled or mechanistic approach to doctoral education. However, this is not intended. In this context, the word apprentice is used to suggest that the primary learning comes from the direction given by the supervisor or supervisors. This term apprenticeship is not intended to reflect an emphasis on simple skills training as it would when used in the context of craft and trades. Doctoral education needs to be of the broadest kind, as well as being of adequate depth, to make a real contribution to the body of knowledge.

And that happens when that research community recognizes the doctoral candidate as being someone who will be able to *contribute to the ongoing research “conversation”* in that field. The doctoral research must ‘speak to’ both a specific research field (or content), and to specific research approaches (or methodologies) shared by a community of researchers in that field. Doctoral research is paradoxically a lonely pursuit but one that initiates the successful candidate into the membership of a community of peers.

The doctoral candidate needs to be quite clear about which community of peers they wish to become part of. ‘Peer referencing’ is the foundation of all research communities. When you choose a research topic and a research methodology, you are also choosing the particular community of peers that you aspire to join, within the larger research community⁵. It is therefore essential to engage in discussions or ‘conversations’ with members of that community during your doctoral research – by e-mail, by attending conferences or by publishing papers in journals.

Therefore, the doctoral degree candidate has finished the work and it is of adequate quality and is ready for examination when the supervisor or supervisors say so; when his or her peers think he or she has produced a good piece of work; when he or she has presented at conferences and/or given a number of seminars on the work; and has perhaps had a paper or two published in a journal and so on. Of course, the final say is obviously in the hands of the examiners and it is critical to the whole process of offering and preparing individuals for doctorates that the university is able to choose appropriate examiners who will be sympathetic to the work produced by the degree candidate. It always has to be kept in mind that the depth and the scope of the research needs to be appropriate for the three or four years which is the target time in which to complete a doctorate. Dissertations, which are not of an adequate standard to be awarded a doctorate, may in some instances be submitted or resubmitted for consideration for a masters degree⁶.

⁵ The community within which the research is being conducted for a doctorate is not always easy to define. However, it is an important part of the doctoral degree process for the degree candidate, with the assistance of the supervisor or supervisors, to make contact with this community.

⁶ The alternative degree that is sometimes awarded to those who do not quite achieve the doctoral standard is a Master of Philosophy. In general, the Master of Philosophy degree is not as rigorous, not as great in scope and requires a lesser contribution to theory. It is however important not to

Clearly it is not possible to define the 'products' of doctoral research across the board, or across the spectrum of institutions, but it is quite possible to define the process and criteria by which one can seek to join a particular 'community of peers', which may be seen as the most obvious outcome of obtaining a doctorate. Thus, it is essential that the university be aware of the evolving standards and practices in doctoral education. But, at the end of the day, the suitability of the dissertation to be awarded a doctorate is always a judgment based on experience and it is essential that this judgment be recognised for what it really is.

References

- Wittgenstein L, *On Certainty*, sct. 378 (ed. by Anscombe and von Wright, 1969).

regard a Master of Philosophy as a failed doctorate, as it does reflect a considerable achievement in its own right. In general, in a masters degree, a degree candidate needs to prove that he or she understands a particular problem in the area in which they have done their research; that he or she is able to analyse the situation and set it out logically; that he or she is able to arrive at logical conclusions or a diagnosis; and that he or she is then able to make proposals for the improvement or the elimination of the problem being studied.

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