



UK Council *for* **Graduate Education**

### **What is a Doctorate Workshop**

University of Reading

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#### **How effective/relevant are current systems for assuring quality and standards?**

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The Group identified the following as key to the discussion:

- Originality/an original contribution to knowledge
- The range/variety of doctoral programmes (e.g. professional doctorates)

The discussion was lively and hopefully, useful. The time was spent, however, attempting to define, understand and explore 'standards' and 'quality'; consideration of the effectiveness/relevance of any assurance systems was not addressed.

The following points were recorded:

1. 'Standards' might be thought of as demonstration of the achievement of threshold criteria as stated for the award.
2. 'Quality' is applied variously:
  - quality of the output – that perhaps reflects an exceeding the threshold criteria for the award (a finer calibration above the absolute standard)
  - quality of the provision offered to the student (of supervision, training, etc.)
  - quality of the student experience.
3. 'An original contribution to knowledge' – is this a *quality* or a *standards* issue?
  - 'originality' is the essence of what is accepted to constitute doctoral level – a key criterion for the award (for most, if not all universities); demonstrable achievement of that criterion is therefore an aspect of standards;
  - there is also, however, a quality judgement made when assessing a doctorate; there is relative as well as absolute achievement of the criteria for the award - even against the key criterion of originality.
4. 'Standard' in respect of 'doctoralness' is arguably a socially constructed notion; that said, there is still a threshold that can be defined.
5. Might 'quality' be dependent on individual circumstances? Should account be taken of the widening participation agenda? In the case of a doctoral student, it is less about consideration of the starting point and the added value, but fundamentally about the essential attribute of originality in the final output.
6. Quality in respect of the output might be reflected in how a candidate relates their work to the wider environment, and where the quality of the training experience can be detected in the candidate and in the thesis.
7. PhD = Doctor of Philosophy. The philosophy of the subject being researched ought to be key, there ought to be a philosophical view of the subject.
8. We have an inert, instinctive feel of what constitutes a PhD standard – what the criteria are for the award, and whether the candidate has met those criteria. Though sometimes unwritten, there is a general confidence amongst the academic community as to what constitutes a PhD. This can be less clear in respect of 'newer' degrees, such as professional doctorates.

9. There are differing, though not separate, contexts relating to quality:
  - *The thesis*  
The individual who the thesis is monitored by supervision and review mechanisms in order to facilitate the production of a good quality thesis; examiners assess the quality of the thesis.
  - *The process*  
This is not usually directly assessed – though possibly indirectly through the quality of the thesis; there might be an assumption that the quality of the process is reflected in the quality of the product.
  - *The individual, the 'trained' researcher*  
An individual may be 'improved' by the process of a doctoral programme and experience.
10. Is the quality of the process reflected in completion rates?
11. How about the supervision process – and supervisor training? The supervisor role is, of course, crucial – as expert advisor, mentor, motivator. Is there any evidence, however, that attendance at training courses improves the behaviour of effectiveness of a supervisor?
12. Linked to the doctoral process, there also has to be a 'container' – something in which the process takes place. The container might be the HEI, the department, the discipline, or something else. Supervisor training is generally useful in helping a supervisor to establish a feel for the container – to understand the context of process.
13. Differences in the doctoral process are recognised. These may be related to type of degree programme (eg professional doctorates), or to discipline and traditions of management –
  - Scientific research group context (better facilities, critical mass, peer-motivation, measurable outputs at intervals, support structures, defined project? Almost equivalent to a professional doctorate cohort?)
  - vs the lone researcher model in small humanities department.
14. In terms of type/category of doctorate, there are perhaps two broad groupings:
  - Traditional PhD; PhD by Published Work
  - Professional doctorate; New Route PhD; practice-based PhD  
There are sometimes strong external drivers – especially with regard to professional doctorates.
15. They should all be equivalent in respect of standards and quality of outcomes but various in the nature of the process and the student experience. The characterising criterion of an 'original contribution' should apply – but in a number of different contexts – e.g. professional practice.
16. What constitutes originality? This will be different in different contexts (and probably related to different disciplines) – discovery of new knowledge, developing a new theory, applying existing knowledge to new situations/in new ways.
17. What do examiners look for? Originality of topic, of methodology, a multi-disciplinary approach? This tends to be implicit, not explicit.
18. Some of the features that constitute originality may be contradictory – a candidate may not be able to demonstrate them all. It might be good practice to encourage the candidate to specify in their conclusion what they have achieved in respect of the criteria for the award – especially in relation to originality.