

# **Firming foundations for doctorate education in a shifting global environment: Generic doctoral support.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on generic doctoral support, the kind provided by Learning Advisors (LAs), locating New Zealand in relation to the recently established European Higher Education Area (Bologna, 1999). Paradoxically, the European Union Bologna process is firming up doctoral education in an increasingly fluid global environment by standardising degree credit ratings, promoting shared best practice and encouraging transferability of doctoral education across national borders (Bologna Process Stock-taking, 2007). In a position of relative geographical isolation, New Zealand has long been concerned to ensure that our doctorates compete internationally; what is happening in Europe as the sands shift there to redefine borders affects us. New Zealand is currently in a strong position regarding doctoral education. This paper proposes that New Zealand LAs who work with doctoral students might take advantage of the European Union Bologna Process discussion to discuss and theorise generic doctoral support.

## **Introduction**

Increasingly, Learning Advisors (LAs) are providing generic doctoral support. Sharing etymological roots, the term ‘generic’ allows that the doctoral thesis is a *genre* with convention regarding moves, structure and style. Those of us who provide generic support for doctoral students are part of a firming up of research education.

## **Global context: The Bologna process**

A declaration signed in Bologna in 1999 led to the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), a name with a geographic sound to it. However, the EHEA stakes out not so much a bordered physical terrain as a sharing of educational practice. The effect is to erase national boundary-lines that previously acted as barriers. In the case of the EHEA, the ‘shifting sands’ of the conference metaphor is promising, removing surface level obstacles to firm the foundations of pedagogy. The term ‘Bologna Process’ includes the Bologna Declaration (1999), and subsequent

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ratifications at Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005) and London (2007). The Bologna process is strengthening tertiary education in the European HE Area by standardising degree credit ratings (so that credits from tertiary courses anywhere in Europe will be transportable), promoting shared best practice and encouraging transferability of education across national borders (Bologna Process Stocktaking, 2007). In firming Higher Education foundations, the Bologna Process has energised the scholarship of teaching and learning.

EHEA reform is fiscally motivated, as nations and universities so frequently are. Doctorates produce new knowledge, a rich resource in what is perceivably a knowledge economy. The hard-nosed commercialism of neo-liberal doctoral education has been quite appropriately contested by academics (Barnett & Griffin, 1997; McNair, 1997; Rowland, 2006), as has doctoral massification (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2004). However, the Bologna process offers more than commercialisation: there is potential for real educational enhancement to come out of the Bologna process and the EHEA for students and for the practitioners who support them.

The Berlin Communiqué (2003) brought the doctorate into educational harmonisation, labelling the doctorate as education's 'third cycle' after the Bachelors 'first', and Masters 'second' cycles. Historically, doctoral practice has differed between countries (between European countries and also between the United Kingdom and the United States of America). Arguably, of the three cycles the third, with its research output, is the most crucial to fiscal motivation: "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). The Bologna process admits to the desire to flourish in a competitive knowledge economy, seeing that:

...enhancing provision in the third cycle and improving the status, career prospects and funding for early stage researchers are essential preconditions for meeting Europe's objectives of strengthening research capacity and improving the quality and competitiveness. (London, 2007, p. 4)

Whatever reservations might be held about knowledge's entanglement with economy, doctoral pedagogy has fallen under scrutiny as to which practices might be deemed 'best' for adaptation as the standard. Given the spectre of doctoral attrition as high as 50% in some cases (Bair & Haworth, 1999; McAlpine & Norton, 2006; Mendoza, 2007), and tragic personal stories behind the figures, it is promising for individual students of the future that more thought is being given to doctoral teaching and learning. And, increasingly in the last few years, more thought is being given to the outcomes for those new doctors pouring from universities as knowledge producers in need of a livelihood.

At a government level, many countries are watching the Bologna process changes. As a recent Canadian report observes:

Observers from all continents are monitoring with much interest the major changes being implemented in Europe. Countries in Africa, South America, Asia, and North America are analyzing the reform process and trying to determine what influence the Bologna Process will have on their educational systems. (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, Quality Assurance Subcommittee, Committee of Postsecondary ADM, 2008)

As Australia's then Minister of Education, Science and Training, Bishop (2006) noted of the Bologna process: "Australia must remain abreast of these international developments" (Bishop & Poutasi, 2006, p. 1). Most countries intend to keep up with any improvements that emerge from the Bologna process.

Some pedagogues are cautious, observing that that the idiosyncrasies of individuals will always outweigh Bologna process standardisation (Rothblatt, 2008), and questioning whether post-Bologna education might be merely "the same dog with a different collar" (Geraldo, Trevitt, Carter & Fazey, 2009). Others applaud Bologna's potential (Gaston, 2008) and its demand for accountability (Adelman, 2008). This article emphasises that international interest in doctoral process is positive, and has potential to enhance practice. So, how does New Zealand relate to the recently established European Higher Education Area, and discussion of doctoral pedagogy?

## **New Zealand and the Bologna Process**

As I noted in 2006, because we benchmark so self-consciously against international universities, what is happening in Europe affects us (Carter, 2006). New Zealanders are self-conscious about what happens elsewhere because New Zealand sometimes feels a long way from Europe, with Pakeha identity arguably based on a sense of exile (see, for example, Bell, 2006, 2009; Pearson, 2001). To look for the positive side of this locative unease, an added advantage for New Zealand scholars is that academia collapses distance: disciplines have their own 'tribes' (Becher, 2001) and communities of practice across international boundaries.

New Zealand is currently in a strong position regarding doctoral education. At a national level, New Zealand's tertiary education system was found in 2008 to be:

...already comparable to the Bologna ideal. Our three-level degree structure [undergraduate, Masters and Doctoral], Register of Quality Assured Qualifications, quality assurance standards, efforts at increasing participation in tertiary education, and policies that promote institutional autonomy, all closely align with the key elements of the Bologna Process. (Sewell & Poutasi, 2008, p. 4).

At the level of government policy, we are ahead of many European countries (Bologna Process Stocktaking, 2007). New Zealand has benchmarked against Bologna: “The focus therefore, is not on ensuring compliance with the Bologna Process, but on ensuring that comparability mechanisms allow New Zealand’s tertiary education system to relate to all major international models” (Sewell & Poutasi, 2008, p. 4). New Zealand carefully ensures that its doctoral education is in line with all significant international systems including the Bologna manifestos. And although Bologna discussions occur first and foremost at governmental levels, and then at the next tier down, in the board rooms of universities, there is also a wide open opportunity for anyone who is interested to talk about practice.

New Zealand learning advisors who support doctoral students might join the international discourse. Academics as well as governments are responding to Bologna with interest (Carter, Fazey, Geraldo & Trevitt, in press): “The Bologna process and subsequent policy development have a wide-ranging effect in bringing doctoral education into a global conversation beyond the boundaries of Europe” (Boud & Lee, 2009, p. 8). LAs who support New Zealand doctoral students are well placed to join this global discussion.

## **Generic Doctoral Support**

There is not a great deal written on generic doctoral support, the kind provided across campus by Learning Centres. There is quite extensive literature giving advice to doctoral students about the process and the writing of the thesis (Denholm & Evans, 2006; Dunleavy, 2003; Manalo & Trafford, 2004). There is currently useful literature about supervision (Delamont, Atkinson, & Parry, 1998; Denholm & Evans, 2007). Quite a lot has been written on globalisation, internationalisation (Chan & Dimmock, 2008; Naidoo, 2007) and on the experience of students writing up their research in English language when it is not their mother tongue (Ryan & Zuber-Skerritt, 1999; Woodward-Kron, 2007). Recent publications illuminate changing practice (Boud & Lee, 2009) and assessment (Lovitts, 2007; Maki & Borkowski, 2006). An excellent discussion of politics and practice is contextualised with the UK’s focus on what is called ‘Skills Training’ (Hinchcliffe, Bromley & Hutchison, 2007), but support reaches more widely than the drive from the UK. Around the world, increasingly, support that is generic rather than discipline based is being designed, instituted and developed: there is “continued pressure for their [core and generic skills training] effective delivery in higher education and employment” (Bennett, Dunne & Carré, 1999, p. 71). LAs increasingly are part of the doctoral experience.

## **‘Generic’ as applied to doctoral support**

Currently generic support tends to be disdained as ‘bolt-on’, with a preference for the more expensive, tailor-made tertiary learning support that is embedded within disciplines (Wingate, 2006). However, I believe that there is a place for generic support of doctoral students and that the time to theorise more precisely about

efficacious practice has come. The doctorate can be viewed as a genre. I define generic doctoral support as that which belongs to the genre of the doctoral thesis rather than to one specific discipline, to “when research is discussed generically, or across discipline boundaries” (Rowland, 2006, p. 10). Despite the contradiction when ‘generic’ means ‘general,’ and ‘genre,’ ‘coming from a specific family’, the words share Latin roots in gens, genera, and genus: usage has widened the sense of ‘family’ yet both meanings are applicable to LA teaching.

Fostering generic capabilities in a generic doctoral programme typically entails teaching computer skills; information literacy; writing skills; discussing the moves to be made in introductions and conclusions, and in the literature review; and making explicit the generic implications of structure style and voice. These aspects of doctoral production affect most candidates, and “If particular skills are useful across a range of fields, then there may be efficiencies in regarding them as generic and teaching them as such” (Gilbert, Balatti, Turner & Whitehouse, 2004, p. 386). Generic support complements supervision, giving a different perspective, different insights and an additional community of practice complementing departmental and discipline sourced ones.

Borthwick and Wissler (2003) point out that “Many universities tend to interpret generic skills for postgraduate students as being to do with the research process...[yet] many (if not all) of these skills are in fact ‘transferable’ to the workplace” (Borthwick & Wissler, 2003, p. 17), although they observe that students seem unaware of the transferability of their skills. The word ‘generic’ can be applied both to the genre of the thesis (not just writing conventions but also the processes of research underpinning the written work) and to the transferable, employability competencies that the thesis-writing process develops.

‘Generic capabilities’ have also been linked to industry compared to ‘research training’ which belongs in the university domain (Craswell, 2007, p. 377). Craswell’s focus is on capabilities that outlast the doctoral experience. Increased doctoral numbers make it relevant that the support of candidates prepares them for employment outside of academia: bluntly, there are not enough academic jobs to support the sheer volume of new doctors. According to Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2004), “There are too many graduates chasing too few jobs”; “[a] growing supply of knowledge workers does not mean that they will find knowledge work” (p. 23); and “[w]hile employees are free to change employers, they are not free from the need to make a living” (p. 27). Commonly, “doctoral students have a too-long transition period from PhD completion to stable employment” (Nerad & Cerny, 1999, p. 17). Current support for doctoral students “includes...interest in the whole student” (Borkowski, 2006, p. 21). The term ‘generic’ can apply to the thesis’s category of textual performance but equally to the whole person, including their employability, that doctoral research should develop.

Generic sessions that focus on the moves that the written thesis makes, the articulation of those moves, and the defensive signposting of this articulation are likely to also ensure that student develop and recognise the skills they will need after the doctorate. Generic insights empower the articulation of the research.

## **Generic support advantage**

I argue that there is benefit in complementing discipline-specific support with generic support. The suggestion to Arts students that they could overtly discuss methods and methodology can help them out of the opaque rhetoric (often their strength as essayists) to seeing what might be made helpfully explicit, even when their methodology is usually implicit. At the same time, science and engineering students frequently lack the narrative component that tells the story of the research project. Between lists of facts there should be connections. Before charts there needs to be the information that enables them to be decoded. Each section of the thesis needs its own introduction. My feeling is that the curiously defensive genre of the thesis is the one piece of writing that justifies the use of Science's straightforward categorisation *and* Arts' use of narrative. Research investigating doctoral examiners' questions shows how the questions about methodology must satisfy enquiry at a deeper level than the discipline-specific (Johnston, 1997; Tinkler & Jackson, 2004; Trafford & Leshem, 2002). Cross-campus enquiry enables strategies for organising writing from different disciplines to be available to others, but also enables the moves entailed to become clearer, able to be expressed.

Some literature endorses and sustains generic support. Barbara Lovitts (2007) has gathered descriptors of what makes an outstanding, very good, acceptable and unacceptable thesis. Her descriptors are useful for generic workshops' objectives in part because they are so similar across disciplines. Parry (2007) describes the doctorate as a complex game, the rules of which are sometimes covert:

...the idea that doctoral study is in a sense a game, or a meaningful social setting with rules, seemed bizarre at first...[but] many of the doctoral students interviewed appeared to identify very strongly with it...in fact, doctoral study does resemble the combination of written and unwritten rules in any complex game. (p. 6)

Some of the unwritten rules belong to the genre of the thesis rather than to the conventions of the discipline. LAs have a role in clarifying the expectations of the thesis genre.

Assessment of generic support is also a topic of interest to practitioners. The Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID), a research project aiming to improve doctoral support, uses three sets of questions as tools to assess the doctoral programmes of participating universities:

1. What is the *purpose* of the doctoral program? What does it mean to develop students as stewards of disciplines? What are the desired outcomes of the program?
2. What is the *rationale and purpose of each element* of the doctoral program? Which elements of the program should be retained and affirmed? Which elements could usefully be changed or eliminated?
3. How do you know? What *evidence* aids in answering those questions? What evidence can be collected to determine whether changes serve the desired outcome? (Golde, Jones, Conklin Bueschel & Walker, 2006, p. 60)

These three questions are challenging; possible answers could add a new vein of literature to the advice manuals for doctoral students and for supervisors. CID also acknowledges the importance of non-supervisory support.

## Conclusion

Given global belief that we are in a knowledge economy, it is unsurprising that the relatively new practice of generic research support is burgeoning internationally (Hinchcliffe, Bromley & Hutchinson, 2007). This makes sense because there are many aspects of all doctoral work that are generic. LAs or their equivalent are working more often with doctoral students and in doctoral programmes. Our LA positioning offers perspectives only available fairly recently and generally absent from the literature. The last few decades have produced valuable thought on the doctoral process and supervision: there is something of a gap concerning generic support that could be filled by LAs. Our LA positioning offers perspectives only available fairly recently and generally absent from literature.

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