

Getting there on time: Understanding what leads to timely submission of PhD theses (0114)

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Abstract

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This poster reports on a PhD project that seeks to understand the phenomena that lead to timely submission of PhD theses in UK universities.

Submission rates (when the thesis is submitted for assessment) are routinely used by UK funders of doctoral education as *the* key performance indicator for judging the quality an institution's PhD programmes and whether or not to continue funding them. This places huge pressure on institutions, supervisors and students to ensure that theses are submitted on time with sanctions imposed when a pre-decided proportion of deadlines are missed. This poster considers the effects of performativity on doctoral education in the UK and, drawing on the literature, suggests what might help to ensure timely and successful submission of PhD theses. A research agenda is then proposed to extend and deepen our understanding of what leads to timely and successful submission.

Research domain: Postgraduate scholarship and practice

Submission for reviewers

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The poster covers the following:

I present a blended theoretical framework consisting of the concepts of performativity (Lyotard 1984), agency (Archer 2000) and practice (Boud and Lee 2009) to explore how and why the drive for efficiency has come to dominate discourse about higher education and is influencing policy and practice in doctoral education (Harris 2007). This framework informs my reading of the empirical literature in the broad topic area which is reported on in the rest of poster as follows:

First, at the policy level, I argue that the purpose of doctoral education has been challenged and changed by the rise of phenomena such as new modes of knowledge production, the knowledge economy and new managerialism. This has led to UK doctoral education becoming a contested space where traditional notions of the knowledge PhD serving the needs of academic disciplines compete with notions of a training PhD which serves the needs of the knowledge economy. Within

the context of this debate, I trace how UK policy has led to submission rates in doctoral education becoming *the* main performance measure of the institution, supervisor and student.

Second, at the level of the main social actors involved in doctoral education, I give a critical appraisal of what the literature reveals about the possible phenomena that might lead to timely submission. In particular, I focus on the attributes of the student (Wright and Cochrane 2000); the approach to supervision (Manathunga 2005); the cultures of departments, institutions and disciplines (Gardner 2010); and career prospects (Golde 2000).

Third, I present the main research questions for the project, which can be summarised as:

- What are the perceptions of the key stakeholders in doctoral education (students, supervisors, programme directors and administrators) of the phenomena that lead to timely submission of the thesis?
- What are the perceptions of the key stakeholders of how they think these underlying phenomena might interact?
- Do these perceptions vary according to discipline, category of student (gender, ethnicity, age, social class) and experience of supervisor?

The methods of data collection I intend to use to explore these questions will be presented in the poster. Underpinned by a critical realist methodology, I will employ a multiple case study approach involving English departments and Biosciences departments in two research intensive universities. At the first stage of data collection a multiple source secondary data analysis of key documents (for example, regulations, codes of practice, handbooks, Doctoral Training Centre annual reports, staff-student committees) will be conducted in order give the researcher a grounding in the strengths and challenges facing each department. This will be followed by around 50 semi-structured interviews across the four departments involving students, supervisors, programme directors, administrators, institutionally accountable senior figures for postgraduate research students, and Pro Vice Chancellors for research. The interviews will conclude once common and particular factors influencing submission rates have been identified.

The project will hopefully enrich our understanding of what leads to timely and successful submission of PhD theses and will be of interest to students, supervisors, universities, funders of doctoral education, and policy makers.

References

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