

Conceptualising the PhD. The Students' Perspective

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Debates continue about the PhD and its purpose in a changing academic landscape. The original purpose of the PhD was to create new knowledge and become an academic. In the 21st century though new knowledge is quickly surpassed and as a result new knowledge derived from most PhD's will have a relatively short shelf-life (Group of Eight, 2013). Traditionally completion of a PhD opened the doors to a career in academia. Though increasing numbers of PhD students and high levels of academic workforce casualization means many PhD graduands face low prospects to securing a permanent role in academia and for many the academic profession is losing appeal. The debate has also extended to the skills and competencies that are developed as part of the PhD and how transferable these skills and competencies are beyond academia for industry or government, and openly questioning whether doctoral education is having the impact desired, or required, by academia and industry. What is interesting in this debate is that there is little reference to, or input from, the perspective of PhD students about the impact doctoral education is having on them. This paper addresses the impact and engagement this debate is having on the human dimension by (re)conceptualising the PhD, or doctoral education, from the critical perspective of the students. This paper reports on part of a recently completed PhD thesis, *The Lived PhD Experience: Critical reflections from the Students' perspective*; a research project that iteratively collected the lived experience narratives from 23 PhD students, in various disciplines and stages of their PhD, studying at Australian Universities over a period of 12 months. The Adventure Park is presented as a conceptual framework for the research participants reported experiences of navigating the challenges they encountered and tested their self-efficacy and sense of belonging. The Adventure Park facilitates us to examine the impact of the PhD from the critical perspective of those who live the experience first-hand, and provide another lens to view institutional doctoral education practices that determine many of these experiences.

Keywords: doctoral education, PhD impact, lived experience

Introduction

The purpose of the PhD continues to receive considerable attention. The PhD as we know it dates to 19th Century Germany with the first PhD in Australia awarded in the 1940's (Group of Eight 2013). The purpose of the PhD qualification was to develop new knowledge and served as an entry into academia. This purpose continues now, in the 21st century, and the PhD is still considered the pinnacle of academic qualifications.

The PhD is associated with developing the thinkers, leaders, business people and academics of the future. There is consensus that research and new knowledge will bring significant benefits to society and in Australia, and elsewhere, there are increasing numbers of PhD students and graduates. In fact, the Australian Council of Learned Academies 2016 Review of Australia's Research Training System purports that quality higher degree by research

training will deliver a highly-qualified workforce and thereby support Australia's 'future economic strength' (McGagh et al., 2016, p. vii). However, in Australia and other western cultures, increasing casualization of academic roles, high workloads and low salaries compared to industry and the public-sector are making academia less viable and less attractive. Not surprisingly, many PhD graduates are gravitating toward industry and the public sector for which they are often considered overqualified and overspecialized.

Universities want to improve their graduate research outcomes and to improve 'their bottom line – completions' (Zammit and King, 2016, p.166), prestige and ranking. For public universities HDR research funding is dependent on completions and for an increasing number of private universities PhD completions provide necessary credentials. Not surprisingly, there is much discussion about developing programs that will support PhD students to completion, particularly timely completions. This paper addresses the 'so what' of doctoral education, from the human dimension and highlight that our priority is to understand the purpose of the PhD from the student perspective, because '(h)aving a clear understanding of (the PhD) purpose is necessary to design effective PhD programs but also to ensure that students taking such programs know what they can expect in terms of outcomes and the employment opportunities these will create.' (Group of Eight, 2013, p.27). However, for many PhD students, there is a 'lack of understanding' about the purpose of the PhD (Park, 2005, p. 191) and higher education providers have a 'duty of care' to inform potential PhD students on the nature of the PhD and its potential outcomes prior to enrolment (McGagh et al., 2010, p. xi).

This paper is informed by recent research on the lived experience of PhD students that found that pre-existing perceptions and uninformed expectations have an impact on PhD students lived experience, the quality of their learning experience, their skill and knowledge development, and their time to completion, all of which may possibly lead to attrition. The plan of this summary paper is to first present a brief overview of the research and the methodology adopted. I then present the metaphor of 'the adventure park' to describe from the students' perspective their experience of being a PhD student. Before moving on to explore how the PhD could be reconceptualised as a process or means to develop the knowledge producers of the 21st century and shift the priority from the research outcomes or product a PhD produces.

Research Methodology

The aim of this research was to develop a participant-driven theory of the lived experience of being a PhD student. This was done by analysing the reported experiences of 23 PhD students, in various disciplines and stages of their PhD studying at Australian Universities over a period of 12 months. Participants were given the freedom to choose and prioritise the experiences to report on and how they reported on them. One of the values of this research lies in what it can tell us not only about a cohort of PhD students' perceptions of their experiences but also about how the methodology adopted enabled that cohort to choose *how* to report on those experiences. By not focusing on predetermined elements of the PhD experience, the methodology used in this research enabled the participants to choose which elements of their PhD experience they wished to discuss freely and without constraint.

A thematic analysis of the data was used to identify the kinds of things PhD students chose to report on. Interestingly, discussions were rarely, if ever, about *doing* the PhD research itself unless there was some breakthrough or setback. Participants reported on their experience of *being* a PhD researcher. 'Being' involved processes in which they engaged, forward

momentum and progress, being in a liminal space, their relationships with others and their planned and actual activities they engaged with to make sense of their research. A good deal of the reporting consisted of meaning-making activities to grapple with and make sense of the PhD phenomena and the actions and behaviours required to progress their PhD research to completion.

Conceptualising the PhD experience from the Students' Perspective

I use the adventure park as a metaphor to conceptualise the lived PhD experience as being encapsulated in a liminal space for a period. It highlights the interdependency between actions and behaviours, the challenges of being in that space and the engagement with others in this space and those on the outside. The unstructured and uncertain nature of the adventure park challenged existing ways of knowing and raises fears about their ability. Perceptions about self-efficacy and sense of belonging affect commitment and the desired actions and behaviours required to complete their challenges and leave. Although each participant is on their own challenge course there is an interdependency with others on the inside, their guide and those on the outside. Each is in this adventure park until they have completed their own challenge course and attained expanding and shifting focus or ontological change; or decide not to complete their challenge course and leave.

In this adventure park, the PhD student encounters unfamiliar structures and expectations; in fact, much of what happens and what they do is boundless and unknown. They do know, however, that they will be challenged to produce new knowledge in a given field within a finite time on their own with the guidance of a supervisor. In this liminal space, they are neither who they were before nor yet who they are going to be (Turner, 1969). Accepted as part of the ritual of PhD attainment, the adventure park presents an unknown environment; what will be encountered in it is often unclear and the actions required implicit. There is, however, much excitement and anticipation at entering. Rather like a child entering an actual adventure playground, the participants in my research entered with a level of expectation about the experiences that they would encounter. Even with the best-laid plans (Ward, 2013), the nature of their progression through the phases of their PhD was unknown because, by its very nature, a PhD is to uncover an unknown, develop new knowledge or examine a subject in a way that has not before been done. How they individually would engage with the experience was also somewhat of an unknown. Although participants brought extensive life and academic experience, the PhD challenged them in ways they were at times unfamiliar with, and they were frequently unaware of what the next challenge would bring. They found that their kit of experiential resources did not contain all the resources required to deal with the challenges they encountered. This essentially brought into question their very way of being and knowing.

Metaphorically, this adventure park is also the PhD space, which is cordoned off from personal lives and personal communities. Being in this space metaphorically detaches PhD students from family, friends and acquaintances not engaged in the PhD process but with whom they remain in contact. While free to leave through a side exit at any time to visit those on the outside, the PhD students are nevertheless contained within this space until they either successfully complete the PhD program or decide to leave. There are several entries and exit points, but there is only one final exit gate that can be used only once—when they have completed their own challenge course. Bureaucratic gatekeepers grant leave passes and occasionally ignore brief exits, but leaving through the final exit gate requires all challenges

to have been successfully navigated and completed, and transformation to have been achieved.

Despite some rules and regulations, there is little structure, pedagogy or guidance on *how* to move forward once inside the adventure park (Ward, 2013). The freedom to try out new ideas and concepts, which is initially welcomed, is soon displaced. Participants in this research soon found that their established ways of knowing and being were challenged.

This flux, flexibility, is great for a while. But, damn, it can be hard to maintain a happy existence without much stability. But we are the only ones who can change it. Onward and upward! (AM, 22nd March)

Others in the adventure park included supervisors, other academics and other PhD students on their own challenge course. Being in this space meant the participants were frequently unaware of what was next, which often resulted in a heightened sense of uncertainty and a feeling of being stuck before overcoming one challenge (Kiley & Wisker, 2009) and moving on to the next. Many found there was no-one to be accountable to except themselves and maybe their guide—the supervisor—but depending on the supervisor, the relationship with the supervisor, and the challenge encountered, this could vary.

How they individually complete their challenges is at times flexible and largely up to them, though their time to completion is finite and measured.

I now understand one of the real benefits of conducting a PhD as an external student – complete freedom (well almost) to choose hours, fiddle with timetables, come and go, and complete flexibility to formulate a workspace from any corner or just using my knees. As long as I count my hours, the world is my office. (MW, 1st October)

Reconceptualising the PhD

This adventure park – is a space in which PhD students develop or create this tangible product called new knowledge (Park 2005, p, 198) but it is also a space in which PhD students undertake their own ‘bespoke’ challenge course to become independent researchers. A further purpose of the PhD might be the ability to think clearly; assess, collect and analyse situations and evidence; and use personal agency to progress the aim or project. This is somewhat in contrast to the current institutional focus on the PhD that revolves around the research output, the product, and to a lesser extent the becoming researcher. Universities of the 21st Century should be focusing on the becoming knowledge creators and this should be the bottom line or outcome universities focus on achieving.

The PhD experience is individual, based on the perceptions of PhD research and the expectations the individual brings with them. In addressing the ‘so what’ about doctoral education, the impact and engagement on the human dimension, doctoral education is the process of being a PhD student and doing the research. It is not about the thesis or the knowledge they are creating; it is the process. The presentation that accompanies this summary paper is to focus less on the product – the research output - and focus more on the process and the product will take care of itself.

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