Reflection on best practice: A kiwi perspective on 'new dimensions for doctoral programmes in Europe'

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Abstract

The 2006 United Kingdom Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) summer conference has implications for learning advisors who support doctoral students. European mapping of new dimensions of doctoral research affects Australian and New Zealand universities. This article reflects from a learning advisor's perspective on the implications of some of the issues raised at the conference, such as increased doctoral output; equity; excellence; transferable skills; flexibility and the market model of the knowledge economy research boom. 'Best practice' is a focus of the article. Nonetheless this term is found to be problematically stretched across a set of tensions inherent in the current desires and responsibilities of universities. Doctoral programme support is placed on ground zero of many of these tensions, with potential for growth along with some new challenges.

Introduction

As Europeans mapped out new dimensions for doctoral programmes, where would they position learning advisors? I went from New Zealand to the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) Summer Conference, 6-8 July 2006, *New dimensions for doctoral programmes in Europe: Training, employability and the European knowledge agenda*, seeking useful pointers for the Student Learning Centre doctoral programme I coordinate in Auckland, New Zealand. With a kiwi learning advisor's perspective, I went as something of a pilgrim from the provinces, hoping European discussion of doctoral programmes would usefully inform my own practice.

As I had hoped, this conference turned recurrently to search for best practice. Best practice is nicely defined as 'the pursuit of world class performance…a moving target….The concept of continuous improvement is integral to the achievement of best practice' (Australian Best Practice Demonstration Program 1994, cited in Wilson & Pitman, 2000, p. xvii). Best practice, then, despite the superlative suggesting nowhere further to go, seeks continuously to be better. The conference faced the challenges to doctoral programmes and 'best practice' rang as a confident chorus. Like my own institution (where 'best practice' is also a litany), universities around the globe are almost universally exerting themselves to attract more research students, to attract better research students, to improve retention and completion rates and to assist doctoral students into worthwhile research employment upon completion. Such ambitious goals make best practice's continuous improvement and the self-reflexivity implied by this essential. Learning advisors are likely to be part of the institutional drive for best practice, and to be concerned with their own employment of, and contribution to, best practice. Individually and collectively we must better our best.

Yet best practice is not a straightforward term, despite its optimistic self-assertion. This report looks at the conference from the perspective of one seeking best practice direction, yet finding confirmation

that other educationalists grapple with familiar sets of tensions and ambivalences. Davies (2003) complains that "teachers who work in pedagogical institutions are multiply inscribed, subjected to discursive lines of force pushing and pulling in contradictory directions. Multiple discourses operate in a palimpsest of overlapping meanings that do not totally occlude with each other" (p. 101). Where does best practice sit amongst the fault-lines of conflicting interests, and multiple responsibilities? If learning advisors are able to take advantage of institutional desire for doctoral support best practice, where do we want to go with this opportunity in terms of our own professionalism, job satisfaction and personal fulfilment?

The conference

The UKCGE who organised the conference is an independent body that champions graduate education, promoting the development of its quality, and quality measures, ensuring effective leadership and management of postgraduate students, equal opportunities and effective infrastructure in graduate education in the UK (Cameron, 2006). To this purpose, member universities collaborate in developing good practice at the same time formulating policy advice for the government. Thus the conference organising body is well placed to act as a beacon for other universities outside of the UK who strive for the same broad goals (and indeed, my institution regularly looks at the codes and guidelines that come out of UKCGE work).

This is the first time the UKCGE have opened their conference to those from outside the UK. About 160 delegates came from Australia, Austria, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, the Russian Federation, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovakia, Spain, and the USA as well as from within the UK (home to about half the delegates). Papers were not called for; instead strategically chosen key-note speakers addressed best practice within the framework of the Bologna process agenda, with discussion following each address.

Bologna process: the European perspective

The Europeans were engaged in the task of meshing with close neighbours. "With an increased political, economic and cultural integration....research and innovation are seen as strategic tools to promote European competitiveness in a more globalised world" (Andersson, 2006, p. 79). European delegates were seeking to promote graduate education in light of the Bologna Process, named after the place of the proposal, in 1999, to harmonise academic degree standards and quality assurance standards throughout Europe (Weber & Duderstadt, 2006, pp.11-13). The process began with lower levels of education and had worked its way slowly up to the doctorate, on the agenda from 2003's Berlin meeting. There are currently 45 signatories to the Bologna agreement, with considerable diversity of practice as a result, and thus the need for discussion to promote and share good practice in the process of harmonisation (Ritchie, 2006). The European perspective is one anxiously based on the difficult administrative task of homogenisation. Lee and Green (1998) identify continuing recent interest in "theorising and understanding postgraduate pedagogy more generally" (p. 6); the European need for unity intensifies this discourse around the doctorate. Thus for most delegates, system change for unity motivated their close scrutiny of doctoral programmes and practices.

The perspective from down under

No island is an island (as Ginzberry, 2000, observes in his title). Many of the themes that emerge overtly from the European need to 'harmonise' resonate with interests in New Zealand and Australia despite our lack of the homogenising drive. We want our systems to be compatible, our standards comparable, with those of our international colleagues. As long-standing practice is defined, qualified, and quantified in Europe, we too are likely to do more self-auditing and reflection. Arguably the globalisation of education makes further homogenisation inevitable, even for those of us who do not have an overt agenda of unification. We are affected by what the European Union does. More to the point, though, the European discussion, intense because based on a practical need for

unity, rather usefully pulls together ideas on practice, and on best practice. If we can afford to be mere spectators, and this is unlikely in the long term, we can benefit from listening in to European discussion.

Our institutions are likely to eye the European direction, but the discussion generated by the UKCGE is also relevant to learning advisors, my subjective perspective in attending the Florence conference. In a recent call for Australian and New Zealand learning advisors to consider mapping their own best possible future, Trembath (2006) raised possible directions for the profession, suggesting that we need to steer a direction for where we want to be in the future. Tectonic shifts in international doctoral support are worth considering. What might the European perspective suggest for our own practice? Could we be better placed to respond to recent disruption to learning centres in both Australia and New Zealand if we position our work in an international context?

Imperative to increase: double, double

Some factors became apparently common at the UKCGE summer conference: for example, universally, universities plan to increase doctorate completions. There is a national interest in keeping up at an international level, expressed for example in the Irish fear that 'the lack of a sufficient supply of doctoral students could seriously hinder Ireland's aim to create a research-intensive university system and stimulate higher levels of …research and development' (Walsh, 2006), perhaps undermining that country's current strong position (Jones, 2006, pp. 94-96). Ireland hopes to more than double the number of doctoral students by 2010. Data from 18 countries showed that all were increasing, and intending to further increase, their doctoral research completion output (Powell, 2006). Floud (2006), Vice-President of the European University Association, identified higher education as a 'global growth business,' projecting that 45% of the population might be participating in higher education in many European countries in the near future. It is not new to note that "A knowledge based economy …means that most productive activity will require higher levels of skills and knowledge" (McNair, 1997, p. 29). The bar of higher education is rising. My own institution's goal for doubled doctoral completions by 2012 reflects international trends. Similar objectives are likely to affect most learning advisors. Grant (2006) noted that neoliberal education is good for learning advisors. The desire for increase suggests good business for learning advisors who support doctoral students.

Generic support increase

Another commonality emerging from the conference is that universities are establishing and developing generic support programmes for doctoral students. "Graduate education should enable the provision of generic skills training to all researchers to meet the challenge of interdisciplinary training" (Walsh, 2006). Higher educationalists contrast the value of generic skills teaching (termed 'bolt-on' by Wingate, 2006) to teaching skill sets embedded within course/discipline boundaries (termed 'built-in' by Wingate, 2006). Gilbert (2004) finds "considerable evidence that the development of generic skills in research higher degrees is supported by many research students themselves" (p. 381) but cites literature that is critical (p. 383) and notes that some students and staff have "expressed concerns about the kind of instrumental approach to doctoral training that has spawned generic skills development" (p. 383). Reid (1998) proposes that "a student researcher needs to be engaged in the practice of research *alongside other practising researchers*, in order to learn the generic practice of research" (p. 62). Whatever the theoretical stance, in practice generic skills education is on the increase, recognised as a way to improve completion and retention rates. The recognition is likely to mean more uptake for learning advisors' expertise.

The next few years will probably see more initial training, life-long and career training of doctoral candidates, with taught modules on topics of professionalism including intellectual property law, contractual obligations, accountability, ethical principles, and project management (Bingen, 2006). The doctorate is shifting from a master/apprentice model to a more structured programme that makes "doctoral education a planned, goal-centred training through structured programmes / research

schools" (Steinwall, 2006). Generic support to supplement discipline-based support was generally recognised as a way to improve completion and retention rates.

An example is the UK Graduate Programme, a national generic supporter of graduate students with a vision "for all postgraduate researchers to be fully equipped and encouraged to complete their studies and make a successful transition to their future careers" in an environment where "better researchers do better research" (Pearce, 2006). Personal Development Planning, defined as 'a "structured and supported process undertaken by an individual to reflect on their own learning, performance and/or achievement to plan for their personal, educational and career development", fostered a culture of self-awareness necessary for the development of quality higher education (Pearce, 2006). Postgraduate and doctoral support from learning centres in Australia and New Zealand is likely to enable universities here to hold their own in an international context.

Greater flexibility demanded

Learning advisors may consider giving advice to students about marketing their own research and themselves both as discipline-based and interdisciplinary. Flexibility and an ability to mesh are likely to be important doctoral attributes. Nilsen (2006) reiterated that transferable skills needed identification, skills such as large projects formulation, ethical awareness, failure control, networking competence, complex problem solving, knowledge extraction and synthesis, and the ability to intelligently face the unknown. Graduate schools needed to facilitate these thematic approaches. The possibility of joint degrees between universities was seen as important, as was a move towards research done by groups rather than by the lone researcher. Opportunity exists for learning advisors to expand their repertoire of sessions. We might also take on the advice that we need flexibility as we market our expertise.

Toil and trouble: equity, excellence, devaluation

Equity and excellence

Universities want more doctorates, often double the amount that they produced a year or two back. Long after Macbeth's weird sisters first muttered "double, double…" doubling is still linked with toil and trouble. Learning advisors have opportunity, but also challenge.

Doubling of output requires that excellent candidates (which was generally defined as fast completers who had good publication) be recruited in greater numbers, so that 'a meritocratic stratification is produced' (van Vught, 2006, p. 71). However, exclusion of non-traditional student groups is one evil associated an increased need for speedy completion. Doctoral scholarship funding policies based on high Masters grades may exclude some groups. The UK wants women and minority groups, currently under-represented, to come through as scientists and engineers (Cameron, 2006; Wong & Sanders, 1983). Demographic under-representation in science and engineering is also reported as a US concern (Weber & Duderstadt, 2006, p. 23), as is racial inequality in US doctoral output (Cross, 1998). Powell (2006) pointed out that post-graduate research reflected, and ideally should address, social issues, citing Australian concern that indigenous Australians are poorly represented (see too McConville, 2002) as are Africans in South Africa (where the concern is being addressed; see Gourley & Brennan, 2006, pp. 51-53). The New Zealand PBRF doubling of the amount that universities receive for Maori and Pacific Island post-graduate degrees makes a striking example of Powell's point (although the policy is not without critics). The need for speed may compete as a priority with the responsibility to ensure equity support.

Further, new kinds of inequity ensue from systems intended to foster excellence. The UK Quality Assurance Agency Code of Practice spells out what universities *must* do to avoid losing funding. The result of strict policy aimed to ensure professionalism is that, in the UK, the top thirty-one institutions take 80% of funds, leaving 20% shared out amongst the remaining 147 institutions. Data showed similarly that in Canada, 6 out of 48 Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) grant more than 50% of

doctoral degrees, while in the USA 49 out of 400 HEIs grant more than 50% of all doctorates (Powell, 2006). "An increasing concentration of the delivery of PGR [post-graduate research] by a limited number of institutions" was noted (Powell, 2006), a new kind of elitism that tends towards monopolisation. Van Vught (2006) also discusses "an increase of wealth inequalities amongst institutions" (p. 70).

New Zealand may be moving to a similar position under changes to our funding under Performance-Based Research Funding (PBRF), with each institution prone to a cycle of incremental growth or decline according to initial performance rating. Some universities may end up in a poverty trap. One of the difficulties with that phrase 'best practice' is that any practice usually gives something away as well as having benefits. Funding designed to reward and promote best performance is likely to create inequity even as it rewards excellence.

The polarisation of equity aid and excellence reward exists at the edges of the middle ground that universities occupy, and that learning centres and learning advisors occupy. The student learning centre that employs me was created in the 1980s to address equity by equipping non-traditional students with basic study skills, the lack of which previously prevented their access to higher education. Since then the centre has shifted its focus towards supporting excellence, nowhere more obviously than in the doctoral programme's drive for improved completion rates.

Devaluation

Devaluation of the doctorate is another danger of doubling research output (Cameron, 2006). Massification has meant that "The advance of higher education and the retreat of high academic culture have been synchronized—paradoxically so" (Scott, 1997, p. 15). Already there is often a "lack of a national framework for research careers; poor recognition of 'researcher' as a profession" and a need for a "substantial cultural change in the way researchers are perceived, managed and conduct themselves. The recognition of research as a profession - with researchers recognised as well as recognising themselves as professionals - is the key aspect of this change in perspective" (Cameron, 2006). His comments sit with my experience that frequently research students are unable to recognise and articulate the wide range of transferable skills that they have on completion of their doctorate.

Jobs for the docs

The Vice-President of Eurodoc, the European students' organisation, gave a student's perspective, with main concerns being the quality of supervision, labour conditions for doctoral students as they progress through their degree, mobility, and future career prospects (Ejdrup, 2006). Supervision practice is an issue I do not address here, but one under scrutiny in most universities. Employment was a common concern throughout the conference: where will all these doctors find careers? Doubled output makes this question pressing. Doctors are likely to have to find employment in new areas. More support with professionalism was also being provided along with generic support, with institutions recognising responsibility to ensure that doctoral students connect with future employers and are prepared for employment along the doctoral process.

Recurrently surfacing was the question of whether or not education should be shaped by fiscal imperatives rather than by a long-standing humanist responsibility to keep knowledge alive, free and pure (see too Barnett, 1997, 2003; Minogue, 2005; Walker, 2006; Walker & Nixon, 2004; Weber & Duderstadt, 2006). The new managers of new managerialism - which "views higher education as a commodity-providing service in which needs and priorities can be measured and monitored" (Bundy, 2004, p.165) - are likely to have doctorates. The Senior Research Manager of Nokia Corporation in Denmark, Vandrup, presented a market-model view of what doctoral graduates needed for employment in a global environment. Nokia employs thousands of researchers with doctorates. Vandrup saw globalisation as a competence game, spelling out a shift from multi-nationalisation to meta-nationalisation, where one produced goods in countries where production was cheap, but

marketed back home or to markets similar to home: unlike the situation with multi-nationalism, 'sameness is not a source of value, diversity is.' Interculturalisation has a hard-nosed fiscal drive. Researchers must be able to work in this frame, which required trust of others, unseen in different countries, but working on the same project. Whereas "the knowledge of facts and skills was important…the knowledge of social relations or networks…may be of greater importance to innovation than knowing scientific principles" (Johnson, 2006, p. 100). Vandrup (2006) and Johnson (2006) both envision projects where researchers around the globe develop ideas and projects on a 24 hour basis in collaboration. Learning advisors interested in promoting social networking skills and interculturalisation have an opening here.

Mobility between universities, and multi-disciplinarity were important under a model of meta-nationalism. "Doctoral students should have a foreign exchange as a compulsory part of their training…It is crucial to have an understanding of more than one discipline in order to see the possibilities they provide in combination" (Vandrup, 2006). Learning advisors might already be supporting international and interdisciplinary students and be aware of some of the additional challenges these students face.

The observation was made in discussion that innovation is risky (which matches my own perception that we want inter-disciplinarity and innovation in our rhetoric but candidates can find them problematic in practice). Flexibility, mobility and innovation have price tags in a competitive market. Again there are challenges in turning the rhetoric into practice, but opportunities for learning advisors to develop their support.

However, Vandrup was clear that researchers should focus on marketability. He rejected the idea that universities foster what he called 'hobbyist doctorates': those doing a doctorate out of interest. (Into this category, I extrapolated gloomily, fall doctorates in subjects with no likelihood of financial gain, like medieval literature, for example, and probably much of humanities and social science). Vandrup's extolment of the highly entrepreneurial doctoral candidate was the strongest statement of an undercurrent of the conference: that the universally sought boom in doctoral completions was in the interest of a knowledge *economy* that literalised Friere's (1998) 'banking model' of education. Scientists and engineers were frequently cited as doctoral candidates in models of best practice. Those of us within the humanities and social sciences felt uneasy with this model, and there was some discussion that the 'research to receipt,' market-driven model Vandrup energetically advanced was flawed in its exclusion of many traditional disciplines. Some also saw the spectre of "academics becoming dupes to technological reason" (Barnett, 1997, p. 176).

Research on research

The conference reiterated a desire that data be collected about doctoral students in order to reflect on best practice. Some data was made available. Floud (2006) found across a spectrum of countries that the ratio of women to men is shifting consistently and radically. Statistics from 1975 charted against those from 2000 showed a reversal in ratios. Women have overtaken men as research students in all of the countries surveyed (and in my own institution). Floud (2006) also showed that the average age of graduates is rising.

Nerad (2006), from the Center for Innovation and Research in Graduate Education (CIRGE), dispelled five myths about post-graduate employment through a longitudinal study following the progress of doctors after completion. The five common assumptions that her statistics disproved are that all PhD students want to be professors; that the best (defined by fast completion and many publications) do become professors; that PhD recipients' career paths are linear and smooth; that faculty enjoyed the highest job satisfaction; and that all graduates would take the best job offered to them.

Nerad found that the ratio of doctoral candidates who aspired to professorships varied across disciplines, with English 81% at the top end and Electrical Engineering 19% at the lower end. She

also found that often extroverts wanted employment outside of academia, introverts within it (suggesting that the ivory tower really is a refuge for the socially unwilling). Top students often worked outside of academia (which confirms Vandrup's model of the ideal doctoral candidate). Career paths frequently careered wildly, with travel and family commitments interrupting the progress, and also meaning that doctors did not take the best job offered. Women especially tended to consider their husbands' situation as a major factor in their own job acceptance. Finally, tenured professors rated fourth most satisfied in their jobs after business managers and executives, academic administrators and academic researchers. Temporary academic staff, unsurprisingly, expressed low levels of satisfaction.

The magnitude of the CIRGE study was impressive, the data illuminating, but Nerad confessed that this research was enabled by a huge grant in the millions from the Ford Trust. Although universally institutions want to know the outcome of their policy and practice, the reality is that only the larger institutions with generous gift funding are realistically able to produce data as telling as that shown by Nerad. America seemed most likely to be the place where such figures could be gathered. However, learning advisors who hanker to do research on research may find it a little easier to get approval and funding to do so.

Summing up

Challenges and opportunities for learning advisors become more evident in the light of the European doctoral discussion. On one hand the conference confirmed Walker's (2006) rather densely packed summation that

> Market idolatry is captured in higher education's contemporary dominant emphasis on: 'knowledge is money' (Bernstein, 2000: 86); decontextualized transferable and key skills; measurable learning activities and outcomes; the splitting of teaching from research (see Barnett, 2003); processes of 'quality' assurance of teaching (see Morley 2003); lecturer training to improve teaching; and a discourse of teaching and learning rather than curriculum and pedagogy (p. 11).

Those who come from humanities and social sciences may see the negatives of knowledge economy's new managerialism: "the reduction of critical thought and responsible dissent, the pervasive subliminal fear and anxiety, the sense of personal pressure and responsibility combined with a devalued sense of self, the shift of value away from personal and professionalism towards the single consideration of the economy' (Davies, 2003, p. 94). Yet despite reservations about the ethics of education's neo-liberal ideology, it allows us to do what we want to do perhaps for other reasons, such as because we believe in the *social* value intercultural discourse, in equity and in excellent. We believe, perhaps, that equity *is* excellence (Hadfield, personal communication, November 2006), or we want to embrace unity and enjoy diversity (Dey, 2005). Probably we will need to market ourselves just as doctoral students must (as Crozier, 2006, considered, critiquing the language by which learning centres describe themselves), but if we can do so successfully the future looks interesting.

The desire for more-finely calibrated knowledge of higher education suggests research opportunities for learning advisors. Cameron (2006) saw "the renewal of academic culture itself," a reminder of the promise that this interrogative discourse holds. Learning advisors might have "a guarded optimism about higher education as a site for personal engagement, transformation and change through individual development" (Walker, 2006, p. 1). "Academics may be involved in 'knowledge production' - with its echoes of the conveyor belt - but their toolkit also includes imagination, scepticism and open-minded enquiry" (Bundy, 2004, p. 174). We are likely to expand our repertoire of sessions to meet new demands. The bettering of best practice opens up potential for self-realisation and agency.

We will also need to negotiate tensions. What is really new here? As the UKCGE seeks to contribute to a general unification of Europe, their quest for 'best practice' exists within the drive for convergence. Convergence requires compromise, despite the superlative 'best'. I came home aware of how much in line with the European process my institution is, as we negotiate the tensions between nests of conflicting impulses: equity (with its own kind of excellence) versus excellence (where excellence equates with speed); innovation (highly valued but risky) versus massification (and speed in the road well travelled); the market model versus the humanist one; and the intellectual flexibility made possible by global homogenisation versus the integrity and authenticity of specific idiosyncratic approaches. In the future, ironically, institutions down under, and learning advisors within them, will continue to achieve best practice only by continuously negotiating a series of compromises.

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