Pedagogically Potent or Bureaucratically Banal: The Trials and Tribulations of Doctoral Progress Reviews (0530)

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Over the past two decades, governments across the globe have been investing in doctoral research to produce the talent necessary to drive the knowledge-based economies of the future (Denicolo, Duke, & Reeves, 2016). Within this new agenda there is little room for the traditional high attrition rates and long completion times of doctorates of decades past as the knowledge economy is impatient for highly skilled doctoral graduates to bring their talents to the labour force. This demand for shorter, successful completion times has led to the identification of various practices that promote shorter candidature and higher rates of persistence. One such practice is the use of periodic formal progress monitoring; often deemed to be a hallmark of international best practice (Di Pierro, 2007; McAlpine & Norton, 2006; Metcalfe, 2006). In the United Kingdom, the Quality Assurance Agency advocates for the use of progress reviews and recommends that universities incorporate periodic progress reviews into the doctoral curriculum (*UK Quality Code for Higher Education Chapter B11: Research Degrees*, 2017).   This has led to a top down pressure on the evolution of the doctorate, with processes and procedures intended to evaluate student progress being bureaucratically and compliance-driven rather than conceptualised and implemented by academic educators. Within this paper we investigate how this impacts the lived experience of doctoral researchers and supervisors as they undergo these processes and try to deal with the realities of problems associated with doctoral progression.

To investigate the lived experience of those involved in the doctoral review process, 28 interviews were conducted in a research intensive university as a part of a larger project exploring factors affecting submission rates. A sub-set of the data relating to progress monitoring processes were analysed inductively using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify how the key actors; doctoral researchers, supervisors and independent chairs, utilise the progress review process. The analysis revealed three types of approach to the review process:

- Open and constructive conversations

- Misrepresentations of progress

- Passive compliance

Where the progress review process is used for open and constructive conversations, all parties involved in the process derive benefit. Doctoral researchers and supervisors receive valued input on the scope and size of their projects, which raises the likelihood of timely submission. In these cases, doctoral researchers get advice on the training needs ensuring that their approach is proportional and time is managed effectively and panel chairs develop a deep awareness of research being undertaken in their area.

However, other approaches were also prevalent in the data. In some cases, power dynamics come into play where review panels members are perceived by doctoral researchers to be part of the same 'club'. Doubts about the independence and confidentiality of the process arise which prevent doctoral researchers from raising issues. Performative pressures on supervisors and a desire to not

be seen to fail in the role of the expert academic sometimes influence supervisors to present student progress in a more positive light than is warranted. This approach tends to lead to issues remaining hidden, or for earnest conversations about progress to be pushed into liminal, shadowy spaces.

The passive compliance approach is the least effective. Supervisors and doctoral researchers perceive progress monitoring to be bureaucratically banal where the time investment is not repaid by the outcomes. Engagement with the process is minimal and there is little to no benefit to the direction of the research project or the doctoral researcher's development.

Consistent with other research (Mewburn, Tokareva, Cuthbert, Sinclair, & Barnacle, 2014), we find that there is, to some degree, a dissociation between lived experience and practice, and the explicit objectives of progress monitoring. Furthermore, at times, participants are reluctant to engage in what is seen as a bureaucratic process, despite the true need for there to be assessment points to inform all parties about the progress of the doctoral researcher. Furthering previous research, we identify the influence of invisible forces such as academic performance metrics, role playing the expert and power dynamics that exude dishonesty and misrepresentation into the review process.

Nevertheless, the progress review process can and does work well where open and constructive conversations take place, showing evidence of its pedagogical potency. We propose that the review process should be dislocated from its bureaucratic ownership to dispel the atmosphere of mistrust and of 'risk management' (Evans, Lawson, McWilliam, & Taylor, 2005), and become much more embedded in the lifeblood of the academic department in order to nurture it as part of an ongoing doctoral pedagogy. Ultimately, where open and honest conversations can take place, there is the greatest scope for the review process to translate into a better chance of timely completion of projects and well-rounded, career-ready researchers. We will end the presentation by discussing practical ways in which institutions can encourage this more positive approach to doctoral progress reviews and by inviting experience-sharing from session participants.

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