Succeeding with your Doctorate

Jerry J. Wellington, Ann-Marie, Cheryl Hunt, Gary McCulloch and Pat Sykes

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Contents

Preface

The aim of this book is to support, inform and guide students (and by implication their supervisors) through a doctoral programme. The book is intended for students working towards either a 'taught' doctorate (such as an EdD) or a course of study leading to a PhD.

We recognise that doctoral programmes have changed and these changes are described and discussed in Chapter 1. The traditional model of a doctorate based on the concept of three years of independent (but supervised) full-time research is no longer the norm. Thus in writing the book we have had in mind not simply those students who may wish to become professional researchers in education, the social sciences or related fields, but also, and perhaps most especially, those who aspire to being a 'researching professional': a professional, probably already established in a career, who wishes to reflect upon, and research into, her or his own practice and/or the political, social and theoretical contexts in which it is located. Because we are well aware that students who are also working in demanding jobs have to perform complex juggling acts in order to balance the demands of work, study and other aspects of their lives, each chapter of the book contains cameos of students who have struggled to maintain this fine balance – and survived to tell the tale.

Thus the book includes the voices and the stories of past and present students on doctoral programmes – but we do not wish to give the impression that this selection exhausts the range of students' individual lived experiences. There are as many rich, personal stories to be told by doctoral students as there are doctoral students. Some of these may well be uncomfortable and discordant at times, but they are always challenging and we find them an endless source of fascination, and continue to learn from them as we try to improve our own craft.

The book is soundly based on research, theory and practice. It draws on our own, and others', research and writing over many years, and on our extensive experience of working with postgraduate students and examining doctoral theses (both as internal and external examiners – see Chapter 10). Even though the five authors writing this book have a great deal in common, we know that we approach research, supervision and writing in different ways. This is partly because we come from different discipli-

nary backgrounds – history, science, sociology, psychology and social-psychology – but it is mainly because we are, simply, different people. You will undoubtedly be able to identify our individual 'voices' at various points in the text. You will also notice that different chapters have different styles and tones. Some are of a more procedural, 'how-to-do-it' nature; others are more critical and discursive. This mirrors the way that doctoral studies actually proceed in practice.

We have tried to write this book in an accessible style which is consistent with our approach to teaching and working with our own students – so we often speak directly to you, the reader, in a 'conversational' style, using 'you' and 'we' as appropriate. However, the term 'we' sometimes encompasses different groups: it may refer to us, the authors; or it may refer to us, as part of the 'research community', into which, as a doctoral student, you will be gradually inducted and included. Our hope is that the book will facilitate your entry into, and understanding of, that community as well as your enjoyment in undertaking doctoral research.

Some of the questions and issues covered by the book include:

- **What is a doctorate? Why do people do them?**
- **Learning and studying – what are the implications of 'being a student' again?**
- **How can critical reflective practice, auto/biographical and life history work help you to better understand your research related interests, orientations, assumptions and biases, that is, your 'researcher positionality'?**
- **Relationships with supervisors: what should you expect from them and what should they expect of you?**
- **Reading critically.**
- **Doing and writing a literature review.**
- **Making best use of documentary resources, including on-line material.**
- **Choosing your topic and clarifying the focus of your study.**
- **Considering an appropriate methodology and understanding its practical and ethical implications.**
- **Writing and the writing process.**
- **Producing a thesis at doctoral level.**
- **Preparing for and surviving the viva.**
- **What to do next? (For example, getting published in journals? Conference presenting? Writing your first book?)**

We should also explain what we are *not* trying to do in this book. We do not go into detail about any specific research methods or strategies; there are already plenty of books that do this and which offer very good advice of this kind. Also, although we hope that we provide a handy and accessible guide on how to study at doctoral level, we do not simply give tips and hints to improve your efficiency, but encourage you to think and work in a reflexive and self-aware fashion that is itself an appropriate approach for a doctoral student.

Viewing the contents and chapter headings in this book (and many others) would seem to imply that the process of working for a doctorate is a linear, mechanistic one. This is far from the truth – in reality the doctoral 'journey' is likely to be non-linear, messy, cyclical and always unpredictable. The book should be read with this in mind, and used accordingly. Despite the book's title, we cannot guarantee complete 'success' to readers in pursuit of a doctorate. We emphasise that a successful outcome at doctoral level can be hazardous and unpredictable. We hope that the chapters in this book will make your journey a little less difficult even though it will still be challenging. We think that the journey itself matters as much as the arrival.

The book mainly addresses the situation in Britain, sometimes with references that are specific to this country. However, it includes within its remit doctoral students from both Britain and the European Community and international students from around the world who are preparing their doctorates for a British university.

We welcome your comments on this book (negative or positive). Please send them to: j.wellington@sheffield.ac.uk

About the Authors

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Cheryl Hunt: having been extensively involved in the Sheffield EdD programme for several years, Cheryl now directs the EdD in Professional Studies at the University of Exeter. She has designed and taught on a range of Masters programmes focusing especially on learning and teaching in professional settings. Her research interests and publications include the facilitation of critical reflective practice; policy and practice in adult and community education; and understandings of spirituality. She is currently co-ordinator of an ESRC Seminar Series entitled Researching Spirituality as a Dimension of Lifelong Learning and is an executive editor of *Teaching in Higher Education*.

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Pat Sikes: Pat directs Sheffield's EdD programme and has supervised many doctoral theses. Throughout her academic career, the study of aspects of teachers' lives and careers through qualitative research methodologies in general and life history/narrative approaches in particular, have been the central strand of Pat's research interest and activity. This work has focused on four main interrelated areas: teachers' lives and life

cycles; life history methodology; social justice issues, and qualitative research methodology. She has published extensively in all of these fields, and is Series Editor of an Open University Press series entitled *Doing Research in Educational Settings*. Pat is an editor of BERJ (British Educational Research Journal).

Jerry Wellington: Jerry is head of research degrees and a professor in the School of Education at the University of Sheffield. He has supervised a large number of PhD and EdD theses. His main interests are in research methods, science education and the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in education. He has written many journal articles and books on science education, methods and methodology, and the role of new technology in education and employment.

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Part I
Embarking on a Doctorate

1 What Is a Doctorate and Why Do People Do Them?

CHAPTER CONTENTS

We start our book by looking at what a doctorate is and why people do them. Although you are probably reading this book because you have already embarked on doctoral study, it can be helpful to take stock of what this means as the process gets under way. The question of what counts as a doctoral degree and the issue of why or when the rather clumsy adjective of 'doctorateness' should be attributed to a thesis are recurrent. The debate occupies, and will continue to occupy, students, supervisors and examiners at various stages of a doctoral programme and we return to it in different chapters of the book.

This chapter traces some of the history of doctoral degrees, considers the recent changes in their structure and organisation, and discusses the notion of the 'professional doctorate'. We have included the personal viewpoints of a small sample of students on why they chose to undertake a doctorate, and the reasons why some choose the so-called professional route whilst others favour the PhD.

What are 'doctoral degrees'?

What do we think of when we think of a doctoral degree? The image that comes into our heads might well be a detailed study of a particular topic, supervised by an established academic with experience of the area; a sustained piece of original research that will hopefully make a difference to our understanding of the field. This would be the basic model of the established Doctor of Philosophy, or PhD degree, which hinges on the production of an extended written work, or thesis. Other images arising from this might also occur to us. In terms of the purpose of the study, it might well be about initiating the student into academic life just as much as it is about enhancing our

knowledge of the subject, and indeed the PhD has come to be regarded as a 'union card' for the intending academic. In terms of the process of the study, we might think of it as rather lonely and solitary, with the supervisor as the only contact and support. So far as the topic is concerned we might have the impression that it should be very narrow – finding out more and more about less and less. Perhaps we might assume it to follow on immediately from an undergraduate or Masters degree, something to be done full time when one is young, if at all. We will have the nasty feeling that it will be very hard work, and may well wonder whether it is worth it, and whether we are up to it.

Many of these impressions are entirely accurate, especially the bit about the hard work. In other ways they amount to a familiar stereotype that still holds good in many cases, but which is also under challenge, and undergoing change. Compared to 30, or even 10 years ago, the doctorate is developing in new and interesting ways. There is still a great deal of mystique about it, but also pressure of different kinds that is making it more accountable, to the institution, to the society, to the government, and also to the student. Cutting-edge research is still the key rationale for the study, but there are growing expectations about making use of the study for other social purposes, and about what is often styled 'transfer of skills'. There continues to be a great deal of variety and individuality and even idiosyncrasy in doctoral study, but alongside this can be seen movement towards common standards, and towards a measure of collegiality. Depth of understanding is still treasured, but breadth of coverage is also increasingly promoted.

A significant sign of change in the doctoral degree is its spread in terms of numbers over the past few decades. A relatively uncommon phenomenon before the 1950s, the doctorate today remains a substantial achievement but is no longer so unusual. The type of students taking doctoral degrees is also changing. They are not simply youngsters fresh from undergraduate study, but are in many cases experienced mid-career professionals, often already senior people in their own right, working on their degrees part time. These latter also include what we might describe as global professionals – established in different parts of the world but enabled because of the development of rapid transport links and the information and communications revolution to contemplate taking a doctoral degree based half a world away.

Many among this new, mature clientele are attracted to the established brand of doctoral study, the PhD model and what it stands for. This is the established gold standard, and it often provides the motivation and incentive even for many who would not wish to go into an academic career. Others are looking for something more clearly

relevant to their own career development, and are receptive to the appeal of new professionally oriented doctorates.

In this book, we are interested in looking at what the doctorate means in the early twenty-first century, at how far and in what ways its nature and appeal are changing, and in particular at what its appeal is to the new kind of doctoral student – the part-time, mid-career professional, perhaps a school teacher or based in a university but just as likely to be working in industry or commerce or elsewhere. What are they looking for and where do they find it?

FROM BACHELORS TO MASTERS

If you have already participated in a degree ceremony, you will almost certainly have seen an array of academic staff – wearing colourful robes and medieval-style hats – sitting behind the Chancellor or Vice-Chancellor as she or he presented the awards. In the twelfth century, as part of a small, licensed body of teachers qualified to teach the true doctrine of the church, they would all have been called 'Masters' or MAs. The word 'Master' derives from roots in Sanskrit, Greek and Latin; these are variously associated with notions of 'greatness', 'nourishing' and 'leading'. In late Latin, these ideas became linked in the term *magisterium*, meaning 'a body of teachers'. (Partridge, 1979).

The Masters eventually broke free from the authority of the church and formed themselves into a guild, or union (which is what *universitas* originally meant), and were thus able to decide for themselves who was worthy enough to be admitted to their number. It was subsequently decreed that the Chancellor should be obliged to confer degrees upon all those nominated by the Masters – which is why the present-day 'Masters' continue to examine students; why the Dean, acting as their spokesperson, reads out the names of those who are to receive degrees; and why the 'Masters' on the platform watch to see that the Chancellor does what is required of him or her.

The form of words used by the Chancellor as the graduands are presented is: 'I *admit* you to the degree of …'. The word 'degree' comes from the Latin *gradus*, meaning 'a step'. Thus, when a student is admitted to the degree of Bachelor, she or he moves one step up towards the Mastership. When she or he is admitted to the degree of Master, she or he climbs up a further step to reach the level of the Masters, who then receive her or him into their guild or universitas. In the Middle Ages, the newly admitted Master (men only at that time) would have stayed on the platform so that his old Master could invest him with the symbols of his office. The new Master then had to

deliver an inaugural lecture, entertain the whole guild of Masters to dinner, and preside over disputations (academic debates) for 40 days continuously. (Fortunately, most of this particular tradition no longer survives, though new Masters' families and friends often preserve the celebratory dinner aspect!)

Taking one's MA was called 'inception', or the beginning of one's career as a Master. It meant that the new Master was responsible for teaching the truth, as it was understood at that time. No longer could he expect his own Master to point out mistakes and correct them – he now had to ensure that what he taught was true, no matter how awkward or inconvenient that might be (as long as this suited the prevailing faith).

Thus, the pursuit of a Masters degree today follows a very long and honourable tradition set by those who have sought to steep themselves in the knowledge, and understand the truth(s), of their particular age and academic discipline – and to pass this on to others in ways best suited to their own time and place.

Masters degree students are not expected merely to assimilate knowledge in order to 'regurgitate' it. Rather, it is expected that, in a variety of ways, they will explore the parameters of their particular subject area in order to obtain a 'mastery' of it (in the sense that they can speak and write authoritatively about it). It has also become increasingly important in our vocationally oriented times that Masters degree students should be able to bring their mastery to bear on their professional practice by seeking constantly to locate practice within a wider theoretical framework, and to identify and hone the skills which will help to improve their performance. In this respect, there is perhaps a closer relationship between many of today's Masters degrees and professional doctorates, like the EdD, than there is between the modern Masters degree and the PhD.

THE DOCTORATE AND ITS HISTORY

Noble (1994) identifies 1150 as the year of the first PhD, in Paris. From the twelfth century until the early part of the nineteenth, professional doctorates could be obtained in theology, law and medicine. The modern Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree originated in nineteenth-century Germany and swiftly attracted students from other countries, including the USA. The first American PhD was awarded at Yale in 1861 but it was not until 1920, and after some resistance, that the PhD arrived in Britain – at Oxford (just to complicate the issue, the Oxford PhD is called a DPhil, as is that at the University of Sussex for example).

By that time, the USA had already taken up the idea of a doctorate in education (EdD): the first one was awarded at Harvard in 1921. It was another 70 years before that idea also crossed the Atlantic and the University of Bristol launched the first British EdD in 1992. Just six years later, 29 British universities were offering EdD programmes (Bourner et al., 2000; for a full account of the historical background, see Simpson, 1983).

Over the past 20 years, in the British context, the Research Councils have become increasingly prominent in regulating procedures and standards in doctoral degrees. This has taken place partly in an effort to improve the quality of doctoral theses, for example through systematic research training. Whereas a generation ago doctoral students might be expected to 'sink or swim', with the (variable) support of their supervisors, now they are entitled to take advantage of a wide range of training courses. Also, the Research Councils fund scholarships in approved institutions of higher education on a competitive annual basis, and they monitor these carefully to ensure a successful outcome in the specified time.

Changing concepts of the doctorate

The traditional model of a doctorate had been based on the concept of three years of independent (but supervised) full-time research. This route was and is often considered suitable for those who know exactly what they want to do (or are told by their department what to do). The part-time traditional model consists of four to six years or more of part-time research, with similar features. Why change?

First, the traditional model had (and still has) its critics. One of the most useful but critical pieces of research on the doctorate in a range of countries (including the UK, Canada, USA and Australia) was conducted by Noble in 1994. His evidence, or at least his interpretation of it, painted a very negative portrait of the PhD at that time. He reported poor attrition rates, sex discrimination, extended completion times and poor preparation for employment (p. 32). He identified several problems with PhD programmes including low quality and lack of purpose of research training programmes, poor supervision and low quality of writing in PhD theses – not an encouraging picture.

In the same era, the 1990s, calls came from government and other bodies for two connected and typically utilitarian changes:

1. **For greater 'employability' of graduates from doctoral programmes, targeted to individual career development needs.**
2. **That doctorates should equip students with generic, transferable research skills, for example management, entrepreneurial, teaching. Hence, the need developed, or more accurately calls were made, for more explicit and accountable formal training (often called research training programmes – RTPs).**

More practical and internal points, such as the realisation that not every student knows what subject to focus on from day one supported these extrinsic pressures for change. One of the results was the creation of 'new route' PhD programmes, and these were supported by much rhetoric. For example, the Tony Blair quote that the new routes were 'designed to give students a competitive edge in the knowledge economy of the Twenty First Century' can be found at www.newroutephd.ac.uk.

Two of the models to emerge, both very similar, are:

- **the 'one + three model': one year of training (and deciding on title and focus) *plus* three years of researching; and**
- **the four-year doctoral programme, integrating academic supervision with group work, lectures, tutorials and perhaps an annual Graduate Research Conference.**

It is worth noting in passing that the new models have come in for some criticism. For example, some critics have complained about an overloaded agenda for the new PhD, especially if it includes teaching and training for teaching, for example the postgraduate certificate in higher education (PCHE).

As the new models were emerging, professional doctorates were appearing alongside. As we note in the next section, one of the catchphrases in the rise of the professional doctorate has become: the 'scholarly professional not the professional scholar'; or phrased another way, it is the route to professionals gaining doctorates (researching professionals) as opposed to the development of researchers (professional researchers). The utilitarian thrust that contributed to changes in the concept of a PhD was also a contributory factor in the growth of professional doctorates.

The rise of the professional doctorate

Bourner et al. (2000) conducted a survey of professional doctorates in a range of subjects in English universities. They noted that the rapid development of these degrees seems to have been prompted by a government White Paper in 1993 which expressed concern that 'the traditional PhD is not well-matched to the needs of careers outside research in academia or an industrial research laboratory' (p. 218). Bourner et al. conclude: 'if the traditional PhD is intended to develop professional researchers, then the professional doctorate appears to be designed to develop researching professionals' (p. 219).

Taught doctorates, for example the EdD, might typically be two years of part-time study with assignments leading to part two, the thesis stage. Thesis length might be 40,000 to 50,000 words as opposed to perhaps 80,000 for a 'typical' PhD (but total word length when assignments are added might be more, for example 6 x 6,000 plus 50,000).

PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATES: ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

The professional doctorate is relatively new as compared with the PhD (one century rather than nine). Inevitably there is still considerable debate about the notion and it remains an essentially contested concept (Gallie, 1955). Some of the issues and questions that seem to recur are:

1. **The term 'professional doctorate' does raise the issue of what 'professional knowledge' might be, as compared to (say) 'academic knowledge'. A full and helpful discussion of this distinction has yet to be written.**
2. **The professional doctorate is sometimes referred to as the 'taught' doctorate – obviously this is a misnomer, as the more recent PhDs will all contain a taught or a 'training' component.**
3. **These supposed distinctions between 'types of knowledge' also raise the centuries-old debate over parity of esteem, commonly between vocational and academic knowledge. Often, academics with experience of the 'pure' established PhD can be rather suspicious of the 'applied' and relatively unproven professional doctorate, even though their institutions are trying hard to assert their parity with each other.**

4. **Forms of assessment and modes of teaching seem to be very conservative in doctoral programmes (see Chapter 10 on the viva). Perhaps it is time to examine and question these: for example, should all doctoral students have to produce a thesis? Should all students undergo an oral examination on completion of their written submission? Could or should the assessment process be different for the professional doctorate?**
5. **One of the strong features of the professional doctorate is often called the 'cohort effect', that is, a group of students start together and build up a sense of community, with peer group support and group identity, thus avoiding the social and intellectual isolation that a part-time PhD student might experience (but really should not). Again, this distinction may not always hold, given the new models and routes for PhDs that are now more prevalent.**

Why do people do a doctorate?

There are probably as many reasons for doing a doctorate as there are people doing them. We asked a range of our own part-time and full-time students, many of whom could be described as 'mature', for their own reasons. The responses included:

I wanted to give myself 'permission' to take time out to learn more about the theory behind education – I had simply been doing it for about 15 years but had no qualification in it or theoretical knowledge of it as such. I already have two professional qualifications (effectively the equivalent of Masters degrees) and reckoned if I was going to take three years out for an MA I might as well take four years out and aim for the top! Having originally failed two out of three of my A levels, I really wanted to prove that I could cope with education at the highest level. To me it will represent a huge personal achievement.

I decided to do a doctorate because I teach in a university and it has become the basic qualification for university teaching.

The doctorate is my 'Everest'; I have always wanted to climb cogitatively to the highest academic peak so that I can prove to myself that starting my formal education in a secondary modern school was not a disadvantage to me.

I decided to do a doctorate to prove to myself that I could. I did not have a positive school experience and always felt that I could do better.

I decided to do a doctorate because I had recently completed my first degree and felt (for the first time ever!) confident that I could achieve more.

I feel I need to be more knowledgeable and be able to reason and inference at a higher level than the Masters. I am hungry for more knowledge and wish to develop my insight more and believe that a doctorate will get me there.

To be entirely honest a number of people came into our department with PhDs and made it quite clear to the rest of us that they were superior to us because they had PhDs. Furthermore, the Head of School told a number of us that we were virtually unemployable because we didn't have doctorates. At first I decided to ignore such comments, but they must have had an effect because I started looking at advertisements relating to part-time doctorates. There is also a part of me that has always wanted to do it, but I still think the comments within the department spurred me on.

I chose to undertake a doctorate because I am at heart a frustrated academic. I had been meaning to complete further research for something like 20 years, following the completion of my Masters degree. (The latter was felt necessary after a disappointing result in my first degree.) I am passionate about education from an historical/political/philosophical and sociological point of view.

Why choose a professional doctorate?

Many students deliberately choose to take a professional doctorate rather than a PhD. Some of the reasons given for this choice from our own part-time students taking the four-year (minimum) professional doctorate are given below. Clearly, this is a biased sample as they are all people who deliberately chose this route on the basis of their perceptions and in some cases hearsay.

I suppose at 54 years of age I saw it as presenting a focus and a challenge to see if I could achieve something like this. Apart from the personal satisfaction of hopefully completing the EdD was the feeling that, unlike a PhD in mathematics or statistics, I might be able to contribute a piece of research which might, in some small way, make a difference to someone in either my Institute or in education generally. It also helps to be a little bit mad.

I embarked on a PhD (part time) many years ago but found it a lonely business and both the timing and topic weren't right. (Dropped out after 18 months or so). I wanted a degree

of structure – which the professional doctorate offers. I also wanted to engage with people from beyond my own institution and subject area. This is of key importance to me.

I chose a professional doctorate because I needed to be taught how to research. I needed to produce a number of different pieces of written work that had a beginning and end so I could build up an experience of writing that had to come up to a standard and be assessed on a longitudinal basis. I suppose if I could have guaranteed getting a good supervisor from the outset then I may have chosen the PhD route. The EdD provides a kind of 'beauty parade' of professors and doctors who could be my supervisor. I also liked the collegial nature of the EdD where I could test my ideas and have others critique my contribution. Lave and Wenger call this a community of practice – you see how my reading has forced me to rethink how learning really does take place in life?

The cohort approach seemed to me important as it promised interaction with other professionals.

I chose a 'professional' degree because it was described as 'taught'. I know that I learn best when I'm with others and learn from and with them, so imagining that a PhD would involve a fairly high degree of doing it alone, I opted for what I hoped would be a more gregarious model.

Having looked at the structure of ordinary PhD's, the Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner springs to mind! I have a very low value of my own worth and I need to have plenty of input and support along the way. I like the breakdown of the modules as I find this easier to work with and less daunting too. It also gives a slight urgency of time – if one relies on doing a dissertation, rather than intermediate papers, there is a false sense of security in the length of time available to work in! Most of us are in jobs which are full of work-related activities I'm sure, and with the best will in the world, we all would find reasons for putting off those things which do not have interim deadlines.

Clearly, the most common reasons given were around the perceived structure and support offered by this route; they also centred around the cohort effect, peer learning and the community of practice that developed as a result of a group all commencing a programme at the same time and meeting on a regular basis. Another factor related to the belief that a wider range of staff, with varying interests and expertise, would be encountered in a professional, taught doctorate.