



The PhD System Under Pressure: An Examiner's Viewpoint

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Introduction

The PhD degree has been described by educationalists as "the pinnacle of academic qualifications in higher education" (Denicolo 2003, p. 84). In recent decades, it has become accessible to more and more students, to the point that some authors (e.g. Cyranoski et al. 2011) have written about overproduction. In our opinion, that is the least of its problems. In a world dominated by accelerating social, economic and technological change, universities are under immense pressure to adapt, and the PhD degree, as an institution, is by no means isolated from such forces. But are they beneficial or detrimental? With the intention of systematically considering the issues that currently bear upon the degree, this article reviews some academic studies of the PhD as a phenomenon that consists of a process and an outcome. In order to produce a critique of examination processes and a warning about what current trends may mean for the future, we draw on our experience of examining PhD theses. We received our PhDs in 1977 and 1985, respectively, and we have been practising academics ever since then. We have thus accumulated a wealth of experience of supervising PhD research and examining theses. This paper builds upon our previous critique (Alexander and Davis 2014) and suggests a classification of problems that assail the modern PhD degree. We believe that, not only is the academic doctorate the pinnacle of qualifications, it is—or should be—a gold standard for quality and rigour. The PhD graduates of today will teach and mentor those of tomorrow. This is the highest level of knowledge transfer and we cannot afford to let standards slip.

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3 25 This article begins with a review of academic literature on the PhD with
4 respect to how the degree is formulated, applied and examined. We then move on to
5 a critique of the examination process, or in other words of the outcome of doctoral
6 studies. As Grabbe (2003, p. 128) noted, "Research examining seems to attract
7 anecdotes like a magnet." He added that the anecdotes are most commonly of the
8 tragic kind. Although between us we have accumulated a rich fund of anecdotes,
9 indeed, of horror stories, about examining PhDs, we are more concerned to analyse
10 them in the form of a systematic overview of what can go wrong and what might need
11 to be put right. Finally, we return to the literature and consider some answers to the
12 issues raised by our analysis. We believe that the PhD is under threat from powerful
13 forces in academia that risk causing quality to be compromised and we hope that by
14 examining these issues we can make a modest contribution that will help maintain
15 standards.
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33 **Studies of studies: academic investigations of the PhD in the modern world**

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35 40 In this article, we are not concerned with the literature on how to study for a PhD or
36 how to prepare for the viva examination. We are occupied instead with the academic
37 literature that analyses the PhD degree as a phenomenon, a piece of pedagogy, an
38 instrument of learning or an indicator of the human condition. Most of this comes
39 from the United Kingdom and Australasia. In the 1990s in Australia there were
40 conferences on the subject and these set off a train of interest that has produced
41 some continuity of interest among academics, albeit in a fairly thin and sporadic form.
42 The relevant research output in the United Kingdom is similarly inconsistent and in
43 the United States it is almost non-existent. This is probably because the main
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3 emphasis has been on creating and running PhD courses. Any analysis has been for
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5 50 the purposes of internal audits and reports, not to contribute to the general literature
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7 on higher education. Rather than in fully academic journals, much of the commentary
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9 has appeared in what we might call 'trade' journals, such as *Times Higher Education*
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11 in the UK and the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in the USA. We are mainly
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13 concerned here with peer-reviewed publications, as these have greater weight and
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16 55 longevity.

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18 To begin with, a small number of books have been published on the PhD.
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20 These are of three kinds: a manual on "how to do it" (Tinkler and Jackson 2004); a
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22 pedagogical survey (Nerad and Heggelund 2008); and methodological debates
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24 (Aitchison et al. 2010, Lee and Danby 2011). Taken together, they offer a reasonable
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27 60 overview of the topic from various perspectives, although not of a kind that solicits
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29 controversy. A very few works have dealt with the history of the PhD. Park (2005)
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31 noted that it is a relatively modern phenomenon, having developed in Germany in the
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33 1860s and Britain after the First World War. Taylor (2011, p. 261) took the opposite
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35 view when he argued that "Most doctoral-education programmes conform to a model
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37 65 defined in European universities during the Middle Ages." A compromise explanation
38
39 might suggest that the present-day PhD is a relatively modern institution, but one
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41 with ancient roots.

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44 Whatever its roots, the PhD degree is by no means a homogeneous
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46 phenomenon. In fact, it differs in organisation, specification, duration, composition,
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48 70 prestige and quality control from one country to another, and indeed from one
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50 institution, or even one university department, to another. The one common thread is
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52 that the output of PhD graduates is growing steadily and strongly around the world
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3 (Andersen and Hammarfelt 2011). Not only are more doctoral students at work in
4 departments than were there in previous decades, more institutions are venturing
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7 75 into doctoral studies. Both Nerad and Heggelund (2008) and Cyranoski et al. (2011)
8
9 have compared some international models. There is a drive to define both lower and
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11 higher standards. Cyranoski et al. (2011) argued that in China, for example, training
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13 is too short, supervisors are poorly qualified, standards are low and criteria for
14
15 assessment are absent. In Italy, the doctorate was first proposed in 1980 and was
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18 80 introduced in the 1990s. Foreign doctorates are not automatically recognised as
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20 legitimate qualifications, and the legal status of the Italian doctorate is precarious.
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22 Because it is a recent innovation, many of the supervisors of doctorates in Italy do
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24 not have the qualification themselves (Stirati and Cesaratto 1995). Nonetheless, the
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26 Italian—and the Chinese—PhDs are fully part of the internationalisation of the degree
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29 85 (Enders 2004), which no doubt has some effect in terms of homogenising quality
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31 (Nerad and Heggelund 2008).

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33 As Morley et al. (2002, p. 264) noted, "Successful PhD completion is a key
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35 performance indicator for universities." It represents prestige, intellectual weight and
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37 the ability to compete in the education market. The last of these attributes is strongly
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40 90 reflected in the astonishing way that universities have thrown caution to the winds
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42 and embraced the neo-liberal model of education as a commodity to be
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44 manufactured, sold and bought. As Morley et al. (2003, p. 69) put it, "In the new
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46 market culture of consumer rights, with students constructed [sic] as paying
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48 customers, rather than recipients of a welfare service, the problems of doctoral
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51 95 assessment are likely to increase as investors in the educational product want more
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53 certainty and reliability of outcome." What this statement neglects to add is that a
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3 reliable outcome is not necessarily a high quality one. Frick et al. (2017) noted that
4 this model tends to take away scholars' and scientists' independence, including their
5 ability to criticise the sponsors of research.
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9 100 The alternative to the neo-liberal university is usually regarded as the
10 traditional one in which researchers are shielded from the worst effects of market
11 forces. In the literature on the PhD, there are both proponents and opponents of each
12 model. For example, the neo-liberal view is upheld by Tinkler and Jackson (2000)
13 and Vilkinas (2002), who see health and vitality in market forces. The most trenchant
14 defence of neo-liberalism in universities came from Taylor (2011, p. 261), who
15 argued that the traditional model is not only antiquated, but "education is a *process of*
16 *cloning* that trains students to do what their mentors do" [our italics]. He proposed
17 modernising the system by giving more decision-making power to administrators (i.e.,
18 taking it away from research supervisors and heads of doctoral schools). In our view,
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20 105 this would be fatal: presumably Taylor's reformed doctorate would produce clones of
21 the business managers instead of the supervisors. The anti-neo-liberal view has
22 been defined by Morley et al. (2003) and defended by Kendall (2002). Evans and
23 Kamler (2005) cast that process as a defence of scholarship.
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40 ***Supervision, students and standards***

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42 115 There, in the middle of the cross-fire, are the students and their supervisors. A
43 comment by Morley et al. (2002, p. 266) is heavy with implied meaning—and perhaps
44 foreboding: "In the power-laden micro-politics of the academy, many diverse interests
45 are thus invested in the viva. It is almost an academic equivalent of debutantes being
46 presented at court." Both Heath (2002) and Acker and Haque (2015) examined the
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3 120 effect of stress on students as they prepare to go through with this exercise, or ritual
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5 as it is sometimes characterised (Carter 2008).
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7 Supervision is clearly one of the keys to successful completion of the PhD.
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9 Indeed, in some circumstances it is probably *the* key. Some authors have
10 conceptualised it as a process of mentoring (Vilkinas 2002, Lindén et al. 2013), while
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12 125 others have seen it in pedagogical terms (Heath 2002, Lee 2008, Lovat et al. 2008,
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14 Adkins 2009, Robertson 2017). Yet other authors have been occupied with the
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16 human dimension (Mullins and Kiley 2002, Ives and Rowley 2005, Lovat et al. 2008,
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18 Morrison et al. 2011), and, finally, researchers in pedagogy have taken an
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20 experimental view of supervision (Johnston 1997, Holbrook et al. 2008). Heath
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22 130 (2002, p. 51) summed up a consensus when he noted that "close supervision usually
23
24 yields results". Some of the authors have focused on the role of supervision on the
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26 outcome, from which Mullins and Kiley (2002) and Carter (2008) drew the obvious
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28 inference that the examination of the thesis is a test of *both* the student and his or her
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30 supervisors.
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35 135 As these and other authors have noted, the examination is an attempt to
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37 impose standards of judgement on the end product of three, four or however many
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39 years of PhD study. Whether these standards are formal or nominal, and whether
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41 they represent a consensus on quality and rigour, has been the subject of much
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43 debate.
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46 140 It is clear that the end product of doctoral studies can be highly variable from
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48 one discipline to another. Despite this, some authors have proposed benchmarking
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50 (Shaw and Green 2002). Others have advocated using a written contract between
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52 supervisor and student. (Hockey 1996). Yet others have suggested that there should
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3 be performance evaluation, with particular emphasis on the time taken to complete
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5 145 the work (Wright and Cochrane 2010). Standards have been proposed and debated,
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7 or simply wished for (Nightingale 1984, Morley et al. 2002, Denicolo 2003), but the
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9 alternative view has also been advanced, namely that such measures are not
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11 necessary because they are already inherent in the lengthy reports that most
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13 examiners write (Holbrook et al. 2008).
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16 150 ***The examiner***

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18 The arbiter of the thesis, and the person who applies the standards, however notional
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20 they are, is of course the examiner. Procedures vary by country and institution such
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22 that there may be between one and five examiners. Golding et al. (2014, p. 567) took
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24 a reassuring view in asserting that most examiners are consistent in their criteria and
25
26 155 judgement. Moreover, various authors have argued that examiners would rather pass
27
28 than fail a thesis and will do what they can to achieve that goal, hopefully without
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30 sacrificing standards. In a provocative and entertaining article, Grabbe (2003, p. 133)
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32 took a less reassuring view of the role of the examiner. In discussing the pressure to
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34 pass a student, he observed that "Feeling sympathy for a failed student, however, is
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36 160 not the same as assuming a miscarriage of justice." Picture the examiner who does
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38 fail a student, a process which is "devastating for the candidate, but [also] seriously
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40 traumatic for the examiner, caught between desire to 'give the student the benefit of
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42 the doubt' and the need to uphold standards, and potentially vilified" (Grabbe 2003,
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44 p. 129). Grabbe further argued that appeals against failure are more likely to be
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46 165 attributed to inadequate supervision than unfair examination. In our experience, that
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48 is often not the case, and we more commonly see a collective failure to confront the
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3 reality of *why* a thesis is an inadequate submission for the degree. This aspect is
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5 considered in more depth in a later section of this paper.
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7 ***The published papers option***

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9 170 Finally, there is now a small literature that critically appraises the route to a doctorate
10 through a collection of published papers (Wilson 2002, Badley 2009). While the
11 majority of doctoral theses are still unitary monographs, it is increasingly common to
12 find the alternative option, or even the requirement, to submit a collection of papers
13 published in peer reviewed journals prefaced by a learned introduction which
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20 175 highlights what it is that links them together (Breimer and Mikhailidis 1993). This is
21 now a prevalent model in Scandinavia and it is increasingly common elsewhere, for
22 example in Australia (Jackson 2013). In the United Kingdom, it started out as a so-
23 called 'staff doctorate', meaning an easy way of giving a long-serving member of staff
24 the PhD qualification for his or her previous efforts at publication (Davies and Rolfe
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31 180 2009).

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33 The advantage of this route to a doctorate is that the candidate already has a
34 collection of peer-reviewed publications to his or her name without the need to repeat
35 scholarship by extracting and abstracting parts of the thesis to form publishable
36 papers. Furthermore, Badley (2009, p. 331) sought to justify the published papers
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41 185 option by arguing that "Publishability is one major criterion by which doctoral level
42 work may be judged." However, although Badley (2009) argued that traditional
43 theses tend to lead to publication *after* the thesis has been examined, this is no
44 longer true. Such are the pressures and such is the need for speed, that today's
45 doctoral candidates are pretty much bound to be writing for publication as they
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52 190 compile their monograph theses.
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3 Despite its popularity, the published paper route is fraught with risk. To begin
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5 with, the papers must represent a coherent development of thought and must
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7 therefore be complementary to one another. This is not easy to achieve with papers
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9 that are by definition stand-alone works. We have examined theses in which the
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11 195 papers are all slightly different versions of the same work, or where the candidate is
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13 one of numerous authors and has not had a dominant role in the writing of the paper
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15 (or the research that underpins it), and that fail to progress in any discernible
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17 direction. Of course, the same may happen with monograph theses, but it is more
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19 difficult to ignore the question of continuity between one chapter and another. It is
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21 200 especially worrying to see papers that enjoy a moderate success as separate works
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23 but do little to contribute to the whole work. We do not believe that a doctorate should
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25 be awarded merely for publishing a certain number of papers, regardless of what
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27 they mean in collective terms. That would merely demonstrate lack of depth and
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29 continuity in argument. Moreover, in the interests of adhering to basic standards, we
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31 do not condone the inclusion of 'grey' literature in the collection of peer-reviewed
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33 205 papers (by 'grey' literature we mean that which has not been formally published in
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35 peer-reviewed journals).

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39 As Badley (2009, p. 333) observed, "Coherence, in the context of the PhD by
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41 published work, may be regarded as a candidate's attempt to provide a convincing
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43 210 critical narrative about the overall intellectual position unifying the submitted articles
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45 or papers." Failure to be rigorous can lead to a whole catalogue of issues about
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47 quality that concern the eligibility of candidates, the nature of supervision and the
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49 value or outcome of assessment. *Sapientia est iudicium!*ⁱ

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3 215 **Conclusion on the literature**
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5 Although research on the phenomenon of the research doctorate has been published
6 now for more than 30 years, interest in the topic has been sporadic and the research
7 output in refereed journals is remarkably thin. Authors have had their enthusiasms,
8 for example for the published papers route, for benchmarking and for contracts or
9 standards, but most of the suggested innovations have not generated groundswells
10 of opinion in their favour. The neo-liberal model of the "university as knowledge
11 market--or factory" has been promoted and criticised. Empirical studies have
12 revealed opinions and tendencies, but there are many areas in which very little has
13 been done.
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24 225 We work in disaster risk reduction, an academic and practical field that has
25 existed on one form or another since 1917. It is now immensely popular and has
26 begun to produce doctoral theses in quantity from a wide variety and geographical
27 spread of institutions. Our knowledge of the field tells us that when we study
28 disasters, we need to look beyond the superficial activators of the events to discover
29 the root causes, which are sometimes known as 'underlying risk drivers'. Only in this
30 way will we achieve a sufficiently deep and accurate understanding of events.
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Disaster risk and recovery management are subjects in which lives depend on the application of effective approaches and policies. Therefore, rigorous scientific research must be continuously applied in order to form a basis of accurate decision making by governments and agencies. Much of this applied research will come from students undertaking PhD work, hence the concerns expressed in this paper.

The same reasoning could be applied to the doctorates themselves. The radical transformation of universities through the application of the neo-liberal model

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3 of unfettered market capitalism has had an enormous impact on degree courses at
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5 240 all levels, as have the social and economic changes that have taken place in the
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7 wider world and have affected students, funding bodies, professional institutions, and
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9 the quality of the workplace. The Mediaeval model of the university as a cloistered
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11 habitat of thinking and debate has been influenced--or perhaps swept away--by
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13 ideologies based on market forces. Governments have had a hand in this
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15 transformation, and not all protagonists of the PhD have appreciated their efforts.
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17 Evans and Kamler (2005, p. 118) argued that: "in the name of scholarship we have to
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19 fight back against the tendency of government agendas to subvert the purpose of
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21 doctoral education." This, of course, presupposes that we have a consensus on what
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23 that purpose is. In our view, rather than a consensus, it is increasingly a battleground
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26 250 (Kendall 2002), as the following paragraphs suggest.
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31 **A model of problems**

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33 The disappointed reader may wonder why our model should seek to characterise
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35 only problems, and not solutions. We will conclude with some reflections on that
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37 255 issue, but in order to know what the solutions are we first have to understand the
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39 problems, and their magnitude and extension. Let us be clear that we are not
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41 presenting the results of a statistical survey. In that sense, we are open to the
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43 criticism that our work sees only part of the phenomenon, perhaps what in our
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45 pessimism we want to see. However, we have encountered these issues over and
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47 over again, and this has convinced us that there is a pattern to be discovered and
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49 brought out. Our observations are based on examining tens of these in different
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51 universities, countries and continents. In each case we have written a report on the
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3 thesis, as judiciously as possible, and in many, but not all, cases the work has gone
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5 to oral examination, usually with positive results. Like Grabbe (2003) we remember
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7 265 very clearly the stress and strain on both sides of the room when we have had to fail
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9 candidates.

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11 The first of the problems we identify is **ignorance**. There seems to be an
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13 increasing tendency of academic staff members to take on theses in fields which they
14
15 do not know well enough to supervise. We have known students arrive at the viva
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17 270 without learning the name of the principal authority in their chosen field, or studying
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19 his or her work. In some cases they have not made the effort to discover and visit a
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21 centre of expertise in their chosen field. All of these omissions are something that
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23 should have been corrected at a very early stage by the supervisor (Davis 2016).
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25 Although most students who face the ignorance of supervisors are victims, there are
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27 275 a few who, through laziness, see the institution as a pushover, such that there is no
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29 need to make much effort to get to grips with the subject under study. A diligent
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31 external examiner might fervently disagree.
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35 Our second problem is **nepotism**. Perhaps the student is on the staff, or is
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37 very close to the staff, or is married to a staff member or one of his or her
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39 280 supervisors. When it comes to the examination such a person may feel a
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41 considerable sense of personal invulnerability.
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44 Thirdly, there are various forms of **corruption**. The ostensible reasons why an
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46 external examiner is appointed are to confer visible impartiality on the examination,
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48 make use of expertise from outside the university, and ensure that common
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50 285 standards are applied. However, the candidate's supervisors may assume that the
51
52 external examiner is someone who can be relied upon to yield to pressure to pass
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3 the candidate regardless of the quality of the thesis. In any case, if the external
4 expert refuses to pass the thesis, it may go to appeal and his or her judgement may
5 be overruled, in some cases summarily, without open discussion, and with few or no
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7 controls on the process of re-examining the thesis. We have both seen this happen,
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9 290 although it would obviously be injudicious of us to discuss specific cases.
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13 Money plays a considerable role in this process. Where a student has paid
14 very high fees for three or four years there may be pressure to justify the expenditure
15 by passing the thesis. Scholarships that involve a contract in which the funding is
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17 295 dependent on completion of the degree may be particularly susceptible to this
18 problem. A university may be extremely unwilling to upset a funding body by
19 demonstrating that its investment in an incompetent student was misguided. Another
20 issue with money is encountered with the naked or near naked institution that is short
21 of PhD passes for its teaching or research assessment and therefore has to generate
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23 300 them by all means possible, including subverting the examination.
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33 Fourthly, we have encountered **negligence**. In some cases, the student may
34 refuse to take the advice of the supervisor. If this is patently unacceptable or ill-
35 judged, that is the right approach, but we have known cases of theses submitted
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37 against the supervisor's advice that have failed as a result. Alternatively, the
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39 305 supervisor may be competent but too busy or too lazy to supervise the student,
40 whose work eventually goes to examination regardless of what is wrong with it.
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46 From his extensive experience of PhD examining, Grabbe (2003) described a
47 memorable case in which the thesis became a battleground between the student, the
48 supervisor and the university, with the external examiner caught in the cross-fire. We
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50 310 have both had similar experiences. They were not resolved in any way that could be
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3 described as ethically acceptable. The greatest arguments for upholding standards
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5 are two. First, passing a sub-standard thesis is a disservice to the work of those
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7 students whose theses are good and excellent. It can devalue the PhD. Secondly,
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9 the doctorate seriously needs its standards if the scholars and scientists of the future
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11 315 are to benefit from insightful, inspired and rigorous training. So much ingenuity is
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13 required to solve society's problems that we cannot afford for the producers of those
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15 ideas to be mediocre thinkers.
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23 24 25 26 **Setting the 'gold standard'** 27

28 We have stated that PhD research needs to set the 'gold standard' for all academic
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30 research endeavours. Therefore, in rounding off our paper, we believe that the
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32 following steps need to be taken by the various actors and maintained over time.
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35 *The university.* Everything starts here. University leaders, senates and governing
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37 bodies need to devise an agreed policy to ensure the quality and excellence of PhD
38
39 work. Criteria are needed to establish and constantly to monitor which departments
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41 and academic staff are qualified to supervise high quality PhD research.
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43 330 *The academic department.* To preserve their reputations and integrity, academic
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45 departments need to define where their expertise lies with much care. To undertake
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47 the supervision of effective, ground-breaking PhD research they need to be highly
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49 capable in the field in question. The staff who supervise the PhD work should be
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51 authoritative in the field. Anything less will clearly lead in the direction of sub-
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3 335 standard research, potentially with damage to the reputation of the department and
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5 university, and to the subject in question.

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7 *The PhD supervisor.* The responsibility lies with qualified academic staff to take on
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9 the supervision of research only in fields or sub-fields in which they have an
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11 established track record of competency, or, better still, excellence. We have heard it
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13 340 suggested that supervisors only need to be well-versed in research methods, rather
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15 than in the subject under study, and we totally reject this claim. With every new
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17 enrolment in a PhD programme, supervisors need to ask themselves whether they
18
19 have the time and energy to take on the student and give him or her the dedicated
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21 attention required and for which the student will probably pay substantial fees.
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24 345 *The external examiner.* The examiner carries a vital responsibility for providing
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26 'quality assurance'. An external examiner needs:-
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- 28 • to be robust and decisive against intimidation, however subtle its expression
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30 may be
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32 • to be conscientious in reading every word of a dissertation, a process which
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34 350 may take several days of undivided attention
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37 • to have complete command of the field of research, and this requires a high
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39 level of discernment, self-awareness and honesty in deciding whether the
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41 person is fit to accept the role of examiner or not.
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44 *The student.* Before applying to a programme of study or department, the student
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46 355 needs to play his or her part in verifying the quality of the academic unit and potential
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48 supervisors. He or she needs to explore the track record of possible supervisors,
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50 noting their levels of expertise and experience as well as whether they have
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52 previously supervised PhD work with success. The issue that each student should
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3 note is that supervision is required from a person who has, not only read the
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5 360 literature, but also helped create the subject under study through his or her own
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7 research and writing. This 'verification process' is particularly challenging and
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9 important for students who come from outside the country in which they wish to
10
11 undertake their doctorates.
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15 365 **Conclusions**

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17 In the neo-liberal university, education is a product that is marketed to students, but
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19 with remarkably little leeway for correction if it happens to be a faulty product. Most
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21 PhD degrees are not purchased, but there is an increasing risk that the
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23 monetarisation of higher education will encourage that to happen. The model relies
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26 370 on relentless growth and vigorous competition. Both of these traits produce
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28 instability. Neither is conducive to good results in academic work, which needs
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30 stability and cooperation. The most remarkable aspect of this situation is that
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32 universities, which should have defended Enlightenment values of truth, objectivity
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34 and humanity, so often embrace wholeheartedly the neo-liberal model which
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37 375 threatens to cause their demise. Such is the academic world of administrators, the
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39 controllers of resources, who pay the piper and call the tune, and how limited in
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41 outlook it is!
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44 Many of the problems of the modern doctorate stem from the underlying
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46 tendency to commodify education. It is remarkable how little has been written about
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48 380 that in the context of the PhD degree. We hope that our modest contribution will
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50 stimulate further debate and, with luck, insight. The answers to the problems we have
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3 outlined are actually quite simple: honesty, application, fair judgement and common
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5 sense, but coupled with appropriate, although even-handed, firmness.
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9 385 Lastly, it is not our intention to suggest that all PhD theses are bad. We fully
10 accept that very many of them are either good or excellent. We do not wish to see
11 these works diminished by classifying them along with work of patently inferior
12 quality. One criticism levelled against our previous work in this field (Alexander and
13 Davis 2014) was that it tended to treat the examination as the cure for problems. We
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15 hasten to correct this impression. In negative cases, the examination is the last
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20 390 bulwark against problems that have usually arisen during the three or four years prior
21 to it happening, but it does tend to throw light on these problems. Carter (2008, p.
22 370) was right when he observed that "it is easy to find oneself examining the
23 supervisor."
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ⁱ The wisdom of the judges.