

Doctoral-level qualifications outside of universities: A comparison of forms and practices

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Abstract

The breadth of doctoral forms available in universities has expanded considerably over the last twenty years to include a wide range of professional and practice-based doctorates in addition to the well-established PhD and older academic doctorates such as the DSc and DLitt. However, the essential properties of the doctorate – that it consists of original research or scholarly contribution, and that it represents a substantial piece or collection of work equivalent to at least three years' full-time study – remain the hallmark of qualifications at this level. Outside of higher education there are a small number of qualifications that while not doctorates are considered to be broadly at doctoral level. The forms and practices represented by these awards are somewhat more diverse than those of university doctorates.

Three contrasting awards made by professional institutes and general awarding bodies are taken as examples and their claims to doctoral level discussed. Using them as a mirror to current university practice opens up questions about whether there is scope for greater diversity at the topmost academic level, for instance through smaller awards that support professional leadership and accredit small-scale but original contributions to practice. It also asks questions about the kind of work that can contribute to doctoral level (relevant to the modular component of some professional doctorates), as well as the boundaries between awards representing rigorous assessment of professional contributions and those that are more honorary in nature.

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Introduction

National systems of qualifications frequently include at least two streams of awards, one concerned with general and academic education and the other with vocational education and training. In many countries these streams merge at the upper levels, with the great majority of higher-level qualifications being awarded by universities and other higher education institutions. While the United Kingdom follows this pattern up to a point, it has a well-developed system of vocational and professional qualifications that parallel at least part of the higher education system and are not awarded by universities even if some are taught and assessed in them.

The UK system effectively has three streams of higher-level awards. Outside of the university system there is a fairly widely-used group of qualifications awarded by organisations such as Edexcel and City & Guilds, of which the most familiar examples are the Higher National Certificates and Diplomas that sit below the level of a first degree. A small minority of these awards, typified by qualifications designed to be taken part-time by senior managers, extend to the equivalent of master's level (level 11 in Scotland, 7 south of the border and in the European Qualifications Framework; the latter will be used here). The other stream that has particular significance at the upper levels is the system of qualifications managed by professional associations and regulatory bodies. Most of these are concerned with public confirmation of the ability to practise in a profession, with a small minority being required by law. The majority are qualifying memberships rather than permanent qualifications, i.e. they are denoted by a membership designation or a chartered or accredited title rather than the award of a diploma, and they are held only while the member remains in good standing with the professional body (a central principle of professional regulation is the profession's ability to withdraw the qualified status of members who practise incompetently or unethically, or fail to keep up-to-date). Many such professional qualifications have as a prerequisite the achievement of a degree or university postgraduate qualification, but their award is often dependent on meeting sometimes quite substantial additional criteria associated with practice in the profession; in addition there are often non-graduate and 'conversion' routes to them (Lester, 2009a). While qualifying memberships cannot be formally recognised within the UK qualification frameworks, the qualified levels of chartered and equivalent professional bodies are 12generally at least parallel with the level of a first degree and many are at level 7 (*ibid*).

The pinnacle of the qualifications ladder is designated as level 8, almost exclusively populated by a single if now diverse type of qualification, the doctorate. In principle the inclusion of this level in the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), the framework in England, Wales and Northern Ireland for qualifications awarded by bodies other than universities, suggests that it is possible to recognise non-university awards as being equivalent in level to doctoral degrees. Potentially at least it is also feasible for universities to validate qualifications that are of the same level as a doctorate but require a lesser volume of work, in the same way that postgraduate certificates and diplomas are offered at level 7. Although level 8 was introduced into the national (non-university) system in 2002, apart from a single qualification approved in 2009 it remains conspicuously unpopulated and raises the question of whether there is or could be a role for non-university awards at this level.

Doctorates and doctoral level

The doctorate is generally the highest level of qualification awarded by a university. It normally carries a requirement to make an original contribution to knowledge whether in the form of a significant published output or its equivalent, a research thesis, or an advancement in practice. For much of the twentieth century the main form of doctorate awarded in the UK was the research PhD, principally intended for would-be academics and professional researchers and typically awarded following three or four years of full-time research (or its part-time equivalent) and the submission and defence of a thesis. Although doctorates intended for practitioners outside academia have a long history – the first professional doctorate, in medicine, was established in the United States at Columbia University in 1767, followed by doctorates in jurisprudence in the nineteenth century and education in the early years of the twentieth – it is only in the last twenty years or so that there has been both an evolution of the PhD to accommodate more practical forms of research and sometimes outputs in forms other than the thesis, as well as a rapid growth in doctorates intended *primarily* for people working in fields other than academe.

The growth of professionally-oriented doctorates in the UK and Australia is well-documented by among others Bournier *et al.* (2000), Maxwell and Shanahan (2001) and

Boud and Lee (2008). They include programmes designed for entry to specific careers such as clinical psychology and engineering research, these tending to have a fairly well-defined structure in the form of a modular or similar programme followed by a shortened research thesis; other profession-specific doctorates designed for established practitioners whose research is often based around or closely related to their own practice; and what are sometimes called work-based or practitioner doctorates, generally rooted in a transdisciplinary perspective and geared towards high-level development and change as much as formal research (Lester, 2004; Zuber-Skerritt, 2006; Boud and Tennant, 2006; Costley and Stephenson, 2008). To these can be added practice-based doctorates in the arts, where the contribution to knowledge is expressed through an artistic work (McLeod and Holdridge, 2004). These newer doctoral forms have sometimes met with opposition or confusion in academic institutions, although they are now well-established across much of the Anglophone world and are regarded as equivalent in level to the PhD if having a different purpose. Perhaps interestingly holders of these kinds of doctorates are gradually appearing in academic (including professorial) positions.

In addition many universities continue to offer the old-established forms of doctorate such as DSc and DLitt which are generally based on a significant contribution to an academic field, occasionally with more applied equivalents such as DTech and DProf by public works. This broad spectrum of doctoral forms suggests a notion of ‘doctoralness’ that is much wider than the PhD, and as Lester (2004) notes, this is now being reflected in official descriptions of doctoral level in the various qualification frameworks, even if these continue to be influenced principally by the conventional PhD. Nevertheless within higher education the doctoral level only contains the doctorate, of whatever form: there is no small qualification at level 8 that might for instance be achieved through a single high-quality academic paper or a limited but original contribution to practice, nor is there an award at this level of comparable size to a master’s degree.

In search of a doctoral equivalent

At the time of writing only one non-doctoral qualification had been positioned at level 8 or its equivalent within any of the UK qualifications frameworks: a diploma (plus

subsidiary qualifications) in strategic leadership offered by the Chartered Management Institute (CMI, 2008), which will be discussed in the next section. Another potentially fruitful place to look for qualifications at the equivalent of doctoral level is among the post-initial designations of professional bodies. Around half of those that confer a qualified status have a grade of membership above the main qualifying level, often termed fellowship (Friedman *et al.*, 2002). Traditionally the criteria for fellowship might be based on a suitably impressive *curriculum vitae*, on a minimum number of years after achieving mainstream qualified status, or on making a recognisable contribution to the profession. Increasingly however professions are adopting clearer criteria and assessment processes for the award of fellowship and advanced practitioner designations, which if not always representing the same level of rigour as those used for chartered titles and the equivalent at least move the fellowship closer to being an advanced qualified status.

A recent study of fellowship-type awards in 21 professions (Lester, 2009b) indicated, somewhat disappointingly for the purpose of this paper, that only two further qualifications could be regarded as above level 7: fellowship of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (FRCVS) and fellowship of City & Guilds (FCGI). In all other cases where a level could be identified or ascribed, the fellowship or advanced practitioner award appeared to be pitched at level 7 or occasionally 6, often representing progression in terms of one or more of (a) development from competence to proficiency and expertise, (b) taking on senior-level commitments and responsibilities, and (c) contributing to the profession, rather than progression in terms of academic level (*ibid*). While there may be other awards and designations that could be considered candidates for level 8, none were identified either in this study (which included an email request to 135 professional bodies) or in a trawl of public non-university qualifications.

Findings

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons

The RCVS has three major post-qualifying awards: a postgraduate certificate now awarded by a universities with recognition from the Royal College; a postgraduate diploma, available in several specialisms and generally leading to membership of a specialist European veterinary college; and its Fellowship. Fellowship is a senior

designation based either on submission of a thesis on a topic approved by the College, or (for members of fifteen years' or more standing) on a collection of publications. Fellowship is regarded by the RCVS as being at doctoral level, and the criteria used to assess it are very similar to those for a PhD although the length of thesis required is typically shorter (c. 30,000 words). Within the profession the postgraduate diploma is regarded as a broadly equivalent achievement; it consists of a taught and examined part which appears to be at level 7, plus a thesis or publication alternative which may be at level 8. Neither qualification has a high uptake, with 360 qualified vets (1.6%) holding the Diploma (which enables them to progress to registration as a nationally recognised specialist) and 265 (1.2%) holding Fellowships.

The Chartered Management Institute

The CMI acts both as a membership body (with responsibilities that include conferral of the title Chartered Manager), and as a major awarding body for certificates and diplomas in management and leadership. One of these, the Diploma in Strategic Leadership, has recently (2009) been positioned in the Qualifications and Credit Framework at level 8. The full Diploma is awarded for achievement of six mandatory ten-credit units at level 8 plus one of two slightly smaller units at level 7; a smaller qualification (Award or Certificate) can be awarded for achievement of one or two units respectively. The Diploma is delivered through approved centres (such as universities or colleges), with individual centres having some discretion about assessment methods; however the CMI advises that:

“the written word, however generated and recorded, is still expected to form the majority of assessable work produced by learners at Level 8. The amount and volume of work for each [ten-credit] unit at this level should be broadly comparable to a word count of 4000 - 4500 words”
(CMI, 2008: 6).

Incidentally this suggests that the qualification may have been given a parsimonious credit-rating within the QCF, which supposedly uses a comparable notion of credit to higher education.

City & Guilds

The City & Guilds of London Institute is one of the UK's largest general awarding bodies, with a historically strong reputation in craft, trade and technical fields. One of its many qualification streams is the 'senior awards' series (Licentiate, Graduate, Member and Fellow), of which the first three are based on defined achievements and are generally regarded as being at levels 5, 6 and 7 respectively; Membership requires the production of a master's-type dissertation on an area of practice. Fellowship (FCGI) is rather different in that it is based on three broad criteria: having achieved distinction in a career, making a contribution to public life beyond that normally expected in the career, and demonstrating active support for vocational education and training. Potential fellows can apply, they can be nominated, or they can be invited directly by City & Guilds. FCGI has some of the characteristics of a generic professional fellowship, some attributes of a general public qualification (once awarded it doesn't depend on a continued subscription or on any professional practising requirements), and some attributes of an honorary award. Approximately 300 people currently hold the qualification.

The claims of these three qualifications to being regarded as at level 8 depend on different kinds of criteria. FRCVS is the closest in approach to a doctorate and, subject to detailed evaluation, its claim to doctoral level appears unequivocal; in fact its similarity to the PhD may be a factor contributing to its limited uptake. The CMI Diploma has been accepted into the QCF at level 8, but the QCF basically works by ascribing a level to individual units or modules and basing the overall qualification level on rules of combination (there is no holistic assessment of the level of the qualification). It could be compared with a series of (short) taught, subject-based modules within a professional doctorate, or it could be regarded as an advanced postgraduate certificate; however, it does not appear to require the original contribution to knowledge or practice characteristic of doctoral level and if included as part of a doctorate, current practice in at least some universities suggests that it could be assessed as providing credit at level 7 rather than 8. The qualification is currently too new for anyone to have used it as the basis of a prior learning claim into a doctorate. Finally FCGI is the most difficult qualification to position with accuracy within a qualification framework due to the broad nature of the criteria that are used. While in terms of its sequence and of the general level of achievement expected it certainly appears to fit with level 8, it also

appears possible to meet the Fellowship criteria without having made the original contribution that would be expected of a practitioner doctorate.

Revisiting doctorates in the light of other ‘level 8’ qualifications

The three qualifications discussed above sit outside the constraints of having to conform to standards expected for the award of a doctoral title, while having to meet other expectations relating to their own communities of practice. One, the RCVS Fellowship, has a design that appears capable of fitting reasonably easily into the doctoral spectrum, so it does not appear to suggest any new departures for university qualifications. The others differ significantly from doctorates, and may suggest alternative approaches at this level that have relevance to universities.

As discussed briefly above, the CMI diploma represents what could be construed as a small achievement at what may be the equivalent of doctoral level. As a minimum it raises the question of universities accrediting smaller awards at this level, for instance to provide advanced professional development without necessitating embarkation on the substantial journey that characterises a doctorate. Over the last decade the number of people taking postgraduate qualifications has doubled, with many professions now viewing a master’s-level qualification as a prerequisite for entry or at least to be encouraged early-career. While academic progression from this point does not necessarily mean moving to doctoral level, it does raise the issue of what awards might be appropriate to support and validate advanced professional extension that moves beyond the level expected of a master’s degree. This could for instance be:

- a) a module or short programme that expects a similar level of thinking to be applied as would be the case for a doctorate
- b) an investigation, project or change programme that makes an original contribution to knowledge or an equivalent advancement in practice, but is more limited in scope or extent than a doctoral project or thesis

- c) a published or public work – such as a single journal article, research report, development or composition – that, similarly, makes an original contribution or advancement but in a more limited way than would be needed for a doctorate.

Accommodating programmes and achievements of this type is potentially hindered by the lack of a vocabulary for awards that have a similar relationship to the doctorate as postgraduate certificates and diplomas do to the master's degree. Awards such as the RCVS Postgraduate Diploma and potentially the CMI diploma succeed because of the niche they occupy in their particular sectors, but it is unclear how easy it would be, for instance, to promote a doctoral-level postgraduate certificate in a way that conveys how it is positioned academically without confusing it with either the existing postgraduate certificate or with the doctorate itself.

The City & Guilds Fellowship offers a different kind of comparison, one more relevant to public-works, 'senior' and honorary doctorates. In some respects it can be considered as a non-academic parallel to the DSc or DLitt, though the broad criteria for its award place it closer to the honorary end of the spectrum: viewed *as a model for the doctorate*, it runs the risk of blurring the distinction between an honorary award that is made for contribution, and a qualification earned for a particular (if reasonably openly-defined) achievement. The dangers of this might be made apparent through considering a hypothetical individual who has achieved distinction in the banking industry, championed a major charity, and backed the introduction of a major vocational entry-route to his profession, making him broadly eligible for FCGI; subsequently to lead his institution to near-collapse through lack of adequate controls and a disregard for proper risk management. In this situation the use of FCGI-type criteria to award a doctorate could have appeared justifiable before the candidate's failings were apparent, but afterwards they leave the university open to the accusation of not applying defensible academic or professional standards: effectively, relying on the career successes that had accrued to the candidate as a proxy for professional and intellectual ability. In making the award on more specific, academically defensible criteria there may still be a certain amount of embarrassment at the subsequent debacle, but there would be no doubt that the doctorate was genuinely earned.

Conclusions

The presence of qualifications outside of the universities that have some claim to doctoral level (if not doctoral equivalence) offers a useful mirror to doctoral practice within higher education. While the range of non-university 'level 8' awards is currently small and therefore limited in terms of the issues it is able to raise, there are nevertheless two points that can be made. The first has cautionary significance to the practice of awarding doctorates based on professional achievements, in highlighting that the criteria used need to be comparable to those for other earned doctorates. The available evidence suggests that in practice this is not an issue (e.g. Bayley, 2008), but it does point to limits to the extent to which, using Scott *et al*'s (2004) term, workplace values and measures of success can be permitted to 'reverse-colonise' the university without being subject to critical scrutiny.

The second and potentially more exciting point relates to what might happen in the space between the master's degree and the doctorate. The CMI diploma will probably not be the only qualification to appear in the QCF at level 8, suggesting that external awarding bodies currently have an advantage in exploiting whatever market exists for short, advanced professional extension programmes that are accredited above master's level. There is at least potential for universities to develop comparable (and more creative) forms of provision; whether this is validated at level 7 or 8 is likely to be less important than being at an 'advanced' postgraduate level and potentially part of a structure culminating in a professional doctorate.

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