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Title: PhD by Published Work: is it time to tighten clarify the ground rules?

National Teaching Fellows, Sue Smith, Leeds Beckett University and Sally Brown, Emerita Professor, Leeds Beckett

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) by Published Work (PhD by PW) is gaining impetus as a format of doctoral output both nationally and abroad (Smith, 2015). Indeed, doing a PhD by PW makes perfect good sense, particularly for many staff who have come into Higher Education to teach from another profession where “having a doctorate” has not traditionally been part of their professional culture, e.g. in nursing, social work, law or teaching. Frick (2019) is also optimistic about its popularity and expansion and has recently explored whether this PhD by PW route can act as the real panacea to the ills of high traditional doctoral dropout rates and slow doctoral throughput rates.

The PhD by PW is a great route for people who might have atypical career pathways into academia or who have struggled with the financial and work/life juggling act of committing to the traditional route PhD, including many NTFs. It is an inclusive route, enabling candidates to build incrementally on extant achievements - thus benefitting and giving opportunities to those who have taken a career break or for someone with caring responsibilities (Lee, 2010; Smith, 2015).

It made sense to us both to write peer reviewed papers over an extended period of time around a coherent subject area and get them published in the public domain progressively. This proved good for our curiosity and the development of our active research and writing skills. Many NTFs have also done this. Their cases have often included publications about professional practices as teachers which can then be critically reflected upon focussing on exploring the body of work’s originality, coherence, impact and methodologies in depth in a narrative (or synthesis) after a substantial body of work has been generated.

As argued in Sally’s previous blog (Brown, 2018), “a significant advantage of the PhD by PW approach is that many working in HE are likely already to be publishing, and therefore this can be an incremental way by which to kill two birds with one stone”.

We advocate an approach which focusses on the pedagogically sound and intellectually rigorous. Write coherently around what excites and motivates you, be rigorous, and get it published. We have both written like this - about approaches to driving change in HE (Brown, 2011 - a paper included in SB’s PhD by publication) and interdisciplinary education design (Karban & Smith, 2009; Smith & Karban, 2008).

Candidates by this route can think as you go, write in bursts or steadily, publish incrementally and take time to make a strong case. And it is cheaper.... you only pay for your final year as you write up your synthesis which argues that your selected body of work is equivalent in size and stature to that of a traditional doctorate.

Of course, theoretical rigour and sector academic standards are core to all this. Some PhD by PW candidates have a body of high quality, peer reviewed outputs which can be submitted swiftly with a synthesis. However, for those starting writing from scratch and wanting to research *and* publish, it is important they are supported through mentors and/or research groups, HE sector research training and collegiate colleagues who might initially start to co-write with them.

Well then...after all this good stuff....what's not to like about doing a PhD by PW?

It turns out, quite a lot.

Some of us who've completed this route find ourselves subject to carping and sniping by defenders of the conventional route. We have heard, too, about a number of disasters which makes one wonder if what we have heard (and witnessed ourselves) is just the tip of the iceberg.

Many colleagues in the sector have reported a lack of clarity and conflicting advice about what is the required number and type of papers, and/or artefacts to submit. There is also confusion over the extent co-authored works can be included. There seems to be a huge variability in the written award guidance offered by universities especially around the type and number of outputs within the UK, and even more so internationally.

We have heard stories of examiners who have taken it upon themselves to examine the quality of the published papers, which should be a given since they are all already peer-reviewed, rather than use the viva to explore with the candidate the coherence, originality and significance of the contribution of a candidate's oeuvre.

We have heard about many traditional PhD route supervisors are not appropriately briefed about the format of the PhD by PW award and viva and often have had no experience supervising this route before they are called upon to examine the candidate for the PW route. Some internal supervisors ask candidates to undertake inappropriate work such as rewriting papers or changing the methodologies of studies already published. Some just haven't read their own university's regulations about PhDs by PW! We have also heard of a candidate's portfolio of outputs being approved at a confirmation of registration meeting, but for them then to be regarded as "unsuitable" further down the line (often at the first attempt viva). This generates an aura of cultural unprofessionalism, shoddy examining and candidates who naturally feel let down and disappointed by the system, often through no fault of their own.

So, while we still strongly advocate the route for NTFs and others, we would argue for more cross-sector clarity and better supervisor training for this increasingly popular route, with a plea that those who have successfully achieved theirs rise to the challenge to mentor, advise and support those just starting out on this powerfully enabling but sometimes challenging pathway.

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