

The PhD and the degree structure of South African higher education: A brief and rough guide

[Presented at the CHET seminar 'Knowledge Production in South African Higher Education'
on 23 February 2012]

While the PhD has come to be generally known as the highest qualification offered in higher education it by no means always has the same connotation or a universal significance. Depending on the historical trajectory and degree structure of the higher education system concerned the PhD can radically differ in content, status and function.

Doctoral qualifications have a long history; significantly, though, the PhD was not always considered to be either the pinnacle or supreme benchmark of higher education. In the Oxbridge tradition of teaching universities, for example, the PhD long had a marginal function and a somewhat dubious status. The increasing prominence of the PhD was closely associated with the rise of the German and American model of the research university since the late 19th century. Even so, it should also be noted that European higher degree systems traditionally differentiated between two types of terminal qualifications: the 'research doctorate' as distinct from the (professional) *Habilitation* in Germany, the *doctorandus* (drs) as distinct from the *doctor* (dr) in the Netherlands, the different categories of (research) doctorates in France etc. On closer examination it also transpires that in the US, too, the research PhD or doctoral program is by no means the only trajectory to a terminal higher education qualification. The underlying rationale for such differentiations is that doctoral qualifications may be designed to serve rather different functions: at the one end the 'academic' research doctorate is a specialised qualification based on the mastery of a particular academic discipline at an advanced level (typically this is the desired qualification for an academic or research career); at the other end a general doctoral qualification may serve as a benchmark for independent professionals or for higher level appointments in the civil service and even executive positions in the business world. Crucially the knowledge base, intellectual and research skills required for the 'academic' PhD are not necessarily transferable to the more generalised 'professional' doctorate.

The evolving South African higher degrees structure is in some respects anomalous, reflecting its particular historical trajectory. The mainstay of South African higher education until a few decades ago was a 3-year undergraduate Bachelors degree followed by a 1-year postgraduate taught Honours degree. The South African Honours degree is unfamiliar in the rest of the academic world (apart from a few other 'old' Commonwealth countries such as Australia and New Zealand). It long served as the only taught postgraduate programme; even at the premier South African universities Masters and Doctoral degrees were offered by research dissertation only. At the time this 'incomplete' higher degrees structure had various systemic consequences. As the only taught postgraduate qualification, and at a time when relatively small enrolments enabled intensive teaching, the Honours degree acquired a high status both as an academic degree and as 'general' qualification. Something of a cult developed around the Honours dissertation, the better ones of which merited comparison with Masters theses. On the other hand Masters and PhD degrees could not fully match up to 'best practice' international norms. The trajectory for a South African PhD

involved a Masters and then a doctoral degree both by research dissertation only (while lacking special provision for research methods training). Even in the best cases this resulted in specialised knowledge limited to specific research topics. This was not well-suited to serve as an entry-level qualification for an academic career; students with serious academic and scholarly ambitions were better advised to proceed 'overseas' to British, American or European universities. The South African PhD by dissertation only based on repeated studies of specialised topics was even less suited to function as a 'general' doctoral qualification in non-academic contexts.

A major change in this higher degrees structure occurred since the 1980s with the development and proliferation of coursework Masters degree programmes. Effectively this established another level of taught coursework at postgraduate level. Students proceeding from Honours to a coursework Masters could now do two years of postgraduate coursework either at an advanced disciplinary level or for a specific professional qualification. To some extent this began to provide some of the building blocks for a local doctoral programme, including increased provision of the research methods training needed for research dissertations. However, it also resulted in a somewhat incoherent higher degrees structure. The Honours degree lost much of its previous high status, the more so with a concomitant rapid increase in student enrolments; the function of the Honours dissertation in relation to the coursework Masters mini-thesis was unclear (in practice the latter could readily become little more than a repeat performance of the former); and where it was retained the role of the Masters research thesis was anomalous (it was supposed to be a 'proper' research degree, but lacked the advanced coursework and research methods training available in coursework Masters programmes).

The systemic significance of Masters coursework programmes and their potential to provide the necessary infrastructure for the development of fully-fledged doctoral programmes of different kinds do not seem to be appreciated by outside observers such as the NRF, HEQF and higher education policy planners. In large part this may be due to the deceptive grip of the notion of a single, logical and natural progression from NQF levels 8 to 10. In terms of this 'logic' a PhD has to follow on from a Masters degree which in turn builds on prior Honours and Bachelors degrees. It may be salutary to consider the implications of the fact that premier US doctoral programs do *not* require a Masters degree as an intermediate qualification on the way to a PhD. Instead students can proceed directly from a (4-year) Bachelors degree to the coursework part of a PhD program without first having to do a (research) Masters. These American universities also offer Masters programs, but not as part of the main 'academic' trajectory issuing in a PhD. Such Masters programs tend to offer specialised interdisciplinary or area studies or professionally oriented qualifications. In effect, postgraduate students have a choice between an 'academic' trajectory issuing in a PhD as the entry-qualification for an academic career, on the one hand, and a range of advanced degrees, often at Masters level and not necessarily geared towards a PhD, of a more 'general' professional or non-scholarly kind, on the other hand. In the South African context the development of a layer of coursework Masters programmes offer the opportunity for a similar diversification in postgraduate degree trajectories. Our higher education system evidently does not have the resources, either in terms of funding or of academic capital, to establish a further level of doctoral coursework programmes on top of the existing Masters coursework programmes. Nor is there any actual need to do this. Instead the existing Masters coursework programmes may be diversified and developed in two complementary directions: on the one hand, the mainstream 'academic' components may be integrated as part of the coursework components of PhD degrees while, on the other hand, the

'general' components can be developed as dedicated advanced qualifications whether as Masters degrees or as 'professional' doctorates.

Current higher education policy imperatives calling for a drastic increase in the overall production of the number of PhDs in South Africa will be dangerously misconceived unless serious prior consideration is given to the nature and function of the PhD degree. A substantial increase in the number of current South African PhDs by research dissertation only will most certainly not satisfy either the urgent needs for upgrading the 'academic' sector itself or the demands of the economy and society for an increased number of advanced graduates with a 'general' knowledge base and transferable intellectual skills. Instead, the most likely consequence of a substantive increase of the number of PhDs based on the current higher degrees structure is both a significant slump in academic standards as well as a probable backlash against the universities from different sectors of the economy and society: a substantial number of the new PhDs will be unable to find appropriate employment while outside institutions will remain frustrated when looking to these PhDs to satisfy their specific and general needs.

André du Toit