



Doctoral Education in Changing Times: Perspectives and Challenges

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Abstract

Doctoral education is the highest level of study a university offers. There are regulations and requirements specific to the institution with an overlay of governmental directives associated with the degree. Recently, these regulations have become more stringent and directional in how the degree is conducted. While each institution is independent it is important that the skills, knowledge and insights are transferrable across institutions and jurisdictions. We have all experienced unforeseen challenges associated with the pandemic and related lockdowns. Doctoral education have been interrupted and disrupted with candidates, supervisors and universities having to reconsider research directions, practices and potential outcomes.

Keywords: doctoral education, higher degree research, pandemic.

Keywords: Doctoral Education; Challenges; Changing Times; Perspectives

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1.0 Introduction

I am deeply honoured to be invited to present this address for the 9th International Conference on Science and Social Research with the theme Addressing Global Challenges for Societal Well-Being. In your invitation you have provided a challenge for me that I hope I can meet. As I am in Australia, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land and recognise their elders past and present. At every entry point to any of the buildings and campuses of my university is the statement: RMIT University acknowledges the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the eastern Kulin Nations on whose unceded lands we conduct the business of the University. RMIT University respectfully acknowledges their Ancestors and Elders, past and present. RMIT also acknowledges the Traditional Custodians and their Ancestors of the lands and waters across Australia where we conduct our business. I acknowledge the custodians of the land wherever you are now and your own history. In acknowledging Elders (and as a non-Indigenous person) I am always reminded of my elders, my parents, my teachers and the people who have so impacted on my thinking and practice.

2.0 Background

My background is in music and music education and my academic and professional work spans music and the fine arts, the humanities and the social sciences (particularly Education). My doctoral research was on the Russian/Soviet composer and educator Dmitri Kabalevsky in relation to his piano music for children (Forrest, 1996). This was completed in the mid-1990s and started an academic trajectory that still guides my thinking and research today. The research provided opportunities to travel (in particular to Moscow), to access collections at places like the British Library, and to present my findings at various conferences along the way.

Soon after I completed the PhD, I joined supervision panels for research candidates for masters and PhDs. This also has been a career long trajectory and direction. As with any doctoral study I need to place some limitations and scope on this presentation. I've been incredibly fortunate to work from my Australian context with higher degree research students from around a dozen countries (with many from South East Asia). I have learnt so much from these students, their backgrounds and culture and I am a better person and academic for the experience. From the outset I need to put on the record that I am presenting this thinking from a privileged perspective. Through my career to date a good deal of my academic workload has been devoted to doctoral supervision and research.

3.0 Doctoral Journey

I had such a positive experience undertaking my doctorate. In those distant days I enjoyed the experience as I was able to undertake my study full time while working as a new academic. It is probably not so possible today with the demands and ever-changing academic conditions. I was surprised that this was not a universal experience and at the time I was staggered to learn that in Australia only a third of candidates who enrolled in a PhD finished. While this figure has improved dramatically there must have been so many lost opportunities and research unresolved. With this alarming realisation Universities and governments started to look closely at what it was to do a PhD in Australia, and from a cost and revenue perspective, what it was to fund a doctoral study, and the eventual returns. I've had the privilege over nearly two decades to be asking questions of people as to why they have done a doctorate and writing about this. My recent role has focused on Higher Degree Research in the School of Art at RMIT University. I am fascinated and intrigued with why people put themselves through this potentially arduous ordeal. While I appreciate there are those who commence and do not complete but there are those who successfully get to the end and have a story to tell. This has been the core of my work in music education, art education, drama and dance education as well as Art (see Forrest, 2003, 2010, 2012, 2017; Forrest & Grierson, 2010; Forrest, Díaz-Gómez, & Cabedo-Mas, 2017).

4.0 Doctoral Education in Australia

Before I proceed, I'd like to talk briefly about the context of doctoral education in Australia. While a PhD (like any qualification) is awarded by a recognised University (with its own regulations, requirements and practices), all Universities follow the Australian Qualifications Framework. This framework is "the national policy for regulated qualifications in Australian education and training" (AQF, 2022). One of the main functions of the AQF is "to facilitate pathways to, and through, formal qualifications. It also complements national regulatory and quality assurance arrangements for education and training." The Framework is divided into ten levels from Certificate 1 through to Doctoral degrees, with levels 5 to 10 being higher education awards. The AQF level 10 criteria is for doctorates.

Graduates at this level will have systematic and critical understanding of a complex field of learning and specialised research skills for the advancement of learning and/or for professional practice.

Graduates ... will have systemic and critical understanding of a substantial and complex body of knowledge at the frontier of a discipline or area of professional practice.

Graduates ... will have expert, specialised cognitive, technical and research skills in a discipline area to independently and systematically:

- engage in critical reflection, synthesis and evaluation
- develop, adapt and implement research methodologies to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice
- disseminate and promote new insights to peers and the community
- generate original knowledge and understanding to make a substantial contribution to a discipline or area of professional practice

Graduates ... will apply knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy, authoritative judgement, adaptability and responsibility as an expert and leading practitioner or scholar. (AQF, 2022)

If we now place this against the Australian Government's definition of research (and I trust this resonates with most national definitions):

research is defined as the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies, inventions and understandings. This could include synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it is new and creative. (ARC, 2022)

These are all important considerations in the way in which we prepare and guide our doctoral candidates through their study. In addition to the definition there have been changes to the delivery of PhDs in many Universities (including my own). Until now most doctorates were undertaken to produce a final body of work in the form of a thesis/dissertation or project/exhibition evidencing their research. This was complemented with a research strategies/methods course undertaken prior to the confirmation of candidature. From 2023 candidates will be required to complete a series of (up to four) taught courses over the duration of candidature to complement their study. In addition, the previous Federal government introduced the requirement that students will undertake an industry-based internship as part of their study. While this is in place, we are waiting on the new government to determine if and how this will continue.

Our government has introduced considerable scrutiny on the delivery and funding of HDR places. This is to say that the doctoral landscape is changing dramatically. It is worth noting that our universities have not been so good at tracking longitudinally our graduates and the application and impact of the PhD research. While a PhD is often the first major piece of extended research most people do, it is often unfortunately the last. In the Academy, the doctorate is a licence to teach once mastery has been gained through a masters degree. We can only hope that the PhD is the start of a wonderful life-long adventure.

4.1 Challenges

Undertaking a doctorate in any field is perhaps the most challenging of endeavours many of us have faced to date. Let me take a moment to consider these challenges.

As Charles Dickens started *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859)

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, ... in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

I have over the years continued to use the over-used word Journey in referring to the progress of a doctoral study. My reason for this is if we look at a definition of journey, we see that it is

1. a long wandering or voyage usually marked by many changes of fortune
2. an intellectual or spiritual wandering or quest (Merriman-Webster)

I have been drawn to many different accounts of journeys. I'd like to talk briefly about a few as they graphically represent some of the challenges of undertaking a doctorate. The first is Homer's *Odyssey* which is the account of Odysseus's long return journey after the Trojan Wars. In the opening prologue he implores the Muse to

Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns
driven time and again off course... Many cities of men he saw and learned their minds,
...start from where you will – sing for our time too.

Our journeys have been recorded and mapped by cartographers, writers and adventurers over time. I am fascinated by these representations and images. Maps may come from direct observation or more importantly, the imagination. Something we all encourage in our research and research candidates.

On 7 December was the fiftieth anniversary of the "Blue Marble" photograph taken from Apollo 17 – the last manned mission to the Moon. According to Larsson (2022) "This photo changed the way we visualised our planet forever". This image reminds me of the need to review our research from a distance and from a range of perspectives.

Considering these images reminded me of the ongoing travels of Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 whose journey started in 1977. Remarkably they are now billions of miles from the sun – a distance I can't even comprehend. Both spacecrafts carry on board "a greeting to any form of life, should that be encountered" on "a 12-inch gold-plated copper disk containing sounds and images selected to portray the diversity of life and culture on Earth" (Jet Propulsion Laboratory, 2022). The golden disk makes me reflect on what is the golden disk of our research and why would someone want to read and think about what we are doing and why we are pursuing particular directions.

4.2 Our Changing Times

These last few years have made us all consider and reconsider what we do, and how we do what we do. In the most part this has been dictated by government regulation and direction. As you would be aware during the pandemic Melbourne was the city in the longest series of lockdowns. (This has now been surpassed by any number of Chinese cities and regions.)

It is this that I return to Homer's Muse to "Sing for our time too" as we "start from where you will". Without doubt, a doctorate is a singular journey. It is one that is supported by supervisors, mentors, fellow candidates (and the list goes on) but it is a singular endeavour.

In my School of Art (like other creative disciplines) candidates go their studios and work – they think, read, experiment, practice, and write. This is often broken through the day and week with candidates getting together to talk over breaks, lunch or a seminar.

From March 2020 our candidates (like all of us) were introduced to new ways of working and studying. From this date, through the pandemic campuses were closed and everyone's journey became even more individual and insular. Domestic and international students who were in Melbourne were required to remain in their residence. (We also had the situation where students were unable to either leave their country or enter Australia and were undertaking their work remotely.) This meant that if they had to set up a studio to continue with their work at home. This worked for some disciplines and practices and not others – challenging times. The creative artist had to become even more creative in their approach to all aspects of their work.

At various times between lockdowns, research students were allowed on campus to use facilities and studios in a limited fashion. These offered a glimmer of positivity as well as an opportunity to resolve some work.

In addition, not being able to travel curtailed the ability of some students to continue the research that was originally planned. Some students took leave while others had to reframe their studies to accommodate the changing circumstances and imposed limitations.

These were times where students were lost, confused, perplexed, disoriented and bewildered. For supervisors (and candidates) the supervision sessions changed dramatically and were mediated via a screen or a monitor. No longer could we sit and talk with our candidates in their space, view and critique the live work as it was being developed. For so much time this was happening via Zoom or Teams.

In many cases the extended supervision session was divided into shorter check-in sessions that often were for well-being and not the subject of the research. The supervisor/teacher/mentor provided help, support, advice, guidance and assistance. This became such a mark of the changing times. The studio visit took on new meanings.

Denholm and Evans (2007) state "Supervising doctoral candidates is ... regarded as the most significant and intensive teaching and mentoring experience accorded to an academic. The supervision of doctoral candidates thus represents an important and vital nexus where research and teaching intersect" (p. 1). We have most certainly experienced that connection from a range of challenging perspectives.

If we track through the life cycle of a doctorate, one of the final stages is the external examination of the research. In Art, this involves the visit by two examiners who view the work independently, following a review of the dissertation. It was the viewing in person that was integral to the examination process. The examiners were allocated blocks of time to individually view and consider the work. This of course changed with lockdown: to enable an examination to proceed the process was put in place the candidate to install their work, photograph the work and the installation, and then film a walk around of the exhibition. The files were then forward to the examiners to review (along with the dissertation). This was not ideal but it enabled the process to proceed. With the work mediated digitally it was a different experience and generally, it worked. Fortunately, we have now returned to live examinations and have not had the new option of the digital alternative taken as the norm. We also have the added bonus of a repository of the examination installation and view.

The experience over our recent times has required us to re-think and respond differently to our circumstances. Delamont, Atkinson and Parry (2001) state “Supervising doctoral students is one of the most satisfying things that anyone in higher education can do. Watching a new scholar become an independent researcher, conduct a research project, write up the results, present them at a conference and see the first publications in a wonderful experience” (p. 1). This is our reward as supervisors. We are fortunate if we are able to observe their continued development through their academic and professional life after the doctorate is completed.

5.0 Conclusion

In drawing to a conclusion, I would like to offer the following comments. Let me say that it is important to note that doctoral candidates don't take three years off 'life' to pursue their studies. Finding a study-life balance is a challenge – but an essential one for the well-being of the candidate – and even, perhaps, for the final quality of the research. This has been but one of our major challenges over these last years. While the focus of much of my research is on music and education, I have a strong interest in the collective nature of the Arts. Dennis Sporre (1994) described the Arts as:

Processes, products, and experiences that communicate aspects of the human condition in a variety of means, many of which are nonverbal. Processes are the creative thoughts, materials, and techniques artists combine to create products: the artworks. Experiences are the human interactions and responses that occur when people encounter the vision of the artist in the artwork. (p. 16)

These few words are important as educators across any disciplines. So much of what we do as educators is to do with processes, products and experiences. Our task is to enable the educator in the broadest sense to become the researcher in their chosen discipline to argue and document the processes, present the products, and reflect on the experiences to propose new ways of doing things. From all of this we want our candidates to continue to pursue the great question of “why”. Returning to the subject of my doctoral research, Dmitri Kabalevsky (1988) used as the epigraph for his general school music programme a phrase by the Soviet educator Vasili Sukhomlinsky: “Music education does not mean educating a musician – it means first of all educating a human being” (p. 19). If we replace Music with whatever discipline you come from we get a sense of the broader field of education – so that we are educating human beings. Importantly, it is important that our doctoral education is fully preparing our students to engage in these changing and challenging times, and enable them to potentially arrive at some solutions that contribute to our societal well-being and development. You have given me the opportunity to reflect and consider what is important to me in education and in particular doctoral education. I welcome your comments and discussion to that we can “Sing for our time too”.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

The contribution of this paper to the field of study is doctoral research and higher degree research.

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