

What is the value of a doctoral degree? Exploring perceptions of personal value gained from doctoral study in the context of the UK knowledge economy. (0235)

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Study context

The newest form of renewable energy in a world driven by knowledge-based economies is doctoral students (Neumann and Tan, 2011). Those who hold a PhD are said to hold significant knowledge and social capital and have been described as “*key actors behind the creation of knowledge-based economic growth*” (Aureiol et al, 2010, p.13). A large-scale study has demonstrated that the recruitment of doctoral graduates yields collective knowledge, skills, networking, and prestige benefits to organisations, and to UK industries, and views doctoral graduates as assets of significant value to organisations (Diamond, 2014). Their report also summarises the perceived individual benefits of doctoral study, but does not balance this against the risks of engaging in doctoral work.

This study furthers that line of enquiry by asking whether doctoral graduates perceive that they derive value when benefits are traded off against the risks and challenges. Have individuals experienced net gain from the doctoral process, and how might that value be understood? In short, to them, was their doctorate worth it?

Conceptual Framework

Understanding what constitutes realised value in higher degrees is a current hot topic, and one of significant debate within the current context of assessing quality by metrics. The value of the doctorate is well explored in economic and financial contexts (Casey, 2009) and somewhat in skills contexts (Diamond, 2014), but there are other facets of value to consider. Postgraduates in HE may experience changing value perceptions affected by social and cultural factors, in addition to economic yield (Kalafatis and Ledden, 2013). Despite much media commentary on the subject, very little research explores the contextual factors of personal, social, and cultural value that individuals derive from the doctoral process (Raddon and Sung, 2009).

As recruitment to doctoral programmes continues to increase year on year in order to generate such highly skilled assets of economic value, this study aims to explore the value of a doctorate to graduates in across broad definitions of value.

Research Questions:

1. How do doctoral graduates perceive value (benefits minus risks) in engaging with doctoral study?
2. Is a doctorate perceived to be ‘fit for purpose’ by graduates in the current and future knowledge economy?

Methods

This interview study is part of a larger investigation examining doctorate value in current students and recent graduates, only the graduate data is presented here. We

employed a constructivist viewpoint to understand and develop conceptual models (Charmaz, 2006) of how graduates perceive value in their doctorate, through the study period and beyond graduation. We used a critical, interpretive lens in analysing the data to help understand the affordances affecting how and for whom the doctorate holds value. Post-transcription, data were subjected to thematic analysis using a framework approach (Braun and Clark, 2006).

Interviews were designed and conducted in a semi-structured style (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006) and recent graduates (1-7 years from graduation, all discipline areas) were recruited through alumni networks. Interviews focussed on value across the following topics: (1) experiences of the doctoral education process; (2) skills, behaviours, and competencies transferred into work; (3) philosophical stances on their doctorate; (4) value perceptions over time. Participants were also asked to map out their doctoral journey, indicating key high and low moments affecting value judgements during their studies.

Findings

We have (from 15 completed interviews) identified three initial themes related to how graduates perceive doctoral value: (1) socio-cultural and extracurricular value, (2) the fluid perceptions of doctoral value over time, (3) the translatability of skills and behaviours into the 'real world'.

Socio-cultural and extracurricular value

Almost all participants commented how unprepared they felt for employment directly after their doctorate. Those who had gained experience outside of the direct remit of their projects (e.g. engaging in placements and other professional development; joining committees or groups; taking part in public engagement/communication competitions etc.) during their degree described a smoother transition into work, particularly for those working outside of academic research. Those who were more active in their doctoral community also claimed to be more successful in navigating workplace relationships. Half of the participants described concealing their doctorate status from workplace colleagues, attributing this to modesty, or to wishing to avoid being disadvantaged as a result of others' perceptions. The doctoral supervisor was a key factor in perceived value both during and after the degree. There was a strong link between the student-supervisor relationship and the perceived value of the doctoral process.

Fluid perceptions of value over time

The increase in graduates' perceptions of doctorate value over time came through very clearly. Those who were employed at a higher managerial level claimed to appreciate their degree more at their current level of work compared to their entry level roles. Taking a salary cut (compared to an expected post-doctoral role) was a frequently cited cost of the doctorate. Most felt more valued as employees (in all career paths) than they did as doctoral students, due to being trusted with higher responsibilities, and finding that their ideas were valued more seriously by employers. This finding was more prevalent in science graduates than in those from arts, humanities, or social science backgrounds.

Translatability

Doctorate holders identified very few technical 'skills' learnt during their degree which they had then put to use in their jobs after graduation. Attributes such as criticality, project management ability, and awareness of the commercial impact of research were deemed more valuable. Participants all particularly valued the determination, perseverance, and resilience that "*surviving the doctoral process*" had afforded them. Participants commented that they gained valuable social, relational, and cultural awareness during their degrees which helped them overcome these types of barriers in the workplace.

Conclusions

Doctoral graduates across career paths find most value in the personal resilience and resourcefulness they develop throughout their study, as well as deriving useful and translatable learning from inter-personal, cultural, and relational processes. Insights from this project have lasting potential to inform the work of doctoral programme designers and HE policy makers. Most importantly, this research will raise awareness of the issues affecting the PhD learning experience, providing meaningful new guidance and support for all stakeholders.

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