

Re-imagine doctorateness as curriculum and journey

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Keywords

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Abstract

Research in the area of doctoral education has pointed to a common absence of curriculum, notwithstanding concepts such as “independent research”, “autonomy” and “original contribution”, listed as descriptors for the highest qualification. The pedagogy associated with doctoral studies is described as emanating from a supervisor-supervisee relationship. The current debate in the literature regarding the process or product of a doctorate is related to the questions about curriculum and pedagogy, as is the debate about what defines “doctorateness”. The purpose of this paper is to explore current literature and to analyse the Doctoral Degrees National Report of the Council on Higher Education, released in March 2022, for its contribution to the process and product debate, and the related curriculum and pedagogy conversation. The findings suggest the journey as a contribution to the curriculum, and horizontalisation as concept complementary to the pedagogy. Re-imagining the doctoral curriculum for the 21st Century will contribute both to process and product, as well as to curriculum and pedagogy. The journey is the concept to be taken seriously.

Introduction and background

Since the concept of doctorateness was introduced to academia in the late twentieth century, research on doctorateness has become a growing field of interest. The concept debated is debated not only in literature, but also in staff tearooms, colloquia, viva voce and faculty meetings. A lack of comprehensiveness in considering all aspects of doctorateness can be observed. “Too much emphasis on the product part of doctoral study rather than the process and, at the same time, too much stress on (the) doctoral thesis as an original contribution to knowledge, seem to overlook the importance of characteristic formation of the doctoral graduate” (Yazdani & Shokooh, 2018:43).

The examination of the thesis as an output product alone cannot thus be a method of assessment and measuring success, and it cannot be a single qualifier for doctorateness. Bitzer (2014) asked: “What makes the doctorate special and what level of understanding does it imply? Is there a common factor that is present in all doctorates? Is there a special ‘something’ about these degrees that can be recognised by those who examine them or those who already possess a doctorate?” The answer to these questions lies, according to Bitzer, in the concept and nature of doctorateness itself.

Problem statement

What, according to the literature, is the current understanding regarding the curriculum and pedagogy for a doctoral programme? Where does the concept of “doctorateness” fit in with relationship to the overall doctorate programme and what does a future doctorate curriculum entail?

Methodology

Compiling secondary data as a data collection method has been labelled a contemporary data collection method by Strydom (2022). It involves reworking existing research data with a different aim, which is valuable as it provides an opportunity to bring new perspectives to existing data, or to form a base to compare or connect data or theory in new ways.

The secondary data for this article has been collected by means of a between-study literature analysis. The larger the number of works consulted for the literature review, the more a between-study analysis of the literature is needed to produce a suitable synthesis (Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins, 2012). The purpose of the literature review was to glean ideas from related studies by summarising, analysing, evaluating, and synthesising findings and arguments from other scholars to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the current state of knowledge and the debate regarding doctorateness and a doctoral curriculum.

Since the topic is a “young elusive concept” (Poole, 2015), part of the methodology for this article was conceptual analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997) to clarify the meaning of doctorateness and to describe the essential and generic meaning as it is used in literature.

Literature review and findings

Since this is a secondary data research design and a conceptual analysis, the literature review is also a presentation of the findings.

Doctorateness

During early 2007, Chris Park, professor emeritus at Lancaster University, where he was director of the Graduate School (2001-2009), initiated the debate about the nature of the doctorate. The essence of this debate was a key theme: doctorateness. Jerry Wellington, from the University of Sheffield, also in the UK, joined the debate in 2013, stressing the importance of the question regarding what constitutes doctorateness, and emphasised that getting to the meaning of the concept is not merely a semantic exercise. This debate was preceded, according to Yazdani and Shokooch (2018), by several publications posing questions such as what characterises a doctoral graduate, whether the candidate demonstrates that he or she is thinking like a researcher, and the nature of the questions to be asked at the doctoral oral defence.

The word “doctorateness” does not appear in dictionaries, while “doctorate” is a common word found in most dictionaries, meaning “the highest degree awarded by a university”. After an intensive conceptual analysis, Yazdani and Shokooch (2018:42) defined doctorateness as: “A personal quality, that following a developmental and transformative apprenticeship process, results in the formation of an independent scholar with a certain identity and level of competence and creation of an original contribution, which extends (s) knowledge through scholarship and receipt of the highest academic degree and culminates stewardship of the discipline.” Their definition addresses the purpose, output and character of doctorateness. The purposes they identified are scholarship to and stewardship of the discipline; personal growth; and the candidate’s position in the scientific or professional community. The process of doctorateness is characterised by a formal and lengthy education that provides enough apprenticeship, experience and socialisation to bring change and development in the candidate. The output of doctorateness is the candidate’s thesis, resulting in a degree at a graduation ceremony.

The product, namely a thesis that would gain a pass, is thus not enough to define doctorateness, although there are some researchers, supervisors and even institutions (Hofstee, 2018) who

regard the product – the thesis, with its original contribution – as the item that demonstrates a candidate’s competence to examiners so that the candidate can be awarded a degree.

Trafford and Leshem (2009) stated that the detail, namely what candidates have to do to produce the thesis, contributes to their doctorateness. The process that develops and forms the candidate is thus essential for doctorateness. Bitzer (2014) added to this by distinguishing and differentiating between what constitutes an educated researcher and a trained researcher. Furthermore, an educated doctoral candidate as researcher, who understands doctorateness, will be an emerging expert in a particular field of knowledge; a resourceful person, able to search out what is needed to be found out and to use; a person mindful of the bigger picture who belongs to scholarly networks of expertise so as to know what is important, current and relevant; and, someone who is adaptable and prepared to change or link research areas and/or techniques to particular contexts and circumstances. In contrast a trained researcher will be able to follow the steps and put the product on the table, without the personal development happening along the journey.

Inherent in doctorateness, for Trafford and Leshem (2009), is the notion of synergy. Interconnectedness of all research disciplines is necessary to create high quality (Trafford & Leshem, 2012). They refer to it as a jigsaw puzzle which, when complete, is greater than the sum of its parts. In their view doctorateness is a threshold concept. They argue that a candidate’s ability to produce high-quality research and a coherent thesis will be limited until the candidate recognises the theoretical and practical significance of doctorateness. When the candidate moves beyond the threshold concept, they will be able to exhibit the associated characteristics of liminality and troublesome knowledge.

Bitzer (2014:40) extended the criteria for doctorateness to include questions such as: “Has (s)he built on previous arguments and theses (from previous literature) and pushed it forward a little or added to it? If the candidate does contribute to knowledge, will this contribution potentially make an impact – or bring about a change – in thinking and to theory, policy, or practice?” Bitzer thus understands doctorateness as a concept and as a process.

Doctoral curriculum

Traditionally a doctoral candidate is expected to make an original contribution to the body of knowledge, and it is the role of the examiners to assess whether this has been achieved. The assessors reach their ruling by examining the candidate’s thesis and by discussing it with the candidate during a colloquium. According to Trafford and Leshem (2009), candidates

demonstrate their claims to scholarship thus through two components: the creation of the text of the thesis, and during the defence in the viva voce.

A key characteristic identified as the most important common capability for a doctoral student by Lucy Thorne (1999), who graduated from Middlesex University in London, is independence. This has also become a key concept of the curriculum conversation. Another defining attribute of the curriculum identified by Yazdani and Shokooh (2018) is the developmental and transformative apprenticeship relationship between the supervisor and candidate. They suggest that strategies need to be adopted to ensure the best supervision models are used to provide learning experiences to doctoral candidates. These experiences must focus on maximising the socialisation of doctoral candidates on different levels in the programme to facilitate the development and transformation necessary to create doctorateness within the candidate. The process, namely the detail that candidates must produce to create the thesis, is an essential element of the curriculum. According to Trafford and Leshem (2009), it includes the mastery of the subject, analytical breadth where methods, techniques, contexts, and data are concerned, as well as mastery of the depth, focusing on the evaluation of the contribution itself, the quality and the originality. Rowena Murray, Associate Dean (Research) at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK, views the research design, the different presentations – written as well as during colloquia, the creating of a coherent argument, the quality of writing, outcomes, conclusion and contextualisation as important facets of the curriculum and of doctorateness (2003).

However, in general, research in the area of doctoral education has pointed, according to Chatterjee-Padmanabhan and Nielsen (2016), to a common absence of curriculum. A gap in the curriculum, as identified by Trafford and Leshem (2009), is that doctorateness is not explained to candidates. When candidates understand the nature of doctorateness they are usually able to provide and understand the quality expected from them in their doctorate. This outcome is the consequence of extended collaboration between supervisor and candidate. Bitzer (2014) noted that doctoral candidates were expected to progress beyond merely reporting facts, since the doctorate represents a level of knowledge, skills and attitudes that involves intellectualising, conceptualising and contributing to existing knowledge. Both supervisors and candidates must understand the scholarly nature of the doctoral degree by appreciating the connection between doing research, writing a doctoral thesis, and defending it in a colloquium. This is an essential part of the curriculum.

Pedagogy for doctoral programmes

Traditionally the pedagogy for a doctoral programme at most institutions consists of a few lectures on research methodology, and a supervisory relationship. The purpose of the supervisory relationship is to guide candidates in their first steps to becoming academics. This supervisory relationship entails identity development experiences (Frick & Brodin, 2019), and it can be characterised by a power imbalance between supervisor and candidate (Chatterjee-Padmanabhan & Nielsen, 2016). According to Leshem (2020), the doctoral student must embody new identity capital. This demands the reconciliation of multiple roles and conflicting experiences. The process has a social, emotional, and cognitive effect on the candidate as well as on the relationship with the supervisor and is intended to assist transition of the candidate into an independent scholar. The quality and intensity of the relationship could be a threshold experience for the candidate because he or she is being guided to new understandings. The process is described by Wisker et al. (2010) as identity construction, a rite of passage, tensions and resolutions. Crossing the threshold, the candidate acquires transformed capabilities from which there is no return to the pre-liminal experience. The interaction between the supervisor and the student and the style of supervision thus have a powerful effect on the candidate.

Bitzer (2014) suggested in her research that the doctoral pedagogy could be enriched by creating developmental opportunities and strategies that included the internationalisation of doctoral programmes that might involve inter and multidisciplinary, as well as multinational, approaches to contemporary global issues. She recommended a shift away from the traditional master-apprentice model of supervision. The internationalisation suggested by Bitzer, along with the trend of students studying in countries other than their own as a consequence of globalisation, has at least one disadvantage for students, namely the language barrier. This disadvantage is identified as a gap that needs to be addressed.

Chatterjee-Padmanabhan and Nielsen (2016), felt that writing in English as an additional language might limit opportunities for international students to develop their research and writing. This could be experienced as a major obstacle to their becoming independent doctoral scholars. In these instances, writing support must also be offered by the supervisor. McWilliam and Singh identified, as far back as 2002, academic writing as a gap in the pedagogy of the traditional supervisor-supervisee academic-apprentice-to-disciplinary-mentor relationship. Woodward-Kron (2007) also remarked that supervisors might not have the skills to advise on issues of language and discourse organisation, or to make the valued writing requirements of the discipline explicit to the student. This is a major problem in South Africa, where English is many students' and supervisors' second, third or even fourth language.

There is thus a need to supplement the supervisor-supervisee relationship with other forms of doctoral pedagogy. Geurin (2014) remarked that thesis writing circles emerged as a popular (pedagogic) intervention for doctoral writers in response to the need to create a social space that can provide benefits such as mutual support, enhanced confidence and a sense of belonging to a scholarly community. These circles foster formal and informal learning about writing and can thus, according to Geurin, horizontalise pedagogy by complementing the relationship between supervisor and supervisee and even, in some instances, mitigate the power imbalance in the supervisory relationship. Students joining these groups are encouraged to bring their work to the sessions to give and receive feedback in a friendly learning atmosphere so that they can improve their work. Developing a thesis writing group as a form of horizontalising pedagogy can thus support international doctoral students, or students who write their theses in English as a second or third language. This supports the notion that there is a need for other forms of pedagogy outside the supervisory relationship.

Research by Chatterjee-Padmanabhan and Nielsen (2016) indicated that these writing circles or support groups empower students in the sense that they become accustomed to giving and receiving feedback and, through contributing to a scholarly community, become more confident.

Review of South African doctoral qualifications

Bitzer (2014) noted contextual issues unique to South African universities: supervisory capacity, diversity of candidates, lack of research experience, and varying doctoral requirements.

The Council on Higher Education reviewed all South African university doctoral programmes during 2020 and 2021, starting by developing a qualification standard for doctoral degrees, against which the programmes were benchmarked. Its report, released in March 2022, made recommendations that, if implemented, could advance the quality of doctoral programmes offered at higher educational institutions in South Africa (CHE, 2022).

For the purposes of this article, recommendations regarding doctorateness, curriculum and pedagogy are abstracted from the report.

For the review section regarding graduate attributes, two standards were identified: knowledge and skills. The recommendations formulated to support this standard are:

- All institutions should have programmes in place whereby regular workshops, colloquia, seminars and platforms are organised to offer doctoral students opportunities to present their work and exchange ideas at regular intervals during the doctoral journey.

- Interconnectedness of the different fields of research and practice, as well as interconnectedness within fields, must be encouraged.
- The development of communication skills, particularly academic writing, should be incorporated.
- The creation of a writing centre that will provide support to nurture critical and analytical skills.

Recommendations applicable to this paper were also made in the supervision and assessment section of the report, namely:

- The relationship between supervisor and student should be an early step in the process. It must start with the early proposal and research intend submitted by the student.
- Preparatory skills training programmes (non-credit-bearing and non-compulsory) should be monitored for effectiveness.
- Students should receive training on ethical approaches to research, and the broader considerations of research integrity.

The Council on Higher Education review had two fundamental objectives. Firstly, it wanted to enable institutions to evaluate their own quality, and secondly it wanted to provide a snapshot of the state of doctoral provision in South Africa. It wants institutions to create an environment that can produce good quality doctoral students, and for the qualifications they provide to be consonant with the institution's mission, vision and goals.

Discussion

The main concepts discussed in the literature review were the doctoral curriculum, the pedagogy, and the meaning of doctorateness. This was done within the parameters of the product and process debate. To obtain a doctoral degree (the product), a process must be followed. This process is what is normally called a curriculum, and the curriculum is transferred to the candidate via a pedagogy. From the literature it became clear that the curriculum is vague, therefore scholars made suggestions on how to improve it. The pedagogy has been without innovations for many decades, so scholars proposed enrichments. This whole process, because it is so intensive, has side effects or by-products, rubbing off on candidates, which is part of the process, as indicated by scholars. All these elements contribute to the level of doctorateness achieved by the candidate.

These elements will be presented in tables to summarise the findings and to direct the discussion.

Table 1: The formal product

Product	Reference
Thesis with an original contribution	Hofstee (2012)
Synergy and interconnectedness of the research process and the material	Trafford and Leshem (2009)
High quality research; coherent thesis; build on previous arguments; contribute to body of knowledge	Bitzer (2014)

The formal outcome of doctoral studies is to present to examiners a high-quality thesis that makes a new contribution in order to obtain a pass, and the qualification.

Table 2: The curriculum

Chatterjee-Padmanabhad and Nielsen (2016) noted a general absence of curriculum for doctoral education. Other scholars contributing to the debate use vague terminology to describe the curriculum such as independence (Thorne, 1999), the text of the thesis and an oral defence (Trafford & Leshem, 2009), a transformative apprenticeship between supervisor and supervisee as a process that is an essential part of the curriculum (Yazdani & Shokooh, 2018). A few concrete suggestions and remarks have been made, as indicated in the table below:

Curriculum	Refence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mastery of the subject • Analytical breadth employing various methods, techniques, context, data • Analytical depth such as contribution, quality, originality 	Yazdani and Shokooh (2018)
Research design, presentations, quality of writing, outcomes, conclusions, contextualisation	Murray (2003)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training in ethics and research with integrity • Preparatory training programmes 	Council on Higher Education
The concept of doctorateness needs to be lectured and explained	Trafford and Leshem (2009)

It seems that most universities are currently offering research methodology modules as non-credit-bearing, optional attendance courses. The only obligation is to submit a thesis written under supervision by an allocated supervisor. The thesis must receive a pass from the examiners and the candidate must defend it in a viva voce (at some universities). The call from scholars is for more than modules on research and research ethics. The concept of doctorateness also needs to be lectured, but no formal proposal has been made for any curriculum changes.

Table 3: Pedagogy

The traditional pedagogy for the doctoral programme has been identified as a supervisor-candidate relationship, described by some as an apprenticeship model (Yazdani & Shokooh, 2018).

The following remarks and suggestions regarding the doctoral pedagogy have been made:

Pedagogy	Reference
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More supervision models are necessary 	Bitzer (2014); Yazdani and Shokooh (2018)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The style of supervision has a huge influence on the success of the candidate • It is all about identity construction. • A rite of passage; crossing a threshold 	Wisker et al. (2010)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The supervisory relationship must start as early as possible with the intention of enrolment on the programme • Create developmental opportunities. • Interconnectedness of different fields of research and practice • Peer thesis writing circles/groups. • Create platforms. • Workshops • Colloquia, seminars where students can present 	Council on Higher Education (2022)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It must be an identity development experience 	Frick and Brodin (2019)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New identity capital must be found • The candidate must be transformed into an independent researcher 	Leshem (2020)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thesis writing circles. • Inter- and multidisciplinary connections • Ways to complement the supervisor-candidate relationship • Horizontalise pedagogy 	Greunin (2014)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mitigate the power imbalance in the supervisory relationship. • Focus on independence 	Chatterjee-Padmanabhan and Nielsen (2016)

From the above, three aspects became clear: Firstly, the supervisor-candidate relationship must have a certain focus, purpose and style. The style must reflect something of an apprentice learning from a master. The aim must be to transform the candidate's being. The experience

must be so powerful that it becomes a threshold moment, or rite of passage, that will change the candidate forever. It is thus a development experience during which new identity capital is gained.

Secondly, this model must be supplemented and supported by other models. These could be writing circles where peers can assist each other by reading each other's work, or listening to each other's presentations, and giving feedback. The engagement with peers can give the pedagogy a horizontalised perspective. This will happen independent of the structured programme.

Thirdly, interdisciplinary, or multidisciplinary, clusters or groups can be formed to give students networking opportunities and to make them part of the bigger academic world, as well as specialised groups (even LinkedIn, Facebook or other social media groups). They can even join international study or conversation groups to gain exposure and confidence. The institution can also create or present opportunities for workshops, seminars, colloquia or platforms – even online – where students can present and get feedback from academics other than their own supervisors. From these interactions and experiences new models or pedagogies can be born.

In summary it seems that there are two distinctive levels on which pedagogical enrichment can happen namely on a practical level with all the suggested models, groups and platforms, but secondly also on a psychological level because the process must be transformative, developmental, identity constructive and an identity capital gaining experience.

Table 4: The process: by-products

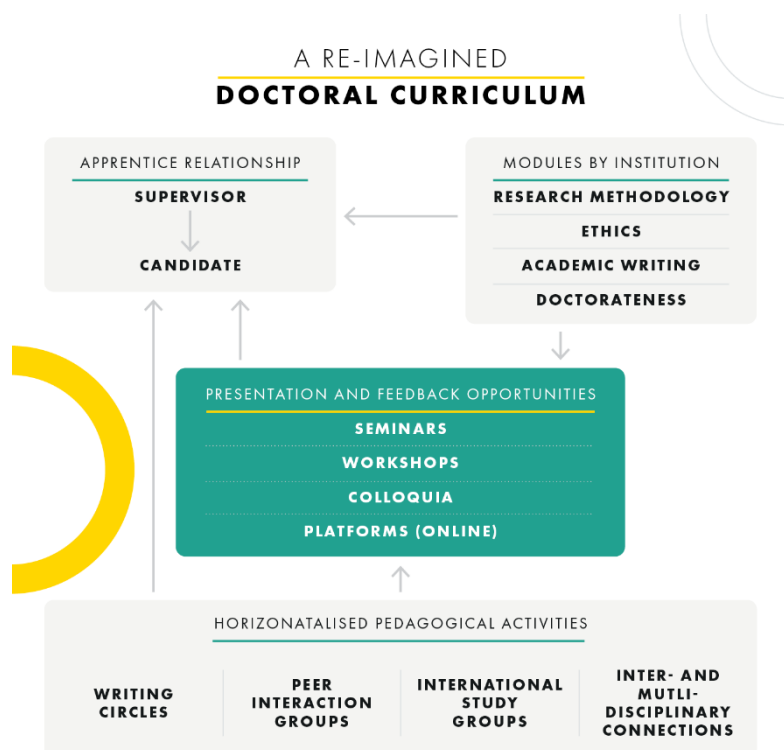
It became clear from the literature that doctorateness is a combination of product and process, but that the x-factor of doctorateness comes from the process itself. Through the concept analysis, the “journey” can be added as an important element of the already listed concepts characterising “doctorateness”. For the candidate to understand the transformation of self and to enter the state of doctorateness is a threshold-crossing moment that can be experienced as a moment of construction where the identity develops new capital.

By-product	Reference
• Development of attributes	Yazdani and Shokooh (2018)
• Become expert in a field.	Bitzer (2014)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become a resourceful person. • Become a person mindful of the bigger picture. • Be a person who can link research to context 	
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Figure 1: A re-imagined doctoral curriculum.

The following figure presents an integrated model of how a doctoral curriculum could be enriched.



Conclusion

It can be concluded that doctorateness is a scholarly attribute – a precondition – that examiners look for when judging the contribution of a doctoral candidate. It is about doing and achieving. It is also about becoming and being. This happens somewhere along the journey.

For doctoral programmes offered by universities to be relevant and innovative, the curriculum needs to be opened to include additional modules, and to facilitate additional inputs, both formal and informal. The pedagogy must be broadened to accommodate different models. The traditional supervisor-candidate model needs to be enriched with horizontalised pedagogies such as writing groups, greater peer interaction, inter and multidisciplinary connections, international connections, presentation and feedback opportunities at colloquia, seminars, workshops, platforms, and a redeploying of the purpose, focus and aim of the pedagogy.

The biggest gain for the doctoral candidate will be in the journey toward doctorateness itself. The journey is a transformative process resulting in the product: a doctoral qualification.

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