

Crossing boundaries between learning and research: Doctoral programs at a distance

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Australian distance education, from school to university contexts, typically concerns teaching people the knowledge, values and skills that constitute their chosen courses of study; whereas doctoral courses principally concern candidates learning how to produce – through producing – significant original new knowledge. This paper considers the history and contemporary practices of Australian off-campus doctoral education and argues that these are at the forefront internationally. It is argued that understanding the provision of quality doctoral education at a distance requires a form of conceptual boundary crossing by policymakers, distance educators, and (especially) doctoral education practitioners, in order to develop and/or enhance future practices.

Introduction

This paper springs from my work in distance education over twenty-five years and in the management and conduct of doctoral education for more than a decade. A brief review of the literature on distance education shows that doctorates have rarely been a topic. Likewise, the more recent literature on doctoral education shows that distance education has rarely been a topic, although there is more often mention of the use of the media that distance education uses: print, telephone, videoconferencing and online media. This paper demonstrates the importance of distance education to doctoral education in Australia and it argues that this is something that has been largely invisible or unrecognised for its importance within Australian educational provision. It is also significant that internationally, even amongst other nations with long histories of distance education, Australia is unusual in this regard.

Some of the argument and data in this paper arises from research and scholarship on doctoral education that I have undertaken with colleagues over the past few years, some of which has been funded by the Australian Research Council and Deakin University¹. I am fusing this with my current and previous work on distance education, which may be more familiar to ODLAA members. Recently Davis, Hickey and I argued a case at the RIDE04 (Research in Distance Education 2004) conference for research that focused on particular aspects of doctoral studies (Evans, Davis & Hickey, 2005) such as mediating supervision, ensuring quality and standards and creating doctoral communities at a distance. This paper extends this theme into areas of distance education policy and practice.

Off-campus doctoral education

In Australia, forms of distance education have been used for schooling, college and university education since the beginning of the twentieth century (Bolton, 1986). It has grown and developed over the past century as the needs, contexts and media have changed (Evans & Nation, 2003). In these respects, Australia was joined by other nations, for example, the USA, Canada and New Zealand. In the case of doctoral education, there is relatively little literature on the subject from within the distance education community. Yet, Pearson and Ford show that from outside of distance education there has been a good deal of *de facto* distance education practised in doctoral education (Pearson, 1999; Pearson & Ford, 1997). This has occurred from the start of PhD programs in Australia in the 1940s. For example, many candidates undertook

their library work, fieldwork, writing etc. 'off-campus' (even overseas), although they were not formally enrolled as 'external students'. Some were formally located in other institutions, such as the military, or in overseas universities, galleries etc. (Evans & Tregenza, 2004).

The first doctoral program formally offered at a distance appears to be the Doctor of Education (EdD) program at Nova University in the USA in the early 1970s. However, in contrast to Australian doctorates at the time, which were typically based entirely on research, the Nova program was based substantially on coursework. Distance programs such as Nova's were seen as very problematic within the educational community, and attracted sustained negative criticism (see White, 1980). However, Nova's EdD programs have survived (see <http://www.schoolfed.nova.edu/home.htm>), although, as is discussed below, doctorates at a distance (and other courses) are still viewed with suspicion in many nations.

In Australia, Deakin University, the University of New England (UNE) and the University of Queensland were the first to offer Masters degrees by coursework programs at a distance (Bynner, 1986). Although, as noted above, some doctoral candidates may be *de facto* distance education candidates for some or all of their candidature, locating the first instance of the formal offer of external doctoral enrolment to candidates is less easy to determine. Certainly, Deakin University offered external doctoral study from early in its life in the late 1970s. However, it is possible that UNE or the Universities of Queensland or Western Australia did so before this.²

A key matter concerned with off-campus enrolment was whether the university permitted part-time study or not. The University of Melbourne (the first Australian university to award a PhD, in 1948) did so from the outset (Evans & Tregenza, 2004). Monash, however, did not do so until the mid-1970s, a decade after its inception.³ Being part time or full time is probably more significant than being on-campus or off-campus. Barnacle and Usher (2003) and Evans (2002) have explored the particularities and contexts of part-time doctoral study in Australia, and those in distance education would recognise the comparisons with research on distance education (part-time) students.

Table 1 External doctoral enrolments in Australia, selected institutions 1989, 1996, 2001, 2004 (source: DEST)

University	1989	1996	2001	2004
Adelaide	8	44	70	48
Charles Sturt	n/a	61	184	168
Curtin	0	0	261	425
Deakin	42	259	346	309
Monash	0	0	72	127
Murdoch	9	28	20	40
QUT	n/a	15	47	79
Tasmania	7	0	5	5
UNE	77	196	226	230
UniSA	n/a	27	243	115
USQ	n/a	18	69	62
UWA	10	0	0	0

Table 1 shows the external doctoral enrolments in Australia. The institutions selected are those with the greatest numbers of students in one or more of the selected years (2004 is the latest year for which data are available). The first selected year, 1989, corresponds to the end of the

pre-Dawkins period of universities. By the early 1990s, Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) were translated into new or reformed universities, therefore these would have been well established by the next selected year: 1996. Charles Sturt, Curtin, QUT and the University of South Australia (UniSA) were CAEs not universities in 1989, and therefore could not have enrolled doctoral students at that time. The following selected year, 2002, marked the commencement of the Research Training Scheme (RTS). The RTS represented a reduction in the total number of government-funded domestic places and the application of a formula to allocate new research student places based significantly (50 per cent) on the numbers of completions (graduations) of previous candidates. This led some universities to endeavour to predict and select 'successful' candidates at the time of application for a place; often part-time students were seen as more risky because they had higher drop-out rates (no surprise to distance educators here). However, those part-time students who complete do so on average with less candidature time than full-time students. Because external students are mostly part time and more likely not to complete, some universities have shied away from enrolling them and given preference to on-campus, full-time students (although this is more expensive in terms of infrastructure costs, see Evans, 2002). Therefore, 2001 represents the last year before the RTS was introduced and 2004 is the latest year where its effect can be measured on the available data. (The full effect is expected to take until about 2007.)

The enrolment figures in Table 1 show that the major universities in off-campus doctoral study in 1989 were Deakin and UNE. These two universities remained major providers of off-campus doctoral education throughout the entire period, although Deakin expanded its enrolments at a greater rate which was probably due to its large increase in size as a consequence of the Victoria College amalgamation in the early 1990s. It is notable that Adelaide University and Monash University are the only Group of Eight (Go8) universities currently involved in off-campus doctoral study, and yet two other Go8 members, University of Western Australia (UWA) and the University of Queensland, were noted for their external studies in earlier times, and UWA had a modest number in 1989. Three members of the Australian Technology Network (ATN) universities have developed significant profiles: Curtin University, Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and UniSA. Yet RMIT, which was an important external studies provider in Victoria, has lagged behind (it had 21 external candidates in 2001 and 51 in 2004) and, therefore, is not tabulated here. The University of Tasmania has had a consistent, but tiny, involvement in its state since 1989. It is clear that there is some reduction in numbers in 2004 for five of the institutions.

The national external doctoral enrolments totals for the above years are as follows: 173 (1989), 730 (1996), 2270 (2001) and 2454 (2004). These figures show that there was a rapid growth until 2001, and then a more modest increase to 2004. The aforementioned effects of the RTS toward reducing domestic doctoral places and part-time/external enrolments in particular are mediated by the increase in the number of international candidates. The RTS is for domestic students only: Australian and New Zealand citizens, and Australian permanent residents. In recent years, there has been a marked increase in the numbers of international off-campus doctoral candidates; these mask what may well have been a reduction or levelling-off in domestic enrolments by 2004.

Doctoral studies in Education at Deakin University

At this point, I shall consider a specific instance of the development of doctoral education at a distance. In this case, the Faculty of Education at Deakin University has endeavoured to foster off-campus doctoral education as an explicitly valued aspect of its practice. The Faculty (then School) of Education was at the forefront of offering PhDs at a distance in the University: its first doctoral graduates were in 1984. There are currently about 145 candidates enrolled in doctoral programs in the Faculty. About 85 per cent are off-campus and part time, and many candidates live overseas: including North America, Europe, the Middle-East, Asia, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand. Most of the doctoral candidates are mid-career professionals who work full-time in the education or training sectors. Many undertake research within their own workplaces as part of their doctoral studies.

As is commonly the case in Australian universities, doctoral candidates must conduct research and scholarship under the supervision of a principal and an associate supervisor. The doctoral

supervisory relationship shapes as a potentially intensive, but somewhat isolated experience, especially, but not exclusively, for distance students. However, we have worked to use typical distance education means to build a doctoral community within the Faculty that involves the students in various forms of collaborative work. The strategies involved are far from innovative for experienced distance education practitioners; indeed they reflect aspects of what has long been seen as good practice in distance education: intensive residential schools (see Morgan & Thorpe, 1993), telephone tutoring (see Thompson (now Challis), 1990) and online collaborative learning (Stacey, 1999). However, deploying these approaches in doctoral education, as we have been doing for about fifteen years, remains 'progressive' in this field.⁴

As Daniel and Marquis (1979) argued more than a quarter of a century ago, good distance education is about 'getting the mixture right' between interaction and independence. This is particularly the case in doctoral education where the candidate has to pursue individual original scholarship (lots of solitary reading, thinking, analysis and writing) and communicate this to, and even become inducted into, a scholarly community. Therefore, from the outset our distance education doctoral pedagogy had to involve a 'mix' of interaction and independence, face-to-face and through communications media. However, again like all good distance education practice, access and equity needed to be considered carefully in establishing the 'rules' of doctoral study. For example, for more than 25 years we have required doctoral candidates to attend their doctoral confirmation colloquium. At the colloquium a candidate discusses their substantial (50–55 pages) doctoral proposal with a panel of five academics, including their supervisors. This occurs about one third of the way through candidature and represents a significant engagement and 'rite of passage' for all doctoral students. Although attendance is compulsory for the candidate, occasionally a panel member may participate by teleconference or videoconference. The requirement to attend the colloquium – this is the only formal attendance requirement during candidature – does create an access barrier. However, the benefits of attending in person are seen to outweigh the difficulties involved. In particular, reading the body language of panel members and the intensive 'de-briefing' with the supervisors are important qualitative components that cannot be experienced as well through communications media, and the occasional candidate who requires counselling about an unsuccessful outcome can be better handled responsibly face-to-face.

Often residential schools have been recognised as a highly valued experience for those distance students who attend (Morgan & Thorpe, 1993; Moodie & Nation, 1993). As a means of providing educative experiences, networking and supervisory contact, since 1994, the Faculty has offered an annual residential summer school in February for doctoral students on its Geelong campus. Since 2000, a residential winter school has been provided in New Zealand to cater for the significant number of students there (about 25) and any other students who wish to attend: in particular, northern hemisphere international students using their summer break to attend. All candidates, on-campus and off-campus, are encouraged to attend these events, but they are not compulsory. Typically, about 65 candidates attend the summer school and about 25 attend the winter school.

Over the past fifteen years, the internet has been used increasingly to provide support and resources for doctoral students. In the early years, due to access concerns, these were optional. Since 2002, it has been mandatory for candidates to have access to and make use of the internet for their doctoral work. A range of listservs and web pages are used to promote communication between candidates and supervisors, in both social and academic forums. However, the most substantial development in these respects occurred in 2002 with the introduction of an online seminar program called Doctoral Studies in Education (DSE) (<http://education.deakin.edu.au/dse>). This program supports the candidate (and supervisor) around a sequence of core seminars that are required of all candidates. There are also optional research issues seminars (on methodology, research practices etc.) and occasional seminars (research presentations by guests, staff and candidates). The seminars are 'located' within the discussion or tutorial 'spaces' of normal forms of online education software (we have used First Class, WebCT and, now, Moodle). They are asynchronous discussions facilitated by a staff member over a six-week period (occasional seminars are usually shorter). The core seminars focus on 'generic skills and knowledge', such as identifying and reviewing literature, doctoral proposal writing, research ethics, etc. In addition, they also provide an induction into doctoral

study and help to ensure that all doctoral graduates are familiar with online media for study, research and communication.

We are moving to require all final year doctoral candidates to convene their own seminar on an aspect of their PhD research. This will provide an opportunity to present online – a new skill for most and one we think all doctoral graduates should possess – and to share their ideas and findings with others. The doctoral convenor will also benefit from having comments from the participants that may help them refine their thesis in some way. Additionally, they will provide a role model to new doctoral students participating in the seminar.

The Doctoral Studies in Education site also provides candidates with access to information about other candidates, staff, research activities, research groups, publications, ethics, funding and conference opportunities etc. In 2004, we extended our connections to include our doctoral graduates through the Faculty of Education Doctoral Alumni Network (FEDAN). Here, a monthly newsletter is circulated to all Alumni members containing information about research and training related activities, as well as profiles and information from previous and current candidates. There are also FEDAN events at summer and winter schools and at major research conferences locally and overseas. FEDAN can be seen as another subset of the Faculty's doctoral networking activities, which has both online and 'real' presences.

Distance educators are likely to recognise that the DSE represents a particular blend of fairly conventional educational practices that have been deployed in distance education. However, the use of residential schools has become less common in distance education as the pressure on costs and staff and students' time has increased. Doctoral educators are likely to recognise that this blend is innovative in doctoral education, especially before 2002, and that most doctoral students would not be able to engage with such a range of educational practices, although, as noted previously, the Research Training Scheme has encouraged developments in this direction.

Boundary crossing

Government policy (especially Kemp, 1999a, 1999b) on 'research training' – as research degrees, such as doctorates and masters, are known – discusses matters of doctoral education in terms that assume that candidates are young, full time and should embark on an appropriate career when they graduate. Part-time students comprise about 45 per cent of the total number of doctoral candidates in Australia. It is surprising, therefore, with the aforementioned government policies emphasising the importance of new knowledge and innovation to the Australian economic and social wellbeing, that those candidates who mostly conduct research in their workplaces or on projects of professional relevance are treated as marginal. Of course, distance educators have long been used to seeing their practices marginalised, partly due to dealing with ('invisible', off-campus) part-time students (see Smith & Kelly's collection, 1987, for an almost thirty-year-old Australian perspective). Doctoral educators have still to grasp the matter, although the work on professional doctorates (which have their own difficulties, see Evans, Macauley, Pearson & Tregenza, 2004) has often considered matters of the professional and workplace contexts of candidates (see Green, Maxwell & Shanahan, 2001).

It is, therefore, not surprising that distance education is rarely overtly considered in the doctoral education policy or scholarly literature, and for that matter, as noted previously, doctoral education is not often considered in the distance education literature. In effect, the boundaries have rarely been crossed from either side. The intention of this paper, and its presentation at the ODLAA conference, is to argue that there is an important element of distance education practice buried in the external enrolments of doctoral students in many Australian universities since 1989. Indeed, the DEST enrolment figures show that every Australian university has enrolled external doctoral students at some time between 1989 and 2004. The University of Technology, Sydney, has had the smallest external enrolments (14) over the fewest years (2) during this period. (The Australian Defence Academy had 12 external enrolments and the Australian Maritime College had nine external enrolments, both over four years during this period). Some universities, especially Deakin and UNE, have enrolled significant numbers of external doctoral students each year since 1989. We have also seen other universities, such as UniSA and Curtin, expand their external doctoral enrolments strongly over the past few years.

It is my contention that doctoral education could benefit with more distance educators, especially those with research and doctoral education experience, crossing the boundaries into doctoral education with a view to enhancing and researching doctoral practices at a distance. When crossing the boundaries, it is necessary to understand the particular nature of doctoral scholarship and research, and not merely attempt to transplant existing coursework undergraduate or postgraduate approaches. In particular, as has been illustrated through the Deakin Faculty of Education experience, it is likely that effective practices will be those that develop communities of doctoral scholars through collaborative learning, and through the presentation and critique of doctoral work (Barnacle, 2004; Evans, 1997, 1998). From this experience, although this may not suit all circumstances, which includes doctoral students scattered around the world, a mixture of distance education media and strategies together with face-to-face encounters seems to work well. However, it seems clear that there is scope for more creativity, and for more research, to explore new approaches to doctoral study at a distance.

Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge the contribution that work with colleagues has made to my thinking on this matter. Pete Macauley (Deakin), Margot Pearson (ANU) and Karen Tregenza (Deakin) have been longstanding collaborators of mine on research and scholarship in doctoral education. Pete undertook his PhD with me on an aspect of distance education and doctoral education (Macauley, 2001). Heather Davis (Deakin), Chris Hickey (Deakin), Barbara Kamler (Deakin), Alan Lawson (Queensland), Tom Maxwell (UNE), Erica McWilliam (QUT) and Peter Taylor (Bond/QUT) are important colleagues in some of this work. More recently, another of my doctoral candidates, Kevin Ryland, has been influential through his research on part-time doctoral candidature in Australia.
2. I would appreciate any information on this if people have such (tevens@deakin.edu.au).
3. I recall this as an early part-time PhD candidate at Monash in 1975.
4. The University of Melbourne recently had an article in the Australian Higher Education Supplement (8/6/05) on its new online group work for doctoral students. It was portrayed as innovative – it was for doctoral studies in a sandstone university – but it was nothing of the kind for people in online and distance education.

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