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PhDs: Fit for the future?

AUA Conference, 16th April 2019

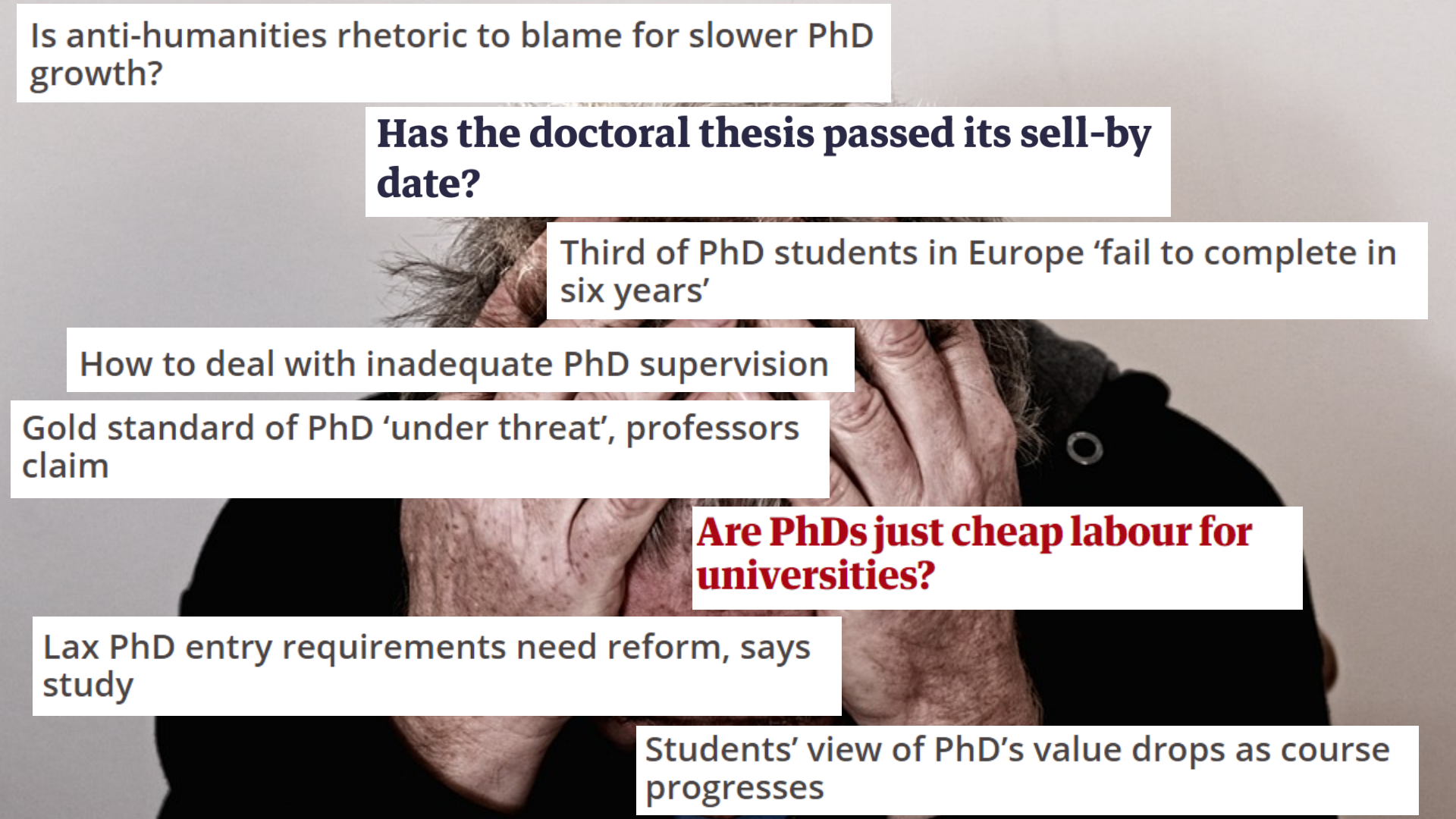
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Introduction/What we will cover

- Trends in Doctoral Study
- Motivations for a PhD
- Administering a PhD
- Enablers and disablers of student achievement
- Wider sector challenges and their potential impact
- Structure: Help or Hindrance?

What is a PhD?

- QAA: “demonstrate an original contribution to knowledge in their subject, field or profession, through original research or the original application of existing knowledge or understanding.”
- Critical appreciation of existing knowledge in the subject (Literature review)
- Different formats – thesis, prior publication, prospective publication, professional doctorate
- What it feels like (Matt Might) – pushing the bubble of knowledge
- Inherently unique, challenging – and unpredictable!



Is anti-humanities rhetoric to blame for slower PhD growth?

Has the doctoral thesis passed its sell-by date?

Third of PhD students in Europe 'fail to complete in six years'

How to deal with inadequate PhD supervision

Gold standard of PhD 'under threat', professors claim

Are PhDs just cheap labour for universities?

Lax PhD entry requirements need reform, says study

Students' view of PhD's value drops as course progresses

Is the PhD in crisis?

- Recent press coverage includes: value of the thesis as a monograph, slow completion, quality of admissions, student experience
- Things we aren't talking about: Are we lying to students about career opportunities? What is widening participation at PGR? Is poor practice falling down the gap between education and research? Are Universities 'gaming' suspensions and extensions?

Facts and Figures

- 111565 PGR students (HESA) – 4.7% of the total student population
- 57% are in the Russell Group – concentration of funding through DTPs/DTCs
- 61% are STEMM – also large numbers in social sciences and education
- Home/EU/International 58%/13%/28% (all HE: 80%/6%/14%)
- First PhD awarded in the UK in 1919. Australia didn't award until 1948.
- In Finland, your examiners wear black tie, and you graduate with a sword

What society (government) wants from PhDs

- Industrial Strategy (25% of all research spending is in Universities).
- Research funding, more broadly, comes from quality (REF) and bids linked to government priorities (e.g. AI). Often require matched funding, good completion rates – can impact on institutional scholarships
- Spring statement: PhD-level jobs removed from UK visa cap, Doctoral Extension Scheme. Doctoral Loans having a limited impact.

What students want from their PhD

- Vitae report: clarity in expectations, positive feedback, imposter syndrome, difficulties in supervisory relationship, financial concerns, harassment, next career steps, isolation. Data collection on PGR service usage.
- PRES 2017: Research Culture, involvement in wider research community. Discipline specificity. Skills scores improve during study, culture and work-life balance scores decrease. Skills planning increases student satisfaction.

What universities wants from their PhD

- Academics of the future, but supply outstrips demand.
- Research-intensiveness. How many of your REF2021 outputs will be PhD co-authored?
- Cheap labour for teaching – but requires training, strategic planning (UG/PGT growth)
- Spin-out companies (Ziylo)
- Balancing the books? Quantify the other benefits – soft power, research culture

So what do we **need** from a PhD?

- Preserve the unique features (don't let process get in the way; discovery is not a linear path)
- Mitigate the risks (strategic imperatives, student experience)
- Quantify the benefits (programme sustainability)

The structure of a PhD

- Are the requirements of students and supervisors implicitly or explicitly written into policies?
- What are the checkpoints of student progress, and are objective assessments made?
- What is the recognition and reward for good supervision?
- Are candidates clear on how they will be assessed?

Enablers and disablers of PhD completion

- + Structured training programmes
- + Supervisory team with a variety of strengths (subject knowledge vs. ‘getting it done’)
- + Cohort-building
- – Working through supervisory difficulties (peer support, anonymous support)
- – Misunderstanding of what writing-up is
- – Financial hardship, and how this is addressed
- – Letting issues stack up

Other ways of doing

- Group Supervision in Year 1 (Research from Sweden)
- Reasonable adjustments in good time - or the case of Brian May
- Surveying students following submission for honest feedback (Loughborough)
- Alternative formats of submission, or hybrids (Music)
- Widening participation (BAME Scholarships at UCL)
- Swedish PhD defence – the external examiner presents the thesis; the student asks the questions!

Activity – Making your PhDs fit for the future

- MoSCoW method:
 - Must do
 - Should do
 - Could do
 - Won't do (ever, or until later)
- Are you providing sufficient structure?
- Are your policies up to date with changes in the sector? (format, reasonable adjustments)
- Do you have data for tracking progression, satisfaction, outputs and outcomes?

Activity – Making your PhDs fit for the future

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Sector challenges/On the horizon

- Tuition fee transparency – less scope for cross-subsidy
- Augar review – impact on scholarships and training budgets if UG fees cut
- Desirability of academia as a career – use skills elsewhere
- Increasingly diverse student body – distance-learners, students with Specific Learning Difficulties, non-standard submissions
- Reliance on ‘goodwill’ in examination process (fees, time spent)

Challenges City is grappling with


- Student number planning – gradual decline
- Research students who teach – separation of teaching and scholarships
- Use of suspensions and extensions
- Concentration of research funding by Research Councils
- Baseline expectations (structure), and software to support it
- Central/School responsibilities – DTPs, training
- Supervisor (re)-training

Selected readings

- Hans Agné, Should first-year doctoral students be supervised collectively or individually? Effects on thesis completion and time to completion (2018) <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1453785>
- Dr Chris Cowton, Making a contemporary contribution using old data: Reflections on delayed doctorates (2019) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2018.12.002>
- EUA-CDE, Doctoral education in Europe today: approaches and institutional structures (2019)
- Higher Education Academy, Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2017: Experiences and personal outlook of postgraduate researchers (2017)
- Dr Sally Hancock, Beyond knowledge and skills: rethinking the development of professional identity during the STEM doctorate <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.915301>
- Matt Might, The illustrated guide to a Ph.D. <http://matt.might.net/articles/phd-school-in-pictures/>
- Nature, Graduate survey: A love–hurt relationship (2017) <https://doi:10.1038/nj7677-549a>
- QAA, Characteristics Statement: Doctoral Degree (2015)
- QAA, UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Advice and Guidance: Research Degrees (2018)
- The Royal Society, Doctoral students' career expectations: principles and responsibilities (2014)
- Vitae, Exploring wellbeing and mental health and associated support services for postgraduate researchers (2018)
- Dr Paul Wakeling, All PhDs are equal but ... Institutional and social stratification in access to the doctorate (2018) <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2018.1434407>

What can you do?

- Introduce structure (but allow room for manoeuvre)
- Fully quantify the benefits of your PhD students and graduates
- Identify measures of success for your institution
- Make sure policy/regulations have caught up with diverse students and submission formats
- Try doing things differently – think swords; just make sure the originality remains!



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