Researching the role of the PhD in developing an academic career: does it make a difference?

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Abstract

This single paper builds on the arguments developed through the think piece by Bak (2013) in that it will report on research that explored academics' experiences of the role of the PhD in developing their academic careers. Bak (2013) questions the *'conventional way of approaching the PhD'* in South Africa (p.1) and proposes reconsideration of how doctoral education is conceptualised, delivered and valued. The current study, undertaken in Australia and the UK, commenced from the premise that it is commonly assumed that the PhD prepares people for academic careers, yet little is known about how academics are influenced and developed through doctoral study. Early findings demonstrate that the PhD has not been particularly effective in preparing academics for independent research and teaching and that changes in doctoral education are needed.

Methods

This mixed methods study collected data from academics in six UK and six Australian universities through a large-scale survey (respondents = 2163) and semi-structured interviews with 27 mid-career academics. The types of universities were mixed, but they all exhibited research-intensive environments. Interviewees were selected using purposive sampling to identify academics with 5-10 years' experience beyond their doctorate in three broad disciplines (Sciences and Engineering; Social Sciences and Humanities; and Health sciences) from three Australian and five English universities. Academics in the other three Australian universities were not interviewed owing to the high cost of travel. Interviewees were identified as those who, in the survey, indicated a willingness to be interviewed. The interviews were digitally recorded lasting, on average, one hour and were each carried out by a team member.

The research design and analysis drew upon an Archerian conceptual framework (Archer 2003) which has specifically enabled consideration of the ways in which academics can be seen to utilise agential powers to mediate structural influences. Archer's concepts of socio-cultural interaction, the internal conversation and differing forms of personal reflexivity (2003) provided a helpful explanatory frame drawn upon throughout the process of analysis in this research project.

Whilst providing initial contextual and descriptive findings from the wider quantitative data, this paper will focus more specifically on free-text qualitative comments received in response

to the survey question 'How well did your doctoral studies prepare you [for an academic career]?'. The analysis was undertaken through a 'thematic analysis' of the open-ended responses in the questionnaire. The discussion will then be further developed by drawing on early analysis of the interview data.

Discussion

Building on previously reported work from specific elements of this large-scale study (see for example, Brew and Boud, 2009; Brew, Boud, Lucas and Crawford, 2013; Brew, Boud and Namgung, 2011), this paper will critically examine the range of PhD experiences elucidated by academics. This examination leads to questioning the purpose and appropriateness of the PhD, much as Bak (2013) does in the conference think piece, and an exploration of where doctoral study is perceived as being helpful or conversely problematic in supporting academic career development.

In exploring the purpose and relevance of the PhD, this paper will further Bak's (2013) think piece in providing empirical evidence of changing expectations of the PhD, with many academics being clear that they would not expect doctoral study to prepare them for independent research and teaching, and others commenting on how doctoral study has been transformed in recent years. This paper will examine the strong normative view of doctoral study emerging from this research, alongside discussing the role of the PhD in developing the skills needed in getting going with publication and in providing opportunities for teaching and mentoring, all of which may be problematic. Further to this, there is evidence in the research data of academics sensing a need to have a PhD, which would follow from Bak's (2013) assertions about pressures on institutions to increase their PhD output. The sampling approach in this research also enables comparison of disciplinary variations in experience; the quantitative data suggesting, for example, that differences of experience in doctoral study may be particularly apparent between individuals who did experimental or theoretical science.

The influence of international mobility is another factor to take account of when considering how PhDs are valued and can make a difference (Bak 2013). Many participants in the current study were academics who had taken advantage of opportunities for cross-country mobility, in particular studying their PhD in one country and developing their academic career in another; as such the data provides interesting windows on their experiences and perspectives on differences and expectations.

The paper will then draw on academics' perceptions of their own doctoral experience to further understanding of 'what works', 'what makes a difference' and 'what is problematic' in the process. Bak (2013), for example, suggests that models of doctoral supervision need to be revisited and indeed, this research has demonstrated that the role of the PhD supervisor prior to, during and after a PhD is not straightforward. They can have positive effects, e.g. if they encourage applying for an academic position, or provide ongoing mentoring; but they can also have negative effects, e.g. if they prevent work being published or are absent during the PhD period. Additionally, this paper will report on how the concept of independence and the exercising of agential powers emerges from the data. For some individuals, that Archer might consider to be 'meta reflexives' (Archer 2003: 255), it is evident that they demonstrate high levels of self-awareness and are goal driven idealists who seize

what might be considered extra-curricular opportunities alongside their doctorate. Yet for others their internal conversations provide less clarity about the things that might be relevant to the path they wanted to pursue.

Conclusion

This proposal outlines a paper that will respond to and develop the arguments put forward by Bak (2013). The mixed methods, comparative study that underpins the paper provides insight from Australia and England, illuminating how academics in the different countries, in different university and disciplinary contexts have experienced doctoral study, its value, purpose and potential in making a difference to academic career development. Drawing on Archer's (2003) theoretical conceptions, the paper will argue that often the PhD does not offer adequate preparation for the complex academic role. In doing so, the authors question the purpose and appropriateness of the PhD, and explore the strengths and weaknesses of doctoral study in supporting academic career development.

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