Completing a PhD in business and management

A brief guide to doctoral students and universities

Yogesh K. Dwivedi
School of Management, Swansea University, Swansea, UK
M.N. Ravishankar
School of Business and Economics, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK, and
Antonis C. Simintiras
School of Management, Swansea University, Swansea, UK

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Abstract

Purpose – Despite the ever-growing number of PhD students all over the world, there remain significant doubts about whether entering students in business and management disciplines fully understand the process of producing a PhD thesis, defending it and developing a coherent publication strategy. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to offer some guidance on what it takes to successfully complete a doctoral research thesis.

Design/methodology/approach – The arguments and guidance presented in this viewpoint paper are drawn on the authors' collective supervision and doctoral examination experiences.

Findings – The paper presents guidelines on three key issues related with the doctoral completion: choosing a research problem; demonstrating rigour and quality; developing a publication strategy.

Originality/value – The content presented in this paper would be valuable aide to those pursuing doctoral research.

Keywords Business and management, Doctoral research, Doctorate in business administration (DBA), PhD, Publication strategy, Rigour and quality

Paper type Viewpoint

1. Introduction

A PhD degree is now almost mandatory to get short-listed for an academic job in a business/management school. Although definite statistics are hard to come by, it is safe to assume that thousands of students embark upon a PhD programme every year and that many of them aspire to land an academic job upon graduation. Recent figures show that in the UK alone, 1,040 business/management students graduated with a PhD degree in 2012-2013 (HESA). A large number of PhD degree granting business schools have also emerged in the last few years in countries like China and India. Despite the ever-growing number of PhD students all over the world, there remain significant doubts about whether entering students in business and management disciplines fully understand the process of producing a PhD thesis, defending it and developing a coherent publication strategy. In many cases the root of the problems are systemic such as the lack of adequate research infrastructure and processes, availability of capable research supervision and research funding and the broader culture of the school/university. Such issues have been discussed in the past and are not the subject of this paper. In this viewpoint paper, we draw on our collective supervision experiences

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and offer some guidance on what it takes to successfully complete a doctoral research thesis. In particular, we focus on three key issues: choosing a research problem (Section 2); demonstrating rigour and quality (Section 3); and developing a publication strategy (Section 4).

2. Choosing a research problem

One of the most critical aspects of doctoral research is making sure that the research focuses on a current and non-trivial problem. In other words, the selected research problem should not have been investigated earlier either in a PhD project or in a journal (or conference) article. A doctoral research thesis is expected to provide clear evidence of a research contribution (i.e. it must add something new) to existing knowledge in a field of research. If an issue has already been investigated in great depth (e.g. in a PhD thesis or in research articles), then it would be hard to demonstrate an original research contribution. How can one find out if a particular research problem has been investigated earlier? A thorough review of the extant literature is called for. Here again, a good approach would be to use the university's electronic library resources and databases to familiarise oneself with the history of a research topic, its development and the recent conversations amongst scholars in the field. A common mistake committed by a PhD student is to assume that any problem he/she arrives at originally (but without referring to much scholarly literature) is a worthwhile PhD project. For instance, just because a student finds it fascinating that companies offshore IT work, it does not follow that the research question "why do companies offshore IT work?" can be the main research question in a PhD project. Hundreds of research papers have already been written on IT offshoring and the academic and practitioner community is unlikely to benefit much from answering this question again. Of course, "IT offshoring" is still very current and presents opportunities to explore interesting problems, but in order to locate an interesting research problem one needs to first conduct a comprehensive review around this topic. On rare occasions one might fortuitously "fool the system" and receive a PhD degree for a thesis that mainly addresses the question: why do companies offshore IT work. But it is very unlikely that the findings of the thesis will be published in a journal of international standards! (see the discussion below on developing a publication strategy).

Another point to be carefully considered is the relevance of the research problem to management practice or/and to the wider society in general. Some research problems can be novel but its relevance may be unclear or unspecified in the thesis. This could annoy examiners (and journal reviewers). Students should try their best to ensure that the research problem meets both the criteria of novelty and relevance. Again, this can be achieved by undertaking a thorough review of the relevant literature and exploring current issues of significance for business or society. For example, information asymmetries in a supply chain may impact the on time on-shelf availability of products and affect customer satisfaction, profitability and competitiveness. Here, there could be interesting issues around technology standards, inter-organisational systems and organisational processes which are worth investigating as a highly relevant PhD project. But in order to ensure one is contributing meaningfully and incrementally to existing knowledge, a thorough literature review should be conducted to assess the novelty of the identified problem. It is worth clarifying here that novel does not always refer to "blue-sky thinking". There are many times when even a much studied topic could be novel as long as it can be differentiated based on context, data types, source, theoretical perspective, etc.

3. Demonstrating rigour and quality

The rigour and quality of the research reported in a thesis is typically assessed in four areas:

(1) Literature review is one of the core elements of any thesis and generally forms the foundation for a research project. Its rigour is normally judged by its comprehensiveness, i.e., whether the review systematically identifies and synthesizes all the scholarly literature relevant to the research topic. Many students take an author-centric approach to structure the literature review, which is a poor approach as it only generates a long descriptive list of who has said what without any deeper analysis and synthesis. Instead, the literature review chapters of a PhD thesis should ideally be organised around ideas and concepts (for further detail see Webster and Watson, 2002). It has to be acknowledged that not all universities subscribe to a wide-range of scholarly journals. This clearly impacts on the quality of the literature review. However, most universities have made big investments and improved online access to scholarly sources, which means that a doctoral student in (say) China is now able to access most of the scholarly journals that a doctoral student in (say) Australia accesses. The point here is that examiners and reviewers are now very unlikely to look at a poor literature review chapter sympathetically on the grounds that a student had no reasonable way of getting her hands on relevant published work. Conducting a literature review also requires a student to know how and where to look for information. While keyword searching on electronic databases is the preferred method adopted by most PhD students to look for related work, we would advise students to also frequently access the web sites of the important journals in their field and read published articles therein. This strategy will not only provide students an insight into the broader intellectual conversations going on in the discipline, but one might also serendipitously come across a potentially relevant theoretical slant or methodological approach that might never have been found through keyword searching alone.

(2) Awareness and understanding of a range of appropriate theoretical perspectives is critical and examiners would like to see this demonstrated in a thesis. While one might focus on a particular theory/model in a thesis, it is also important to show awareness of competing theories and models. What are the strengths and weaknesses of other theories and models? How have they been used thus far in the literature? It is also crucial that a thesis logically and rationally justifies the choice of a particular theory/model. Many PhD theses merely assert and claim that their theoretical perspective is appropriate without seriously comparing and contrasting it with other related approaches. This problem will almost certainly be picked up on by examiners and students could be asked to revise their thesis and elaborate on other possible theoretical approaches.

(3) In terms of methodological approaches, the thesis should openly and clearly discuss the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the thesis. It should also illustrate a general awareness of the most often used research methods and show an in-depth understanding of the particular method adopted in the thesis. A detailed description of the research context and data collection procedures is always appreciated by examiners. Data analysis is

another section within the methodology chapter that requires careful crafting. Often one comes across data analysis sections where there is very little explanation of how the data were actually analysed. All one gets to see is a brief statement such as "data were analysed using X software". Care must be taken to ensure that the steps followed in analysing the data are reported in as much detail as possible. Many PhD students (as well as experienced scholars) find this a very difficult section of the thesis to write. However, one should bear in mind that a well-written, clearly argued and credible data analysis section often creates a very good impression about the thesis (and the student) in the examiners' minds.

(4) A thesis is incomplete without a strong discussion chapter: however, many students run out of steam by the time they start the discussion chapter. As a result, although labelled "discussion", this chapter often ends up summarizing the results and doing very little else. In some other problematic cases, discussion chapters only detail the practical contributions, limitations and suggest avenues for future research. It is very hard to evaluate the contribution of a PhD thesis if no effort is made to explain and discuss the findings in the light of prior literature. A good discussion chapter should be able to tease out some abstract principles and contribute to both the phenomenon studied and the theory(ies) used. In other words, a good discussion chapter must clearly highlight the theoretical contributions of the study (see Whetten (1989) regarding what constitutes a theoretical contribution). Examiners may also put off by inconsistent citation and referencing styles, grammar and word-choice issues, formatting issues and disjointed writing. It is very important to follow a consistent citation and referencing style throughout the thesis. Very often one comes across numerous typological, spelling and grammatical errors in a submitted thesis which give examiners a bad impression about the quality of the thesis. It is sensible to take the help of a proofreading or copyediting service before submission. Readers may find the following sources useful to know more about rigour, theories and the theoretical contribution and structure of a doctoral thesis: Davis (2000), Davis and Parker (1997), Dwivedi *et al.* (2012), Grover (2004), Robey (2001), Webster and Watson (2002) and Whetten (1989).

The focus on rigour and quality also has an important dimension that relates to how universities manage the examination of a PhD thesis. One of the challenges for universities is to identify and recruit suitable examiners. The most obvious way to find such examiners is through the supervisors' academic networks (e.g. scholars they may have met during international conferences or may have interacted with when undertaking collaborative research). However, this may not be a feasible approach in all cases. An alternative approach is to select examiners based on citations. If a thesis heavily cites a particular scholar, then he/she could be an appropriate examiner. Even when an examiner is selected purely based on personal contacts, this choice can only be justified from a rigour and quality perspective if the potential examiner's research is relevant to the thesis. Examining a PhD thesis is clearly a time-consuming task. Universities must ensure that an examiner's time is not wasted due to poor communication. The examiners should be clearly informed about the process and criteria for evaluation and they should be provided with an electronic version of the evaluation form. The majority of (if not all) examiners prefer to complete an assessment report electronically so just providing a printed form may be unhelpful and inconvenient. Once an invitation to examine is accepted, a university should clearly explain its regulations and procedures to the appointed examiner; information about any delays (e.g. late submission of thesis), should also be communicated to examiners in a timely manner. Also, when examiners send a report, it is courteous to acknowledge receipt, but in many cases this is not done. Finally, if there is an honorarium specified for the examination it should be reimbursed in a timely manner. Institutional sluggishness/failure to do so will have a negative impact on the reputation/image of universities and it may be difficult to recruit the same examiner again.

Some countries have only recently developed best practices and norms to improve the standards of doctoral research in their universities and to better assess the rigour and quality of a submitted PhD thesis. For instance, University Grants Commission (the central regulator in the India HE sector), in specifying minimum standards and procedures for the award of MPhil/PhD degrees encourage universities to select one examiner from a foreign institution (UGC Regulations, 2009, p. 4054). Consequently, many Indian universities now appoint academics based in foreign institutions as examiners. This practice has a direct impact on doctoral candidates as they not only need to make themselves familiar with international standards[1], but also have to meet such standards in order to successfully complete their doctoral research. Such moves promise to raise the rigour and quality standards of doctoral education in a country and could eventually lead to a better recognition of PhD degrees awarded by a country's universities.

4. Developing a publication strategy

In almost all business and management schools, academics are now expected to publish peer-reviewed research of international quality. While the definition of what constitutes a "good" scholarly journal varies from country to country, the increasing pressure to publish is most keenly felt by PhD students in the academic job market. It is therefore crucial for PhD students to develop a publication strategy while working on their PhD thesis. If students are looking to find an academic job in a research-intensive university, it is advisable that they at least have a paper under review in a peer-reviewed journal by the time they submit their thesis. This demonstrates the student's potential to the short-listing panels and signals ambition. Peer-reviewed conference papers too are useful in that they show recruiters that a student has experience of writing research articles for a scholarly audience. However, an excessive focus on publications could take the focus away from completing and submitting one's PhD thesis on time. This is a very difficult balance to strike for many PhD students, especially in countries like the UK where full-time PhD students are normally expected to submit their PhD thesis in less than four years. Some universities allow PhD-by-publications in addition to the more traditional method of earning a PhD degree by producing a research monograph. In choosing between the two, students are well-advised to follow a path that is well-aligned with their personality and their career objectives. On the whole, students should devise a publication strategy that takes into account the wider institutional context and expectations. Taking their supervisors into confidence can help students plan a realistic and achievable publication strategy. As people with more experience of getting articles accepted (and rejected!), they are often able to accurately guess whether academic reviewers will like a paper or not. A final point on developing a publication strategy: students should not simply look at journal titles and decide that a particular journal is a good home for their paper. It is much wiser to read the editorial policy and to go through the profile of editorial board members to assess whether one's work is likely to be well-received in a journal. It might also be helpful to write for a specific journal instead of writing a paper and then thinking about where to send the paper. Writing for a specific journal implies that one closely follows the house rules and the typical structure of the articles published in the journal. This approach obviously does not guarantee publication, but at the very least it helps present a paper in a style that is familiar to a journal's reviewers.

5. Doctorate in business administration (DBA)

Many business schools across different countries have an alternative equivalent known as DBA to a PhD degree[2]. The DBA is particularly designed for those who intend to carry out doctoral-level research whilst being in full-time employment. The DBA is generally delivered in part-time mode and candidates would have four to six years to complete it. The expectation (in terms of rigour, quality and contribution to the existing knowledge) from a DBA work is similar to a PhD work. Hence, guidelines provided above are also applicable for conducting a doctoral research through a DBA route. However, there are some distinctions between these two equivalent degrees. In comparison to a traditional PhD degree, DBA candidates have to complete a specified number of taught modules (in order to be equipped with relevant theoretical concepts, methods and analyses techniques) before beginning their actual research work. Although both PhD and DBA work are expected to make an original contribution to the knowledge, DBA is generally more applied in nature and it is assumed that the outcome of the research would be implemented in a real world organisation to solve a management-related problem. Furthermore, in contrast to a PhD work which is generally focused on theory building, extension and/or testing, DBA work is largely based on applying theory to solve management-related problems. Based on the discussion presented above, it can be said that all aspects of doctoral work (i.e. choosing a relevant problem, conducting a thorough and systematic literature review, choosing and applying appropriate research methods and data analysis techniques, synthesising findings, illustrating original contributions and drawing relevant conclusions) is vital for completing a DBA work. However, given the applied nature, DBA candidates need to give particular attention to ensure a very high degree of relevance of the chosen research problem. Furthermore, a DBA research should neither ignore theoretical element fully nor should give main focus on building and testing theory as the general expectation is to apply theory or theoretical framework to solve a management-related problem.

6. Closing thoughts

This viewpoint paper attempted to offer some guidance on what it takes to successfully complete a doctoral research thesis. Particularly this paper discussed and provided guidelines relating to three key areas, which are choosing a research problem, demonstrating rigour and quality and developing a publication strategy. The chosen research problem should be original, timely and relevant. A doctoral student must illustrate rigour in all aspects of the work but particularly in undertaking literature review, selecting and justifying theories and/or theoretical constructs, critical instance on selecting, justifying and applying research method and analysis techniques, discussing research results, clearly highlighting both theoretical and practical contributions and drawing careful conclusions. Research publication emerging from a doctoral work is vital for both successful completion of a PhD and building a successful academic career. It is therefore crucial for PhD students to develop a publication strategy while working on their PhD thesis. However, a caution must be taken not to give excessive focus on publications as that could take the focus away from completing and submitting one's PhD thesis on time.

Notes

1. www.linkedin.com/pulse/article/20140411141019-13849180-successful-phd-completion-in-business-and-management-discipline-a-brief-guide-to-indian-students
2. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctor_of_Business_Administration

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About the authors

Yogesh K. Dwivedi is a Professor of Digital and Social Media and Head of Management and Systems Section in the School of Management at the Swansea University, Wales, UK. He obtained his PhD and MSc in Information Systems from the Brunel University, UK. He has co-authored several papers which have appeared in international refereed journals such as *CACM*, *DATA BASE*, *EJIS*, *IJPR*, *ISJ*, *ISF*, *JCIS*, *JIT*, *JORS*, *TMR* and *IMDS*. He is an Associate Editor of *European Journal of Marketing* and *European Journal of Information Systems*, an Assistant Editor of *JEIM* and *TGPPP*, a Senior Editor of *JECR* and a Member of the Editorial Board/Review Board of several journals. He is a Life Member of the IFIP WG8.6 and 8.5. Professor Yogesh K. Dwivedi is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: y.k.dwivedi@swansea.ac.uk

M.N. Ravishankar is a Professor of Globalisation and Emerging Markets at the School of Business and Economics, Loughborough University, UK. His research interests span cultural conflicts in the implementation of strategy, offshore outsourcing of work and IT-enabled transformations in emerging markets. His research articles have been published in journals such as *Information Systems Research*, *European Journal of Information Systems*, *Journal of Information Technology*, *Omega* and *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*. He serves as an Associate Editor at *Information Systems Journal*.

Antonis C. Simintiras is a Professor of Marketing and Deputy Dean for Internationalisation at the School of Management, Swansea University, Wales, UK. He obtained a BSc (Econ) from the University of Macedonia – Greece, an MBA from the University of West Haven – USA and a PhD in Sales Management from the University of Huddersfield – UK. Over the years, he has held visiting professorial appointments in various EU states, USA and China and published several refereed articles. Part of his work has appeared, amongst others, in *JIBS*, *IMR*, *JBR*, *IMM*, *P&M*, *EJM* and *JMM*. He has contributed to several edited books and co-authored a book on Global Sales Management.