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Launching a career or reflecting on life? Reasons, issues and outcomes for candidates undertaking PhD studies mid-career or after retirement compared to the traditional early career pathway

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The Commonwealth government provides fee exemption for any Australian who undertakes a PhD. This policy is presumably based on the 'clever country' assumption that an educated population will develop and contribute to social and economic capital. Enrolment numbers therefore continue to increase, and a PhD is no longer an elite qualification. In addition, the characteristics and demographics of PhD students are changing.

In the School of Education, University of South Australia, a significant number of PhD students are not early career researchers or recent honours graduates, but mid-to-late-career education practitioners and retirees, and the majority are women. These mature-age and third-age candidates are undertaking doctoral

research not to launch their career, but in most cases to reflect on it, with many experiencing transformative learning in the process.

In this paper I will explore why people undertake a PhD later in life, what the learning process is like for them, what the outcomes are, and the benefits to society.

Introduction

The Commonwealth government, through the Research Training Scheme, provides fee exemption for any Australian who qualifies to undertake a higher degree such as a PhD. This policy is presumably based on the 'clever country' assumption that an educated population will develop and contribute to social and economic capital. Enrolment numbers therefore continue to increase, and a PhD is increasingly becoming common currency in terms of credentials, no longer an elite qualification for the chosen few. In addition, a traditional research career pathway that involves a young honours graduate progressing to a higher degree and then perhaps to an academic or research career is no longer the norm—the characteristics and demographics of PhD students are changing.

At the University of South Australia, for example, the Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences currently has over 400 enrolments in its doctoral programs. The average age of this cohort is 45. In the School of Education, a significant number of PhD students are not early career researchers or recent honours graduates, but mid-to-late-career education practitioners and retirees, and the majority are women. These mature-age and third-age candidates are undertaking doctoral research not to launch their career, but in most cases to reflect on it, usually through narrative, auto-ethnographic and interpretive approaches, with many discovering and experiencing transformative learning in the process.

Based on the author's involvement in managing and teaching in higher degree programs and initial data from a small-scale survey of doctoral students, in this paper I will address the trend for candidates undertaking research training later in life and pose a number of questions, including:

- Why do people undertake a PhD later in their life and career?
- What are the outcomes professionally and personally for these people?
- How is the learning process understood and experienced?
- What are the benefits to society?
- What comes after the PhD?

Background: the PhD as currency

A doctorate is a research-based higher degree offered by universities and a very few accredited higher education providers. However, it is interesting to note that the term doctorate originates from the Latin *docere* (to teach), and that teaching licences or *licentia docendi* were originally issued by the church in Medieval Europe (Latin Dictionary, 2010). While a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is certainly regarded as necessary academic currency in modern universities, it is increasingly seen as a pathway and a training program into the world of research rather than the world of teaching; and the fact that almost every university in Australia requires new academic staff who may already hold a doctoral award to undertake a Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching suggests that it is certainly no longer a program that 'teaches people how to teach'.

The introduction of the professional doctorate—for example the Doctor of Education (EdD)—goes some way to addressing the more practice-based requirements of professional practitioners who are less interested in pure research than in applied practical solutions to specific issues in their profession; but that is by no means a teaching

qualification either. With their coursework component, similar to the US model of a doctoral program, professional doctorates are becoming increasingly popular among international students and professionals who do not have a research background or an honours degree. However a professional doctorate still requires the same amount of time in candidature as a PhD (4 years full-time or 8 years part-time) and also attracts federal funding under the Research Training Scheme for Australian residents and citizens. It also requires the production of a thesis/portfolio of about 80,000 words, similar to the thesis requirements for a PhD (UniSA, 2010).

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) has reported that the PhD is one of the fastest growing higher education qualifications in Australia, with the number of graduates almost doubling between 1996 and 2007 (Edwards, Radloff & Coates, 2009). However in a review of the ACER report, Moodie has noted that 'Almost 10 per cent of doctorate graduates who were not studying full time in the year after their graduation in 2007 were not working, which was higher than for graduates of bachelors and postgraduate coursework degrees' (2010: 22).

This seems to show that a doctorate is not necessarily achieving vocational or professional outcomes to the extent that other university programs are, prompting the suggestion that there are other reasons for, and outcomes from, undertaking higher degree study. While a PhD may be strong in terms of intellectual currency therefore, it is not necessarily of equal value or currency in the job market and even in universities, where a doctorate is highly valued, completing one does not automatically translate into a higher salary and position—one still has to apply for promotion based on other metrics including teaching quality and research output.

However, the argument that I explore in this paper is that the notion of 'currency' in this context is more related to current ideas, understandings and meanings around topics of research that

are important and relevant not only to the doctoral researchers themselves but to wider society in general, rather than in terms of economic currency. The prevailing view of the contribution that higher degrees might make to knowledge is still largely linked to the economy and the world of work:

> As the developed world becomes more reliant on knowledge as a vital part of economic growth and development, the importance of highly skilled workers who can create, disseminate and use new knowledge becomes integral. The role of those with the skills and competencies provided through higher research degrees is therefore of increasing importance to the future development of the Australian economy. (Edwards et al., 2009: ix)

The focus in this quotation on 'highly skilled workers' tends to exclude those who are not in the workforce, and/or are not likely to create, disseminate and use new knowledge in the workforce; yet are nonetheless contributing to the knowledge economy—or what could be termed 'gross national knowledge'—and supporting the broader ideal of a clever country. Furthermore, one of the five stated objectives of the Commonwealth Research Training Scheme is to 'Ensure the relevance of research degree programs to labour market requirements' (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation, 2008: 23). This further highlights the questions: What is the relevance of research degree programs to requirements *other than* the labour market? And in fact is the link between research degree programs and labour market requirements that clear?

A more recent federal government discussion paper, *Meeting Australia's research workforce needs: A consultation paper to inform the development of the Australian government's research workforce strategy* (Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, 2010), discusses inter alia the ageing profile of the research workforce, but also reinforces policy aspirations to increase significantly the number of higher degree by research

(HDR) completions in Australia, as they are seen to be critical to the development of a globally competitive research workforce. However, the paper has been critiqued as short on detail:

> What is not clear from the evidence presented in the paper is: exactly who is critical to the future research workforce [and] whether industry shares the government's enthusiasm for expanding R & D and employing research-qualified individuals and is willing to offer competitive employment options and remuneration appropriate to researchers' knowledge and skills. (Bell, 2010: 1)

Furthermore there is an apparent disjunction between the expectation of competitive salaries for doctoral research graduates and the paucity of government funding to support doctoral candidates during their years of study. One of the challenges facing tertiary students in Australia is not only the accrual of debt from course fees, but also the need to provide living expenses while studying. For most undergraduate students this means finding part-time work while undertaking full-time study, sometimes with a negative effect on their studies.

For HDR students this is also a reality and, while a number of scholarship schemes exist, they are highly competitive, disadvantage those who have not come through an honours pathway, and are generally set at a level that for most people would not even pay the rent. The stipend for an Australian Postgraduate Award scholarship (APA) is currently set at $22,500 per annum, which the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations has noted is 'below the poverty line' (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation, 2008: 76). This is particularly untenable for attracting mid-career professionals into full-time study from the workforce where their lifestyle and commitments would rely on a salary of three or four times that amount:

> The majority of postgraduate research students are over 30, and are subject to the commitments that typically accompany the middle decades of many peoples' lives ... Postgraduate research students have partners, children, mortgages, debt repayments, employment commitments, and aging parents. (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation, 2008: 91)

If Australia is to be globally competitive in developing the knowledge economy, then lessons could be learnt from Germany and the Scandinavian countries where higher education is fully funded and PhD students are 'paid a salary equivalent to a junior academic level, in recognition of the skills required to be accepted for doctoral studies' (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation, 2008: 87). The Standing Committee, reporting in 2008 on the issue of adequate funding for research training, included Recommendation 15: that the APA stipend value be increased by 50 per cent. However, at the time of writing, this has not yet translated into policy.

Who is undertaking doctoral studies in Australia?

While it is difficult to obtain accurate demographic information on current national doctoral enrolments, the 2009 ACER report does detail the supply, demand and characteristics of the higher degree by research population in Australia in terms of those already holding such an award, based on 2006 census data:

> Almost half of the population with a doctorate degree are aged 50 or above (47.2 per cent) and three quarters of these people are aged over 40 (74.0 per cent). Only four per cent of the population holding a doctorate are aged below 30 ... The age distribution of the doctorate population is shown to be notably older than the general distribution of professionally employed people in Australia. (Edwards et al., 2009: 33).

In addition to the age distribution, what is also interesting is that in 2006 about two-thirds of the Australian population with a doctorate were male. Yet the trend shows that by 2007, there were more females actually enrolled in doctoral programs at 50.4 per cent, compared with 44.4 per cent of doctoral students in 1998 (DETYA, 1999, cited in Edwards et al., 2009: 34).

This is significant in the social sciences and particularly in education, which has traditionally been a discipline and a profession with a higher proportion of female participation compared with the natural and physical sciences. Of the 200 or so HDR candidates enrolled in the School of Education at the University of South Australia, there are around three times as many women as men. This is reinforced by the sample of sixteen HDR candidates invited to respond to an online survey investigating reasons for undertaking a doctoral degree; of this cohort of sixteen only three were male.

Furthermore, doctoral enrolments in the field of education are smaller in terms of overall numbers, judging by the number of completions in 2007: less than 7 per cent in education compared with nearly 25 per cent in the natural and physical sciences. This highlights the concentration of females compared with males in the discipline compared to all disciplines where the ratio, as cited above, is around 50:50.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation received a large number of submissions to its 2008 inquiry into research training and research workforce issues in Australian universities. The committee's report noted: 'Certain professional sectors, such as teaching and nursing, argued that their research postgraduate student profile tends to comprise mid-career professionals with a practical or clinical background' (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation, 2008: 94). Particular individual submissions were quite scathing of the way in which research training policy tends to focus by

default on a model of participation that does not recognise changing demographics and cohort diversity, characterised as:

> a monocular policy focus on younger, full-time, scholarship holders 'preparing for work' which is blind to the needs and potential of the many candidates who are older and often mid-career, part-time, salaried and in a good job … We believe that diversity is a strength of Australian doctoral education and we call for policy that eschews homogeneity and which values diversity and flexibility. (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation, 2008: 91)

Access to HDR study has been highlighted in the previous section as determined by economic considerations, and the limitations for mid-career professionals of forgoing salary for four years while completing a higher degree. Therefore, those who are able to undertake doctoral studies in Australia appear more likely to be demographically at either end of a career trajectory (i.e. early career or late career/retired), or undertaking part-time HDR study while trying to juggle a work–life balance.

Finally, the geographic spread of Australians with doctoral qualifications is also interesting—they are disproportionately concentrated in the major capital cities, in particular Melbourne and Sydney: 'These two cities and the other capitals … all have an over-representation of people with a doctorate degree in comparison to the general population spread' (Edwards et al., 2009: 36). This concentration is linked to the availability of suitable employment for people with such qualifications in large urban centres. However it highlights one of the issues associated with equity of access to higher degree participation by under-represented groups such as Indigenous, rural and regional Australians. The availability of study by distance education has increased the possibility of participation by these groups; however several respondents to the survey noted that their geographical isolation was a reason for them being unable to undertake higher degree studies earlier in their careers.

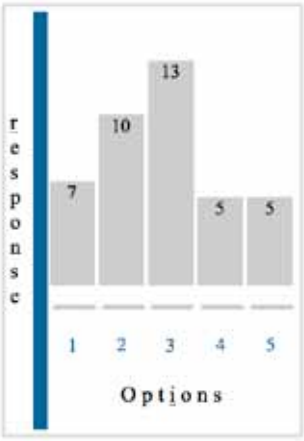
Why do people undertake a PhD later in their life and career?

A small-scale survey addressed this question to sixteen doctoral students in the Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences at the University of South Australia. In one sense the respondents were a convenience sample as they represented students who were older than 45 and were known to the author through their enrolment at UniSA and/or through their connection with a research project or a particular academic or research group in the division. In another sense the sample was random as these students are enrolled by choice at the university, some with APA scholarships. They ranged in age from early 50s to late 70s.

A link to an online survey was sent to their student email address with an invitation to participate, noting that the survey was voluntary and anonymous. Fourteen people completed the survey, a response rate of 87.5 per cent, with several respondents sending a separate email indicating interest in the topic and the resulting paper. Respondents were asked to list one or more reasons why they had undertaken doctoral studies at this stage in their career:

> **2. Question:** Please list one or more reasons why you have undertaken doctoral studies at this stage in your career
>
> Option 1: Career advancement
> Option 2: Personal development and interest
> Option 3: The time was right
> Option 4: Challenge myself
> Option 5: To prove that I can do it

Figure 1: Reasons for undertaking doctoral studies



All except one acknowledged that 'the time was right', while 'personal development and interest' was the next highest reason chosen by ten respondents. Of interest to the theme of this paper is that only 50 per cent considered 'career advancement' as a reason.

When asked to expand on their responses to this question, a number of comments were particularly salient:

> I felt that it was an opportunity to draw a number of threads in my life experience together, my experience in many walks of life, that could when integrated form a satisfying account of my life learning in relation to my area of interest.
>
> As I approached the end of my active career path I decided to devote time to examine what was the most valuable lesson I learnt about a special professional activity. There was an urgent desire to find the how and why of a vocational life in the form of a thesis.
>
> My children were at Uni themselves so I no longer had school fees to pay, so the time was right. When I was offered a scholarship, the time was really right! Also I have been a lifelong writer and reader, so doctoral studies allows me to follow these passions.

> As someone from a background (gender, ethnicity, class) who had not seen university as an option when I was younger, this was a way of developing myself and feeling as though I could make a valid contribution to society at the same time.
>
> All of the reasons were elements of my thinking. My work challenged me in new ways and at the same time I felt the need to make sense of what should/could be done. It had a lot of practitioner practical concern about the inquiry. Personally I saw the doctoral studies as providing some legitimacy in my explorations.
>
> From having worked in education settings my entire career I wanted to gain a theoretical understanding of my practice. Why did certain beliefs underpin my practice no matter what setting I was working in?

Perhaps the standout comment in relation to reasons for undertaking higher degree studies was: 'Learning for me is like a disease which doesn't go away.' The underlying driver for many candidates like this one is a lifelong engagement with learning in its various forms, and doctoral study allows them the space to explore aspects of learning in depth, for example, as others claimed, 'to gain a theoretical understanding of my practice', as 'a vehicle for a new vocation', or to 'allow me to follow the passions of being a lifelong writer and reader'.

What are the benefits to society?

Particularly where candidates are pursuing some form of methodology based on a narrative or life history approach (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Ellis, 2009), doctoral studies really do encourage deep self-reflection, personal growth and transformative learning (Mezirow, 2009) or, as one respondent put it, 'providing some legitimacy in my explorations' of what could be seen by others as individual, esoteric or even irrelevant.

The contribution to the knowledge economy of a thesis based on one person's exploration of a single case study in an obscure aspect

of education, for example, could be queried; and indeed there was a moment in Australia's recent history when the federal Education Minister personally criticised thesis topics that he thought were irrelevant and obscure (Gill, 2004). Pointing out that the training and development of the researcher is just as important as their thesis or findings could just attract the criticism that 'older' researchers—especially those who are no longer in the workforce—are not likely to contribute very much to society as individuals despite their elevated level of wisdom.

I therefore asked respondents to discuss the extent to which they believed their doctoral studies might contribute to knowledge generation and social capital. Their responses ranged from the pragmatic:

> I think [my study] is readable and accessible enough for it to be read every now and again and not gather dust on a shelf.

To the policy-oriented:

> My research will raise awareness beyond the child protection arena and bring this issue to the forefront for educators and policy makers by providing much needed research evidence.

To the general observation:

> Older doctoral students have more diverse and wider life experiences and may choose to study different topics than a younger person; therefore their contribution to knowledge generation and social capital may be quite different, but equally valuable.

In relation to the last comment, my central argument in this paper is that the 'different but valuable contribution' older doctoral students might make is in relation to their ability to reflect on, analyse and make sense of their life and career experiences, providing rich data for consideration by future generations. 'I hope that the knowledge

I am generating by this study is helpful in promoting interest in the profession that is/was my working life.'

In other words, and especially for baby boomers, a working life is often something taken for granted, not necessarily planned, and the initial professional training might have provided the *what* and *how* but not the *why* of the profession. As one respondent put it, 'the tight knit between theory and practice is very powerful', and reflecting on this appears to be more powerful for those with significant experience to reflect on. If these considerations are available to early career practitioners who have the theory but perhaps not the practical experience then there are potential intergenerational benefits.

Not all respondents were sure that their study would have an immediate impact on or contribution to the knowledge economy:

> I am less certain about this—I don't think I have contributed yet. I naively thought that my employer and others would somehow be interested/concerned about my study … The challenge is will anyone ever read/consider my work? I think it has the potential—I need to find a forum.

The forum for promulgation and discussion of research findings is often limited to academic journals, conferences and seminars. Access by the general public is quite limited and, unless research findings are taken up by policy developers or government agencies, they are destined to be read by a narrow audience or at worst to 'gather dust on a shelf'.

How is the learning process understood and experienced?

I asked respondents to consider the extent to which their doctoral studies had contributed to their learning and development, both personally and professionally. Their responses revealed a mixed range of experiences, with personal development often benefitting at the expense of professional progress.

On the plus side, it was noted that

> My capacity to engage in critical thinking has certainly developed as have my problem-solving abilities.

And:

> It has been one of the most valuable professional experiences I have ever undertaken. It is intellectually stimulating and it is hard to quantify just how much I believe I have learnt—but it is a great deal!

And furthermore:

> Doctoral studies are a wonderful gift that keeps on giving. I never expected it to be so rewarding and the personal growth and development are beyond my wildest dreams. I have discovered sides of myself that I never knew or suspected and I have developed a deeper understanding of my life and of other people. It has given me a sense of completeness and wholeness. I'm a much better person than I was when I started.

However, the 'down side' was also expressed:

> In some ways it has been very frustrating … Doctoral studies are very lonely.

And one respondent qualified the benefits with the consequences:

> I have achieved more than I ever thought possible, met some amazing people and participated in events that a few short years ago I would have considered off limits to me. At the same time, it can complicate the different events/factors in my daily life, particularly when new ways of thinking and seeing the world clash with my previous thinking and with those around me who are not in any way interested in academic life.

The 'complications' mentioned are consistent with the type of disorienting dilemma that Mezirow (2009) discussed in his development of transformative learning theory. For these mature age learners a transformation in world view or meaning making was

characterised as: 'A hard slog … challenging my own long believed, hard earnt beliefs/attitudes'. And the view that:

> Through doctoral studies a new world opened and every step I take leads me to new learning challenges, new people and opportunities that make me question why I should be there.

Challenging long-held beliefs and views can often translate into major upheavals in the personal lives of mature age students. These profound changes also lead to the question of what comes next in a mature age person's life after completion of doctoral studies, which may have taken eight years of their life, 'many highs and lows', and in some cases personal struggle and sacrifice. There is a feeling amongst some candidates that completing and graduating will leave a big hole that was previously filled by the all-consuming PhD, and also suddenly break the link with the academic community that has been formed through enrolment at a university.

One respondent to the survey sees herself as unemployable: 'because I am too old to be a "graduate" yet have no experience within the new "profession" so I am really concerned on what to do'. There is a moral question for universities then, in taking on late career or retired PhD candidates who might become 'all trained up with nowhere to go'; over-qualified and over-educated with no opportunity to apply or further develop their higher learning.

Finally I asked respondents to the survey whether they could or would have completed doctoral studies earlier in their life and career. Responses centred around three issues:

1. Family/work commitments, isolation and/or opportunity mitigated against the reality of undertaking doctoral studies earlier in life.
2. The confidence to feel able to achieve studies at a higher degree level was not there until later in life.

3. As a younger person without significant life experience and practice to reflect on, a doctorate would have been very different, and probably even in a different field.

   I started Honours when I was in my 20s and found myself feeling quite intimidated and not quite ready intellectually or emotionally. It was as if I didn't have the life experience yet to ground it. Having said this I believe it may be different in more quantitative or scientific studies which may not draw on life experience as much. My thesis really reflects a culmination of my life's work up to a certain point and I would not have been able write a thesis at that level as a young person.

   I often wonder about this question and would I have wanted to or achieved this level of study earlier and I doubt it. I've come to the conclusion that my priority was a family and I consciously chose not to return to work until they were independent. There were fewer opportunities or role models for young women in the 1960s. Until distance education became available it was not an option where I lived.

   If I had pursued doctoral studies after my honours degree it would have been in science. Life would have been very different … Then online external studies became available and I could manage a family, partner a primary production business, work full-time in a school AND study part-time. My part-time study opened up the possibility of pursuing doctoral studies. In one way I wish I had pursued them in the 1970s but I did not have the information I needed. Marriage and family life are important, and I could not have coped with doctoral studies when the children were younger.

   This has been the right time to complete my studies for me. I am practice rich and so playing with the theory has been a joy. I could put a practical context to the theory.

Conclusion

It is with these insights that the mature-age PhD needs to be seen as a very different experience, and undertaken for different reasons, to the traditional early career researcher pathway. These reasons can be summarised as follows:

- reflecting on and theorising practical/career experience
- drawing together various threads of personal and professional life experience
- taking the opportunity presented by circumstances
- making a valid contribution to knowledge and society
- providing academic legitimacy to lifelong learning and interests.

As argued in this paper, these do not easily align with accepted and traditional views of doctoral studies as linked to labour market requirements and economic outcomes. Outcomes for mature age doctoral graduates would appear to be more philanthropic than pragmatic, more inspirational than aspirational, and more holistic than strategic. It would appear that such doctoral studies are aligned more closely with recent trends to point university education in the direction of moral and social enterprise and away from the prevailing view of universities as factories that train workers. Professor Steven Schwartz, Vice Chancellor of Macquarie University in New South Wales, has been championing this view in recent lectures and through his institution's focus on 'practical wisdom' as a legitimate focus of study:

> In last year's Vice-Chancellor's oration, I argued that education should be about more than preparing graduates for their first job after university; education should be a moral enterprise.
>
> I explained how Macquarie University is 're-moralising' by implementing a new curriculum that is aimed not just at the state of the art but also at the state of our students' hearts ... I want to show how we hope to set our students on the road to practical wisdom. (Schwartz, 2010: 8)

The process of formal lifelong learning in later life seems to resonate with the notion of 'wisdom', a construct that goes beyond notions of knowledge construction to involve a more holistic, integrated world view and process of meaning making and understanding. The 'getting of wisdom' is something that can be learned through both informal

and formal lifelong learning, universities can encourage this, and certain disciplines such as education are more likely than others to be able to facilitate it.

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