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PhD and the manager's dream: professionalising the students, the degree and the supervisors?

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This article has two main aims: to analyse relevant literature on the doctoral degree, and to assess whether recent funding changes in the UK have changed the nature of the PhD in the social sciences in a research-intensive and prestigious UK university. Data were collected at BlueSkies University where interviews with social sciences PhD supervisors were conducted. The article posits that doctoral programmes have changed in nature and objectives. The doctorate has become a managed exercise which has affected its aims and scope. Findings are likely to apply to other research-intensive universities in the country due to the overwhelming changes that have been applied to doctoral programmes across the board.

Keywords: doctorate; PhD programmes; social sciences

Introduction

This article explores some important elements that are recurrently part of the reflection on the PhD and its role. Also, it explores how recent changes in doctoral funding in the UK have affected, and may further affect, doctoral degrees in the social sciences. Whereas there is a significant body of literature which looks at the major steps of the PhD process – how to write a thesis, how to prepare for the viva and so on – little has been written on how recently introduced funding policies affect the PhD process and its role in the development of future academics. This article thus intends to be a contribution to the understanding of these recent changes and how they impact doctoral programmes.

Academics, when discussing the PhD, tend to consider the PhD as the entry level for an academic career. As such, what is required and expected from the students will vary depending on each supervisor's views. These discussions are not new. In an analysis of literature on the PhD, this article first discusses three contributions which set very clearly some of the foci prevalent in the faculty's considerations surrounding the PhD. These contributions were made in 1928 and 1933 and what is of particular interest is that the issues they set are still relevant today. They discuss issues related to the types and functions of the PhD, the role of PhD students in departmental teaching and that of the doctoral degree as a 'union card' into academia.

The article goes on to consider some fundamental differences between the PhD in the social sciences and in the natural sciences. This is relevant since some of the changes being introduced in the PhD programmes in the social sciences following the Roberts Report have been shaped by practices in the PhDs in natural sciences. The main analysis in this section will relate to how funding priorities are affecting the scope and range of topics of the PhDs.

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Finally, the article considers changes happening more generally in Europe and how we are living in a time of uncertainty in terms of doctoral degrees and an increased managerialism, which many academics view with considerable distrust. However, an increased professionalism in the way PhDs in the social sciences are ran brings considerable advantages for both students and faculty.

Literature on the doctoral degree

Currently, there is a considerable amount of published work with practical advice on how to proceed in the PhD study: 'how to do' literature. These usually focus either on the whole doctoral process, and guide students through it (e.g., Brewer, 2007; Churchill & Sanders, 2007; Dunleavy, 2003; Finn, 2005; Fitzpatrick, Secrist, & Wright, 1998; Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005), or on a particular element of the PhD process, like writing up, the viva or time management (Kearns & Gardiner, 2006; Murray, 2003, 2006; Tinkler & Jackson, 2004).

However, these studies are general reflections of personal experiences and views rather than (in-depth) research on the PhD process and meaning. This has changed, mainly in the twenty-first century with the publication of reports such as the Roberts Report (HM Treasury, 2002), the What Do PhDs Do? Report (UK Grad Programme® 2004) published by the UK Grad Programme® and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES survey) (Kulej & Park, 2008; Kulej & Wells, 2009; Park, 2007) directed and published by the Higher Education Academy (HEA).

There is also a strand in the literature that looks at the doctoral process itself in terms of academic practice and the development of an academic identity and voice. Its foci can be as varied as the doctoral students' identity (Jazvac-Martek, 2009) and concepts of doctorateness (Trafford & Leshem, 2009). These are well represented in a special issue of Innovations in Education and Teaching International edited by Whisker and McAlpine (2009). Furthermore, the (now-closed) Centre for Excellence in Preparing for Academic Practice, which was based at the University of Oxford, also provided some well-needed fresh look at various aspects of the doctoral experience (Borg et al., 2008; Matos et al., 2008).

Some authors have addressed the issue of the doctoral student experience having in mind some recent changes. Phillips and Pugh (2005) already tried to assess what impact the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Code of Practice had on the PhD itself. And elsewhere (Matos, 2007), there have been opportunities to discuss in-depth some of the impacts of these policies in doctoral programmes. But the literature still lacks a consistent body of research, and analysis, on the PhD experience that focuses on the impacts that the Roberts Report had on the PhD itself, and subsequent PhD experience. This article aims to be a contribution to such a body of work. To my knowledge, there has been only one attempt to assess the nation-wide implementation of the new directives for doctoral programmes, namely the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) under the auspices of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) (Park, 2007; Park et al., 2007). This was the first national effort to gauge the extent to which changes introduced in the PhDs were having an impact on the doctoral experience of PhD students. Notwithstanding, more efforts need to be made in order to assess and evaluate how doctoral programmes have been adapted and how this has been received by students and supervisors alike.

The doctoral degree requires a considerable investment, namely of time, on the part of both actors: doctoral students and supervisors. It is hence imperative to address their concerns, their expectations, their own (social) constructs and frustrations. By addressing

these issues, we are more likely to understand what the PhD in fact is rather than what it should be, which I consider a fundamental question in the current climate, one of perceived change.

What the literature has yet to address is how PhD students and academics are experiencing, and adapting to, the changing doctoral programmes in the UK. This is probably due to the fact that changes have occurred relatively recently, and institutions still seem to be fully adapting to them. In fact, the literature on PhD supervision and about the student–supervisor relationship is quite prolific. Some literature, mainly coming from the US, focuses on the American doctoral degrees, with a special attention to attrition, length of the degree and destination of doctoral graduates (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; De Valero, 2001; Holden, 1995).

Genealogy of the PhD

Doctoral programmes in the UK have recently undergone substantial changes and a considerable amount of what has been written about them is geared towards practical implications of political and funding pressures. Recent research and literature have been more focussed towards what these changes could mean in terms of what kind of PhDs the new directives could *produce* and also towards what PhDs should be (Park, 2007). However interesting and important these issues are, the literature is still missing some crucial points: why students are undertaking their own PhDs, what their expectations are and how supervisors can adapt to the new constraints.

Very little has been written about how the recent changes in doctoral degrees programmes have affected the PhD experience of both the students and the supervisors. This is not to say, however, that little has been written on the PhD, on the supervisory relationship and so on. Things have moved on since Bowen and Rudenstine stated in 1992 that little had been written on doctoral programmes as such even if they stated that supervision and supervisory relations were then a hot topic in the literature (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). What is missing though is a consistent body of analysis of change in PhD programmes, which is unsurprising considering how relatively recently these changes have been introduced.

The literature on other aspects of higher education has been prolific since the early 1980s but the one reflecting on personal experiences of doctoral degrees has been less so. Some reflections on the role and *prestige* of the PhD however can be traced back to the 1960s, an era of intense discussion in Europe and the US over the purpose of education and the university, materialised in the intense student demonstrations in France and elsewhere. The 1970s also saw some activity surrounding the issue of doctoral degrees. While I was researching the literature on the PhDs, I found some interesting contributions dating as far back as 1905. I decided to do a short genealogy, in the Foucauldian (Donnelly, 1982; Hardy, 2011; Shiner, 1982) sense of the word, of the literature on the PhD especially that made available through academic journals. In his article ‘Some Ph.D. Statistics’, Tombo (1905) discusses issues of inbreeding within universities by which he means the number of professors with PhDs from the institution where they are now members of the academic staff.

German universities were very important in the development of the American universities, some of which are now seen as the leading research institutions in the world and the ones others try to compete with and seek to emulate (Matos, 2011). This is relevant in terms of understanding what the role of the university currently is and how the doctoral degree fits within the academia’s role of knowledge production and reproduction. But this is not within the remit of this article.

For the period from 1928 to 1939, three articles which are of particular interest for the analysis of the development of the literature on the PhD should be noted. Their importance stems from that fact that they set the ground of what have become important elements and issues present when questioning the purpose, the role and the structure of PhD degrees. The issues they discuss have persistently been present in the literature until today. The way the doctorate is discussed at present echoes these past texts and questions, hence my choice of these texts. These three articles provide the fundamentals of a short genealogy of the literature on the PhD. In the Foucauldian sense, the concept of genealogy is used to describe the process through which a concept, or 'thing', develops through its history.

Eaton (1928), from Cornell University, suggested three types, or *functions* as he puts it, of the *doctors' degree*: one that sees the student as a kind of employee that executes the research under the supervision of the professor and which belongs to the latter. Another that suggests that the student is an independent learner and researcher and the role of the supervisor is one of 'advice and criticism'. Finally, a third one assigns the candidate a certain level of independence after, and only after, s/he has fulfilled an initial probation where s/he has proved her/his proficiency in certain techniques which are of importance to his discipline and research.

Concentrating on the two first conceptions, these appear to have remained in the practice of PhD programmes to the present. On one hand, doctorates in sciences such as physics, biology and chemistry adopt a model where the student joins a research group under the direction of a principal investigator and where the student performs part of that research which is assigned to her or him. On the other, there is the model, more common in the humanities and the social sciences, where students define and produce their own individual research project. But Eaton goes further and creates a gradation of quality in research produced in the different *types* within his model. For him, the highest level of research, which he defines as the discovery of *truth*, is the one produced when the student is working under the guidance of the supervisor and does not have the ownership of the research, where the research s/he is undertaking is the supervisor's. The lowest form of 'truth discovering' is the one that distinguishes the quality outcome of research: the research from the student is never on the level of the one made by the faculty. Eaton states: 'For it is neither assumed nor to be assumed that the norm of acceptability in student research shall equal the norm of staff production in research. The standard is, rather, the "*minimal level of acceptable staff research*"' (Eaton, 1928, p. 620) (my italics).

If we extrapolate Eaton's comment to the sciences versus social sciences doctoral models we could conclude that the current PhD programmes in the social sciences doctoral students produce research which is below the quality of that produced by the supervisors. This could easily be the case in the early years of the doctoral programmes, but it would be questionable by the later years of the doctoral research. However, Eaton (1928) notes that it is in the second model, where the student is an independent researcher, that 'the candidate is placed in the position of the researcher' (p. 620) and thus is trained by performance of a "complete act of research"' (p. 620). In the first model, which we could call apprenticeship, the student is 'trained only as a technical assistant, not a researcher' (Eaton, 1928, p. 620).

These are important elements to take into consideration when analysing the purpose of the PhD and to frame the analysis of the literature that was to be produced in subsequent years. Eaton concludes that the university, which should both aim at producing research of the highest quality and, at the same time, preparing researchers to fulfil that role in the future, is dealing with a tension. This tension lies in the fact that the model that in his

view creates higher quality research is in opposition with the one that produces the best future researchers. 'The functions of research and of training in research are coordinate, but they are not coincident' (Eaton, 1928, p. 620). How does he solve this dilemma? Well, he envisages a university that embraces two types of research: a research of the *highest quality* which will be performed by experts – and which he calls university research – and a research of *high quality* performed by apprentices which will not contribute to the furthering of knowledge but will serve the purpose of preparing researchers. This conception can be a valuable contribution to understanding whether the functions of the university, as Eaton sees them, co-exist in universities but the relationship between them remains critical and complex.

A couple of years after the publication of Eaton's article, in its first volume, the Journal of Higher Education published an article from Dale (1930) which focussed on the 'Training of PhD's'. In this article, the author ponders over the ability of doctoral students to teach, and asks how a PhD prepare for a college teaching position. The conclusion is that it could not and that new structures should be put in place to prepare them for that particular role. In addition, he quotes a communication from the Association of American Colleges that recommends that no university should admit students who have not had previous teaching experience and that it should require the student to obtain 'such interest and experience . . . for which no graduate credit should be given' prior to admitting the student as a doctoral candidate. This article is a reminder that much has changed in the way universities prepare their students for their future careers. The Roberts Report, which is changing the face of doctoral study in the UK, or at least of doctoral programmes, addresses the question of research training but also that of transferable skills training. The Roberts Report and the new training demands put on doctoral students also have in mind that doctoral students should complete their degrees with more than research skills and specialised knowledge on their field of study. In addition, students should be prepared for their career post-PhD. If they are looking to pursue a career in academia then it is important that they prepare themselves for that, and this includes getting teaching experience and reflecting on their own teaching practices.

Nelson (1933) brings to the fore two interesting and important concepts when thinking about what the PhD represents: the PhD as a 'union card' for academia, and that of servility amongst candidates for higher degrees. He suggests that his peers view the doctorate as a 'union card' which grants access to an academic career and this, in turn, creates a sense of servility and humbleness from students towards the achievement of a PhD. In other words, and already in the 1920s and 1930s, and maybe more even in the US than over here in the UK, the PhD was an essential milestone through which one could be granted access to a career in an university. The concept of servility brings along some problems. Students, according to Nelson, are usually in economically difficult circumstances and the access to the 'union' is of extreme importance for their livelihood. But, for that, they need to comply with rules and requirements set up by the 'union card' holders who are all too aware of the value of the said 'card'. Thus, the discussion over whether to grant fewer degrees, thus making the 'card' even more valuable comes as a logical consequence against the widening of participation.

The three articles referred to here are important for they analyse and discuss important issues that relate to the PhD: what is the role of the PhD student and the value of their research, the importance of a wider view of doctoral education that includes skills other than those merely related to research and, finally, the idea of the PhD degree as the door into academia.

The PhD in the social sciences

The PhD in the social sciences has characteristics which distinguish it from PhDs in the natural sciences. Table 1 sums up some of the most fundamental differences between the two PhD *types*. This terminology has been used in order to simplify the comparison and is often used in the literature. The differences between PhDs in different subjects range from the daily run of the research to the scope of the thesis. Table 1 presents a simplified typology of the main characteristics of these two types of PhD. The 'natural sciences' model has been increasingly used as the ideal PhD model and thus the one that other disciplines should adopt. It is important to note that according to the Higher Education Policy Institute, in 2006–2007, the social sciences topped the non-STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects in terms of number of students in research degrees (HEPI, 2010). In the same year, 60 per cent of the research students were doing a PhD in a STEM subject and 40 per cent in non-STEM subjects. There were 8540 students doing a PhD in social sciences in that year which represented an increase of 16 per cent from 2002 to 2003 (HEPI, 2010). This typology arises from my understanding of the literature and my research on the PhD, especially arising from interviews I have conducted with both PhD students and supervisors over the years.

This table indicates some of the main differences between the two types of PhD research and experience. First, it refers to the scope of the thesis. One difference that appears fundamental is that of the scope of the doctoral project. In the social sciences, the student is expected to devise the topic of their research as well as determine the various steps for the whole of the research project. The student is expected to conduct all the elements of the research project. Some of the students interviewed had spent their first year of the PhD defining and finessing their research project and proposal. On the other hand, students in the sciences tend to be part of a team of researchers, which may include the principal

Table 1. Differences between PhDs in social sciences and in the natural sciences.

	PhD in the social sciences	PhD in natural sciences
Scope of the thesis	Student responsible for whole research project	Student responsible for a part of a wider research project
Topic of the thesis	Student's own	Part of a wider research project and selected/assigned by the supervisor/principal investigator
Results	Only positive results accepted	Negative results accepted
Proximity to supervisor	Meeting by arrangement	Constant presence of supervisor
Location	Student rarely has own space provided by department/university. Many students work from home	In the lab
Proximity to other researchers	Lonely endeavour	Close to other researchers in same lab
Funding	Student has to apply individually for funding	Attributed to student as part of the overall funding for supervisor's project
Duration of doctoral programme	Rarely within 4 years	Stricter time limit – due to way funding is organised
Facilities	Usually none	Lab, computing facilities, desk

investigator (who tends to be the main supervisor of doctoral students involved in the project), postdoctoral researchers and other PhD students. The project proposal and scope as well as the funding of the project (and of the PhD students who take part in it) are the responsibility of the principal investigator. The student tends to be assigned a part of the research project. Funding for the PhD in the social sciences is done individually by the student.

These two initial elements – scope of thesis and topic of the thesis – are fundamentally different for these two types of PhDs. They highlight the different levels of participation towards a final research project: one more individual model and the other which is a more collective model. This is one of the main reasons why the nature and the practice of research in the social sciences is very different to that in the natural sciences. And therefore it is essential that different funding bodies understand the different nature of research practice in diverse disciplines.

Other differences are that students in the social sciences tend not to have their own place or desk. At times, there might be a research room where computers and desks are available to students on a first-come-first-served basis, and many students work from home or in the library. Students in the natural sciences generally work in a lab and tend to have their own desk and computer facilities. They will also have a close contact with their supervisor who usually is the principal investigator for the whole research project and is therefore also based in the lab. In the social sciences however the students tend to need to arrange meeting with their supervisors and their contact is much less regular. In terms of contacts with other researchers, be it PhD students or postgraduate researchers, the same happens as with the supervisors: there is more contact between those in the natural sciences than in the social sciences.

Finally, in terms of length of the doctorate, the natural sciences tend to have better completion rates than the Social Sciences. This is one of the main changes happening at the doctoral level in the latter.

Roberts Report and conceptions of the social sciences doctorate in the UK

This research arose in the context of national and international shifts in higher education systems and of a increased requestioning of its purpose. More specifically, universities are standardising their degrees and processes in order to try to gain grounds in quality and peer legitimation (Gilbert, 2004; Gilbert et al., 2004). The Roberts Report (HM Treasury, 2002) and the Bologna Process are examples of the opening up of educational systems and are a reflection of the international and widespread refocus on higher education and what its main aims should be. Economistic concerns prevail and considerable attention is given to the efficient use of funding and how a knowledge society will lead to an economically and financially strong society. And the competition for the high-fee-paying international students is getting fiercer. In 2007, the business of higher education in the UK amounted to almost £21 billion (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2008). Even though official figures do not separate total fees figures paid by non-EU international students, the total amount paid by foreign students in the university fees in the UK in the year 2004/2005 amounted to £1.39 billion (Vickers & Bekhradnia, 2007). Vickers and Bekhradnia further calculated that international students spent a further £2.5 billion on living costs for that same year. This very clearly shows the importance of attracting foreign students for the country's economy. And even though they note that number of foreign students coming to the UK has been increasing, the increases are happening at ever reducing rates. Still, over 60 per cent of higher degree students (both masters and doctoral students) in the UK are foreign students

(BBC, 2008). And they warn that: 'there should be not presumption that this [increase] will continue'.

'As other countries begin to use English as the language of instruction, and as the effects of the Bologna Agreement begin to take hold, eroding some of our competitive advantage; as other countries start to market themselves more aggressively; and as better information becomes available that enable students to compare the value they receive for their money, it is quite possible that UK universities will begin to struggle to maintain numbers while charging the sorts of prices that are charged at present' (Vickers & Bekhradnia, 2007, pp. 9–10). An increasing number of programmes (at all levels) all over the world are being offered in English in order to entice those highly desirable international students. Between 15 per cent (for EU students) and 27 per cent (international non-EU students) report they get poor value for money in their education in UK higher education institutions (Sastry & Bekhradnia, 2007). This could have a negative impact on the attractiveness of UK universities for foreign students.

Kehm (2006) has noted some of the problems facing doctoral education in Europe and the US. Of all the issues she refers to, a few should be subjected to further analysis and discussion considering the UK higher education context: structure of doctoral programmes, funding, duration of doctoral studies, supervision and quality control and, finally, the transition into an academic career. These are issues that have been discussed for quite some time and optimal solutions are yet to be found or agreed upon. Economic interests and pressures are at times at odds with the personal and academic interests of supervisors and students alike.

Historically, the doctorate in the social sciences has been quite an individual affair. Students were often left to their own devices, and meetings with the supervisors were rare. The usual anecdote used in this case is that of the supervisor who tells the student to spend 6 months in the library and come up with a big and great idea. Little support was given and the students were supposed to learn by themselves and learn by mistake. But with increasing concerns over student support, accountability and imposed deadlines, there has been a shift in terms of the structure of doctoral degrees. It is now common that the student has two co-supervisors (arrangements over shared supervision vary greatly between departments and institutions), and the inclusion of some coursework is the current practice. Moreover, departments have more stringent rules as to how many times student and supervisor should meet per term or year and hurdles, such as the upgrade and the presentation of papers in research seminars have been introduced and are a common practice.

The closer involvement of the department and the supervisor in the student's doctoral process is seen to prevent students from going 'astray' and complete their PhD in the 'allotted' time. So, the structure of the doctoral programme can be seen as intrinsically linked with the issues of supervision, funding and (consequently) of the duration of the degree. The latter though, is mainly influenced by economic factors and a rather limited notion of knowledge and knowledge creation. The onus appears to have been put now in the deadline for completion of the PhD rather than on the knowledge achieved and created in and with the PhD. It seems to be the case that in the UK it is the funding of doctoral degrees that represents the biggest drive for change.

Another crucial element and currently a considerable problem in doctoral education is that of students who want to pursue an academic career after completing their PhD. With increasing numbers of PhDs awarded every year in most OECD countries (Kehm, 2006) and more specifically in the UK, the problem of academic labour market saturation is ever more present. The key issue is that there are too many PhD graduates for the vacancies available in academia and that is reflected in the 'decline of academic work as a career

destination relative to the number of doctoral graduates' (Gilbert et al., 2004, p. 379). Moreover, these positions tend to be taken by graduates from the top universities in the UK. This has a further impact on the aspirations of PhD graduates from universities other than the ones belonging to the Russell Group (of 24 major research and teaching universities).

The Bologna process, change in Europe and the Lisbon Strategy: the future of the PhD

> Do we want to prepare novice researchers for the world of educational research as it is, or do we want to prepare them for the world as it might become? (Pallas, 2001, p. 6)

In Europe, a concern at the very core of the European Union (EU) is the mobility of its citizens within its borders. One of the important elements in achieving this is the recognition of degrees *inter pares*. Different European countries had considerably different higher education programmes and this at times made it difficult for a degree in one of the EU countries to be recognised and accepted as equivalent in another country. An example of this was the non-recognition of the UK masters degree as the equivalent of the Portuguese Masters degree when applying for civil service jobs in Portugal. Hence, the process of bringing together the wide variety of degrees offered in order to make them more similar and, thus, making it easier for a degree in one country to be recognised in another. This process came to be known as the Bologna Process, the city where the signing of the Bologna Declaration (European Higher Education Area, 1999) took place. The Lisbon Strategy and the subsequent Europe 2020 Strategy (European Commission, 2010) furthered this joint European view of development and put the development of skills for economic growth at the forefront of national educational programs.

Serbanescu-Lestrade (2005) in her study of the two French and two German universities suggests that there is a sense in European universities that the Bologna process is a top-down reform that 'nobody in universities asked for'. This reveals the independent spirit that is observable in academia everywhere in Europe, where academic staff revel in the independence that their institutional position offers them.

There is a sense that everywhere universities and staff are struggling with the new direction the PhD is taking and, in this transitional phase, we are still trying to understand what the direction is.

Contributions from Barnett (1990, 1993, 1994, 2000, 2003, 2005), Delanty (2001a, 2001b, 2003), and Fuller (2000, 2001, 2003, 2009) have been important and relevant for an understanding of the contemporary PhD experience and of the role of the university and of knowledge as an integral part, or not, of the current role of the university in the UK. Barnett discusses the competences the university is expected to help students develop, namely an academic competence and an operational one (issues that I have had the opportunity to explore in-depth elsewhere (Matos 2011). He posits that the 'competence' discourse is prevalent in a university system that needs to demonstrate its short-term contribution to society. Fuller's view that knowledge is being devalued in, and by, the university complements Barnett's assertions. For Fuller, the credential is becoming the currency of university practice to the detriment of knowledge creation and dissemination which have both been part of the history of the university. Finally, Delanty posits that University departments have become administrative units rather than sites of research and thus the notion of the university as a site of excellence and creativity is now being undermined.

Professionalism

This article posits that the changes being made at the PhD level appear to have had a negative impact on the depth of the doctoral research. The timeline, the skills and training, the avoidance of topics deemed too original, all appear to have led the PhD to become a credential above anything else. The streamlining of the PhD programme with a strong focus on transferable skills training has been one of the most significant changes in the PhD in recent years. The research councils appear to have directed the PhD into a more professionalised, and regulated, degree. Simultaneously, there has been a move to professionalise the supervisory element of the PhD. Academics are increasingly required to undergo training in order to improve their practice as PhD supervisors.

This move towards training academics suggests a notion that previous practices could sometimes have not been appropriate in supporting PhD students. The training of academics has been accompanied by a more stringent structure of the PhD programme. This has implied that students need a series of checkpoints throughout their thesis, and that supervisors have to demonstrate a more professionalised approach to their supervision. This has been done by the establishment of a series of rules for supervisors. Departments now stipulate how many supervisory meetings there should be per term/year between the student and their supervisor. This has an obvious advantage. Students will feel more supported if they meet their supervisor regularly. Supervisors will be closer to the students' work and their progress and can potentially save a lot of time by preventing students going in what can be perceived as an unproductive direction. Many institutions have introduced a student record where meetings with supervisors are registered as well as the contents of the discussion in the meetings. This has an advantage for the institution itself since it helps it monitor individual practice. It may also have benefits for the supervisor since it can provide a shared platform with their students. This can also have advantages for the student: it may indicate that the student is being taken care of by both the institution and the supervisor. This latter point is relevant when considering the background of supervisory practice in the social sciences. The doctoral model metaphor of the supervisor who asks the student to 'go to the library and come back in six months' reflected a view of a less supportive supervisor–student relationship.

The argument remains that changes in doctoral programmes appear to strongly indicate a move towards PhD research which is less free, less creative and less original. However, a certain professionalisation of supervisory practice can have benefits for the PhD student experience if it implies a closer support on the part of the supervisor.

Conclusion

In a context of changing practices in doctoral programmes, it is sometimes tempting to consider that these tend to devalue the PhD or empty some of its meaning. What is important though is to understand how changes affect practices and the student experience of the doctoral programme. Therefore this article has first analysed the genealogy of the PhD and concluded that some of the questions one can ask about the purpose and the role of the PhD have been asked for a long time. Furthermore, they help frame discussions about the PhD which tend to focus on the function of the PhD and how this impacts the student experience.

As new funding priorities have been introduced in the UK for the PhDs in the social sciences, this article questions the inappropriate imposition of a PhD model on the social sciences, one which is based on practices in the natural sciences. This denies the historical

reality of the latter and the considerable diversity in the essence and nature of these two types of PhD. Scope and topic are the main axis that have been undergoing radical change.

Finally, a broader look at the European context reveals that the winds of change affect not only the UK but also other countries in diverse ways. The main impression is that academics across some European countries are resistant to, or at least very critical of, the new direction research policies are taking. The main point of contention is the perceived increased managerialism prevailing in higher education institutions and funding bodies. The article concludes by acknowledging that despite some serious and negative impacts of new funding policies there is something to be gained by both the faculty and doctoral students in an increased professionalism in PhD practices which has been pushed by funding councils.

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