THE PROBLEMATIC NATURE OF THE LACK OF DOCTORAL COURSEWORK IN AUSTRALASIA

Frank Alpert
Griffith University

Michael Kamins
University of Southern California

Track: Marketing Education

Keywords: marketing education doctoral coursework

Acknowledgement is given to Griffith University School of Marketing doctoral student Anita Love for research assistance.

Abstract

The formal structure of most Australasian doctoral programs is still thesis-only. This paper presents the perspective that this structure is not ideal for today’s academic environment. The paper makes the argument for the importance of coursework in a student’s doctoral education. The argument is relevant to all thesis-only social science and business doctoral programs, but the case of Marketing in Australasia is highlighted. Students having coursework may develop stronger research skills than thesis-only students, thus thesis-only students would generally be at a disadvantage in terms of achieving publication in higher-ranking journals.

Introduction

Completing a PhD without having had the benefit of doctoral coursework is similar to competing in a swim meet while being thrown into the deep end without knowing how to swim. If that’s not enough, you find yourself thrown in amongst hundreds of other swimmers from elsewhere, many from abroad, who have already had several years of swimming training. While through sheer force of intellect and strong self-discipline you may ultimately learn on your own how to conduct research and get published, many others will have had the benefit of up to several years of doctoral coursework to help them. That is, one cannot forget that getting published is a globally competitive game, and those who are “well trained” are the ones who have the greatest advantage toward having their work see the light of day in the better journals.

Australasia is the only English-speaking region we are aware of that generally does not require doctoral coursework in Marketing. A survey of the websites of the 37 Australian public universities plus Bond and AGSM, and the 8 New Zealand universities, totalling 47 websites surveyed, revealed only 6 with mandatory doctoral coursework. Thus, 87% do not have mandatory coursework. (A few cases were unclear from the website, but if coursework were required probably it would have been so indicated.) While adverse consequences from this situation may have been limited in the past, when there was an ample job market for Marketing academics and perhaps more of teaching focus; now, according to Polonsky et. al (1998), the importance of publishing for Australasian Marketing academia is growing, leading these authors to conclude that recently “there is much more of a U.S. type publish or
perish mentality.” In such an increasingly competitive environment, publication success, and furthermore the quality of the publication, becomes more important.

Are Australasian doctoral students well prepared by their training for this new environment? Unfortunately, as Uncles (1998, p. 89) points out, it is quite common to find doctoral theses in Australian universities where:

“The student attempts to show mastery of a body of knowledge by describing it at length in an exhaustive literature review. Far from being a presentation of the student’s own synthesis of the literature, it tends to read more like a general textbook.”

Quite simply, we would call this type of research effort a “laundry list dissertation” where a mass of literature is favoured over integrating and analysing literature to lay a foundation for hypotheses. That is, without a deeply-internalised basis in how to write a research paper, the default dissertation option is an agonizingly long description of the literature. These students tragically believe that the more citations in the literature review, prima facie the more favourably the thesis will be received.

A lack of doctoral coursework in critical areas such as marketing theory, consumer behaviour and research methodology results in a lack of guided experience critiquing marketing articles. This leads to weaknesses in theoretical development and methodological follow-through (components critical for success in any business research project). Taking research methods as an example, it is a challenge for students on their own without coursework to achieve 1) depth in a sophisticated method, such as structural equation modelling, sufficient to allow skilful use, and 2) awareness of the breadth of research methods available today, from conjoint analysis through time-series modelling, in order to identify the best method to suit the research problem.

The Australasian Traditional System Of Doctoral Education

In the traditional Australkian system, a research student can show his/her research prowess by first writing an Honours thesis in partial fulfilment for the Honours degree. Once this is successfully completed, he/she at some point moves on to the doctoral level by working with a PhD research supervisor on a topic of mutual interest, typically over the next three years (at a full time pace). At completion, the thesis is sent out to two or three external examiners who grade the thesis on a range of something like outright acceptance, minor revision, major revision, and failure. According to Moses (1985), there are three requirements for an Australasian Ph.D. thesis: a) that a distinct contribution to a body of knowledge is demonstrated, b) that competence in the research process is exhibited, and c) that mastery over a body of knowledge is shown. While this system has been successful in producing doctoral graduates most of whom go into the world of academia, one might ask is it also equally successful in training them for the art of getting published in good journals today, a challenge that will face them throughout their research career? While some individuals through their own ability or through the astute guidance of their PhD supervisor can achieve a high level of skill (perhaps the original model of the Oxford/Cambridge system), we are now at a time of mass research higher degree enrolment (at least compared to a half-century ago), so a more broadly effective system is desirable.

What of the argument that research students have completed a year of Honours program that includes coursework? In our view, Honours coursework is not equivalent to doctoral coursework. Again, in Marketing (and Management) most of the coursework is not scholarly in orientation, the level of the courses are not doctoral level, and some students have a gap between their Honours degree and the start of their PhD.
We have already hinted above that mastery and competency over a research area cannot and should not be measured in kilos. While a current guideline is that a doctoral dissertation should be 75,000 words (Preece 1994), there is not and cannot be a guideline for what exactly these words should say, and that is the major problem facing a new doctoral student. Indeed the key to a successful thesis and ensuing academic career lies in point a) above, that is, the ability to make a distinct contribution to a body of knowledge. We would recommend stressing that aspect by phrasing the PhD requirement as for a “significant contribution” as opposed to merely a “distinct contribution” (which seems Honours thesis level to us). Most Australian universities have moved on to an official standard of “significant” or “substantial” contribution (22 in the survey of 39 websites), but still five state “distinct” and another four simply state “original” (the rest being unclear or unspecified in the website).

But the catch is, how does one go about developing the necessary skills to make a significant contribution? Clearly, there are books and articles to be read which explain in great detail the various elements of the research process from thesis formulation to the general process of getting published, to the specific characteristics of “good” research. For example Perry (1998) and Uncles (1998) discuss and present some common and alternative perspectives regarding how a thesis should be structured. Baker (2000, 2001a, 2001b) offers the Marketing field a series of articles with advice on selecting a research methodology, writing a literature review and “writing up and getting published”. The mere presence of these articles suggests that there is a growing need for young researchers to understand the process of research. However, one should ask, if you have to read these articles to understand how to do research, have you already begun to sink in the deep end of the pool? Indeed, even if you read these articles would you be assured of success? Isn’t good research too sophisticated an art for someone to simply read 5-10 such articles on their own and then go for it?

Furthermore, we would argue that a key article among this set is missing, and that is the article that tells you how to come up with a research idea, which makes a significant contribution to an area of marketing. If one could write an article containing a magic formula, which assuredly generates such research ideas, it would already have done (and have been frequently cited!). But yet many researchers do come up with creative, interesting and substantive research ideas, month after month and year after year. How do they do it?

Benefits Of Doctoral Coursework

Uncles (1998, p. 88) hit the nail on the head when he said that many doctoral students “will wish that some guidance had been offered earlier.” We argue that this guidance comes in the form of required coursework. Coursework is not a novel approach to learning, as it is present at both the undergraduate and masters level. So why not at the doctoral level? Is it that doctoral courses would be too small in enrolment as intakes in each discipline are often small? The easy answer is to aggregate students from cognate fields or across years within a field, such as have a business research methods doctoral course that all new business PhD students would attend. Methods are common across many business disciplines. This is certainly feasible, as it is one approach used in the USA and Canada, which have an established tradition of about four doctoral courses per semester for four semesters (two years) culminating in a major field exam. We are not advocating a full 16 course North American system, but are arguing that introducing some coursework is desirable. Even the British form of doctoral education (of which the Australasian system is based upon) has
moved on from the traditional major advisor/no coursework system, to one that includes a curriculum incorporating formal research training (Huisman, De Weert and Bartelse 2002).

What are the benefits of doctoral coursework? In the “doctoral seminar” framework, where several journal articles are read and critiqued by the students with the discussion guided by an academic staff member expert in the field, doctoral students gain practice in evaluating scholarly research. They learn not only the issues with empirical methods in actual practice, but also the more difficult art of evaluating the contribution of hypotheses. This skill only comes with practice! It takes reading a great many journal articles to internalise a sense of what research is strong and what is weak. The doctoral courses provide this experience academically and socially. Indeed, by hearing what other students and the academic also say, they get a broader sense of what comprises “good” research. Research skill thereby becomes tacit knowledge, or more specifically, “sagacious tacit knowledge,” which Castillo (2002) argues is the “engine of scientific discovery.” This tacit knowledge cannot be learned by simply reading on one’s own an article such as “How to Do Research” (or even several such articles). Furthermore, if different academics lead discussions in their different areas of expertise, the students are also intensely exposed to different faculty and to their different styles of doing research.

At many top universities around the world doctoral seminars typically involve the development of a research paper which includes a literature review, development of hypotheses and description of proposed methodology. Often times the only element missing from a full paper is the actual collection of empirical data. Those who practice writing research proposals should be able to come up with a stronger one for their actual dissertation. Indeed Polonsky (1998) et. al. argue for “learning by doing” in the context of working with your research supervisor or academic mentor, however as noted above, “learning by doing” can also be accomplished in a more systematic way through doctoral coursework preceding and in preparation for the dissertation.

Three UK academic writing about their doctoral experiences (Lindgreen, Vallaster and Vanhamme, 2001) suggest two relevant “Do’s” for a doctoral research program: “Take courses in a field if you are lacking some theoretical background; and participate in doctoral colloquiums, seminars and conferences.” Furthermore, in terms of addressing the problem of the isolation of thesis-only doctoral students, Lindgreen credits doctoral seminars as an instrumental component of his success in the doctoral program in that he was able to effectively network with other doctoral students, which continued on after graduation and led to joint research.

From another perspective, coursework with different faculty members allow students to gain an understanding of the research interests of the academic staff and helps the student to decide whether he/she can effectively work with that professor, both from a personality and research perspective. Again as noted by Les Johnson in Polonsky et al. (1998), critical elements of research success are linked to how well the mentor and student “get along” on dimensions of personality, research interests and work habits. In some universities around the world, it is only until after the doctoral coursework is completed that the student’s main advisor is determined. This allows the student to more fully develop his/her research interest, and to find a supervisor that is most congruent to these interests and also to her/his personal style. For the student to be assigned a PhD supervisor based simply upon topic area, or, where student choice is given primacy, is problematic. For students to choose based on whom they liked as a lecturer in their undergraduate courses, or even to simply stay with who they worked with in their Honours program, may be suboptimal in that students may not be exposed to research expertise and styles of all the academic staff.
Recommendation: An Efficient Start With Two Courses

We are suggesting that universities without doctoral coursework should gradually introduce coursework into their doctoral programs, as a few in Australasia are already doing. One course is better than none, but we propose two in particular that efficiently begin to provide the best of the coursework system. One course could be what is sometimes described as a “survey course” doctoral seminar. This has little to do with survey research, but rather is a course taught by different members of the School/Department on a weekly basis. Each faculty member assigns pre-readings in an area of their interest that are to be discussed on a given week, and hence the course becomes both a survey of the marketing literature and an overview of academic staff expertise and styles. Students then choose one of these topics of interest in which to write a research proposal, containing a literature review, methodology and development of hypotheses, everything except the data! Therefore, the dissertation topic does not have to stand on the Honours Thesis, but may evolve as the student experiences the broader variety of the doctoral program. Furthermore, the survey course is very efficient in leveraging staff research expertise into doctoral teaching, and most staff would be probably be delighted to lead a week’s seminar even if the School/Department’s doctoral enrolment is small.

A course in research methods would be a strong candidate to coincide with the survey course during research students’ first semester. Not only would this course cover complex statistical methods, but also probably qualitative research, questionnaire design, and experimental design. Many students are weak in these areas when they enter a doctoral program. Mastery over these topics is critical if one is to write articles to be published in top marketing journals. Perhaps 50 years ago research methods could be mastered by self-study, but today’s research methods are more varied and more sophisticated. Most students would probably prefer some help with, say, structural equation modelling (a combination of psychometrics and econometrics that is quite complex), rather than having to learn it on their own. Some leading journal articles warn of misapplication of complex methods such as this (eg, Baumgartner and Homburg 1996)—the misapplication problem could be exacerbated by weak training in the method.

The methods course and survey course nicely complement each other, as the methods course could be the same course for all business students (certainly for all marketing and management students, and possibly also for accounting and finance students), thereby achieving economies of scale, and be a textbook course. The survey course in contrast would be a journal article based course, specific to the student’s discipline.

Some would argue that a course in philosophy of science (eg, marketing theory) would also serve the doctoral student well as it could directly tackle the difficult issues of epistemology and theory construction in social science, including the nature and scope of constructs, moderation versus mediation, the formation of hypotheses and the relationship between variables, among many others. All of these concepts are critical in the development of solid research.

If the importance of publishing continues to increase in the Australasian region, then it becomes increasingly important to be able to publish right from the start. That means, publishing your dissertation. As Les Johnson astutely comments, “Your Ph.D. should be the basis for at least one or two good papers, so don’t waste it” (Polonsky et al. 1998). Increasingly, the quality of your PhD is determined by the quality of the journal the research eventually gets published in. We argue that Australasian doctoral students could benefit strongly from taking coursework in terms of writing better dissertations, becoming more
skilled researchers and more competitive in the global publications contest, and ultimately in being broader and better colleagues and teachers.

References