

PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATES AND DBAS IN AUSTRALIA: DILEMMAS AND OPPORTUNITIES TO INNOVATE

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ABSTRACT

The aims of this paper are to a) share information about the focus, aims, structure and examination criteria of the Doctor of Business Education (DBA) programs in Australian universities, b) clarify current dilemmas in terms of program delivery when instituting and managing such programs and c) identify opportunities to collaborate between Australian and American universities to share insights about best practices in the management of DBA programs.

INTRODUCTION

During 2002 meetings of DBA directors and interested parties, a workshop was designed for an Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management (ANZAM) conference to discuss current dilemmas that Australian universities face when they institute Doctor of Business Administration programs. During the workshop an international perspective was provided by Hay and Bartunek (2002) that created a need for a continuing dialogue between academics nationally and internationally to influence quality and accrediting bodies over a longer term.

The current debate about professional doctorates and DBA programs in Australian universities, as well as the structure of this paper, focuses on dilemmas of positioning the programs, establishing a structure to meet certain aims, providing high quality supervision, establishing criteria for the examination of dissertations, and investigating opportunities for industry-university linkages and professional networks in the programs.

POSITIONING THE DBA

Any Australian university that institutes a professional doctorate or DBA program devotes considerable discussion to differentiating such a program from their existing PhD programs. In Australian universities research-based PhD programs tend to be university awards, administered by an Office of Research, that attract Research Training Scheme (RTS) places and funding from the federal government. The candidates are often young academics who have achieved significant success in research-based Honours or Masters programs. Full-time PhD students are encouraged to prepare a research proposal in their first year of oncampus research and to complete a dissertation in three years under the supervision of principal- and associate supervisors. In most PhD programs, students can enter at any time, engage in a variety of appropriate research methodologies, participate in major academic research projects of their supervisors and negotiate progression with supervisors. This contributes to a dominant model of doctoral training that is university focussed and driven (Kemp 2002). In contrast, American PhD programs contain more structured coursework and the concept of an

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American 'Executive PhD' is closer to the Australian DBA or professional doctorate programs than Australian PhD programs.

Hay and Bartunek (2002) provide an international perspective on DBA programs by highlighting some of the structures of Case Western Reserve University, Benedictine University, Fenix (Sweden) and Cranfield UK. These 'Executive PhD' programs tend to be part-time programs, have a three to four year program duration and are completed by executives or managers in profit or non-profit organisations. The programs include coursework that mixes rigorous research with practical application to organisational issues and aim to deliver graduates with 'dual qualifications as academics and organisational leaders'. The programs were instituted in the universities to raise revenue for the university, advance the personal and professional development of the candidates, contribute to organisational effectiveness and leadership development in organisations, and ensure theoretical and applied knowledge construction as well as societal relevance through mode 3 learning.

Australian DBA or professional doctorates (for example, in education or engineering) can be studied on campus part-time or full-time or by part-time distance education, are normally presented by a school or faculty and include coursework in addition to a dissertation or portfolio. Such programs do not necessarily attract RTS places unless they include a significant research component (75% of the program) culminating in a dissertation, and the faculty or school aims to target RTS places for both PhD and professional doctorate programs. For example, in the University of Southern Queensland, the research-based PhD and Ed D (Doctor of Education) candidates can compete for RTS places, but not the DBA program candidates as the latter contains more coursework than research credits.

Guersen (2002) questions what the aim or unique niche is of the DBA and how it could be differentiated from the PhD. Some universities argue that the difference between the PhD and the DBA lie in their research and learning objectives, the different candidates they attract, and the ambitions of the candidates (Morley 2002) whereas others note that as the professional doctorate programs are targeted to the particular expectations of participants and their contributions to a professional field, specialisation in these programs are possible and marketable (Kemp 2002). In general a number of universities design DBA programs as high-level vocationally-oriented programs that give students who are already business professionals, sufficient theoretical and empirical understanding to enable them to identify and resolve business challenges in both the private and public sectors (Erwee 2002). Many universities include statements that their DBA candidates or graduates will be able to apply relevant theoretical knowledge to contemporary business problems; determine and apply appropriate research methods to business management problems; demonstrate superior oral and written communication skills relevant to business; and link this educational experience directly with their own workplace experience.

Different universities such as Central Queensland University, RMIT, Curtin University, University of Southern Queensland and University of South Australia confirmed that their DBA candidates are mature high achieving professionals who wish to gain more research experience, are attracted to structured coursework that could increase specialist knowledge, and wish to make a contribution to management knowledge and more effective practice.

A discussion ensued in the ANZAM workshop about the balance in the DBA between generation of new knowledge and practical application of knowledge. Some perspectives were that a PhD thesis must make a distinct contribution to knowledge, whereas a DBA thesis is required to make a contribution to professional practice (Morley 2002). Other perspectives were that the DBA and PhD can be arranged on a continuum, blending the requirements of contributions to theoretical knowledge and professional practice. The discussion culminated in a perspective by Prof Jean Bartunek that there should be a blend of practice and theory and the DBA (or Executive PhD in the USA) candidate should be a 'boundary spanner' who closes the relevance gap between management theory and business practice.

STRUCTURING THE PROGRAMS

An overview of entry requirements and structures of thirteen DBA programs at various Australian universities is provided in Tables 1 and 2 (Erwee 2002). The mix of research methodology training, advanced coursework and, in some cases, reflective seminars that culminate in a dissertation (or portfolio in one university) demonstrate how the universities tend to manage the dilemma of the blend of theory and practice in the DBA.

In general the entry requirement is an MBA or equivalent professional business qualification with a satisfactory Grade Point Average, considerable experience in management, and English proficiency for overseas candidates (see Table 1). Some universities require a short research proposal to enable them to match the candidate's interest to the availability and expertise of potential supervisors, whereas other universities specify the areas in which they wish to attract students or the current projects that supervisors are engaged in. The selection criteria again confirms that the universities are trying to select experienced managers who, with sufficient training in advanced theory and research methodology, could contribute to both the generation of new knowledge and more effective business practice. Universities such as RMIT and University of South Australia select cohorts of students who complete coursework, research methodology and reflective studies or seminars together during parts of the program.

Coursework tends to be used as an initial framework to create a theoretical basis for the dissertation and as an introduction to development of research capabilities (see Table 2). Certain universities tend to emphasise coursework in a range of academic disciplines, for example Charles Sturt, Northern Territory, Swinburne, Victoria, Southern Queensland, whereas the focus in Macquarie, Canberra and Southern Cross is more on advanced research methodology. Other universities mention seminars for presenting research proposals to peers and supervisors for feedback or evaluation in their websites or documentation (Morley 2002). Some universities are linking the aims of specific sections of the DBA program to the specific development of capabilities or graduate attributes. The question remains if the current Australian structures match the aims of Executive PhDs in the USA to deliver dual qualifications as academics and organisational leaders. Therefore, in Australia no one best practice method exists to bridge the relevance gap between management theory and business practice.

SUPERVISING THE DBA CANDIDATE

Table 3 indicates the number of graduates in a sample of Australian universities in contrast to the number of students enrolled (Erwee 2002). The underlying dilemma is one of selecting the 'right' candidate, enhancing the research-, writing and analytical skills of the candidates and

then supervising the candidate to complete a dissertation that would be acceptable to external academic examiners, as well as to interested parties in industry. The question remains as to the level of specialisation of a DBA supervisor, or differences in supervising DBA versus PhD candidates.

One argument is that the specialised nature of professional doctorates requires significant specialisation on the part of those who teach into or administer such programs (Kemp 2002). In many cases these supervisors of DBAs have graduated from research-based PhDs and are often sceptical about the DBA program if they were not part of the design-, accreditation- or program advisory teams. A contrasting perspective is that the senior or principal supervisor of a DBA student need not be the main source of knowledge, inspiration and guidance: the candidate could have more relevant practical knowledge than their senior supervisor and therefore the supervisor is required to be more expert in doing research and knowledgeable in/about doctoral standards (Morley 2002). One of the issues debated at the ANZAM conference was whether the DBA graduate, if employed in a university, could supervise PhD students. Both RMIT (Morley 2002) and USQ (Erwee 2002) confirm that this could be possible, depending on the area of specialisation of the supervisor and candidate.

Universities also differ as to the extent of the written or psychological contract that they have with their students or how they apply the university's guidelines or academic guides (Moses 1985) to supervision. Universities tend to differ in the extent to which they provide written guidance on how to construct a dissertation (Perry 2002), circulate completed dissertations as examples, and provide guidelines on ethics clearances and intellectual property policies.

EXAMINING THE DISSERTATION OR PORTFOLIO

Cavaye and Perry (2002) analyse the examination process followed in a number of Australian universities. The aims and structure of the DBA and PhD differ among the universities and various professional doctorates develop along unique pathways. However, many universities examine DBAs in the same way as a PhD, using the same criteria. For many of those involved with DBAs this is not an acceptable way of examining a DBA, as a DBA is a separate product with different aims from a PhD.

Similarities among the examination include that both the DBA and PhD dissertation are examined on the candidates' demonstration of capacity to undertake independent critical research and evidence of clear thought in the development, delimitation and justification of the research question. In general universities require that there should be inclusion of sufficient original material in the dissertation to make a contribution to theory and practice in the DBA dissertation. There is an expectation that the research question and issues in the DBA should be directly related to a workplace or industry based question. The examiners evaluate the DBA candidate's appropriate integration and critique of the literature relevant to the research question, choice of methodology, data collection and analysis, and logical argument in the interpretation of the research findings. The candidate's soundness of conclusions, based upon the argument and findings of the dissertation, and appropriate coverage of especially managerial implications of the research, are evaluated (Erwee 2002).

During the ANZAM workshop the audience discussed these examination criteria and noted that the first criterion, 'demonstrated capacity to undertake independent critical research' could exceed the requirements of a DBA. Examiners may also have different interpretations

of the criterion 'inclusion of sufficient original material'. The recommendation is to provide examiners with as much guidance for examination as possible. The University of South Australia allows candidates to prepare portfolios consisting of publishable papers, rather than dissertations, for examination and are formulating clearer guidelines for examiners.

INNOVATIVE LINKAGES BETWEEN INDUSTRY AND UNIVERSITY

Hay and Bartunek (2002) note that the expectation of an Executive PhD is that the individual should be able to be a boundary spanner between higher education and business to pursue new management knowledge and more effective practice. Therefore both higher educational institutions and industry should search for innovative linkages between them to realise the aims of the candidates.

Kemp (2002) notes the extensive opportunities for collaboration between universities and industry in the delivery of professional doctorates or the DBA programs, and differentiates between surface level and deep level linkages. Examples of surface level linkages are that a particular industry group is the source of the candidates, individuals from industry are involved in course delivery, supervision or assessment and research is work-based. Deeper level linkages imply that the establishment of the program was driven by industry needs and in some cases funding, the professional or industry bodies are equal partners in credentialing processes, delivery, supervision and assessment. Such deeper linkages create communities of learning between the partners and, therefore, the research training outcomes benefit both partners. Kemp's (2002) evaluation is that most professional doctorate programs in Australian universities tend to exhibit surface level linkages and she argues that the success of professional doctorates could depend on the advocacy of professional associations and funding incentives should more adequately entice universities towards industry partnerships. Universities should investigate how they can form linkages between themselves, such as developing joint ownership and delivery of programs with external bodies, to service the needs of major industry partners.

RMIT has experimented with a 'DBA spiral curriculum model' (Morley 2002) that includes elements of the bridging of theory and praxis, critical reflection in cohort groups and supervised professional practice review sessions. Most universities use electronic discussion groups and emails to assist in creating a learning community, but they could also introduce candidates to senior or international peers and researchers. In addition to the current DBA research, training could be adapted to incorporate a deep engagement with industry and professional requirements that could further lead to more context-specific research capabilities (Kemp 2002).

FUTURE RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION IN AOM AND ANZAM

Articles in the Academy of Management Learning and Education point to further innovation in bridging gaps between theory and practice. Ackoff (2002, p. 63) cautioned educators to 'think creatively about learning, every single aspect of the educational process ought to be questioned and systematically denied and the consequences explored'. Another issue is how boundaries and borders in current management education between management students and instructors, between universities or schools, classrooms or geographic borders, can be breached. Mintzberg and Gosling (2002, p. 66) argue that learning can occur 'where concepts meet experiences through reflection' despite the tensions across borders. In contrast Pfeffer

and Fong (2002) question whether business school research is influential in management practice and Donaldson (2002, p. 105) recommends that business schools should foster theories that 'improve managerial decision making by specifying causal connections between managerially valued outcomes and the practices that managers can adopt to bring them about'. One of the innovative models to contrast with the 'postgraduate-student-as-customer model' is a collaborative partnership model (Ferris 2002) and its associated changes in policies and methodologies. These analyses can also be applied to Executive PhD and DBA programs.

Furthermore, when we institute or evaluate current DBA or professional doctorates programs, we need to ask the same questions that Hay and Bartunek (2002) posed namely:

- Do the DBA candidates create new theoretical knowledge and more effective implementation of theories and applied knowledge?
- How essential are the forms of theory practice linkage to the delivery on the promise of Executive Doctoral programs in the USA or DBAs in Australia?
- What is the nature of a DBA program that is capable of closing the theory-practice gap in such a fashion that it adds to unique and lasting contributions to universities, organisation and society?

In order to stimulate international dialogue, the Academy of Management, USA and the Australia New Zealand Academy of Management can facilitate contact between American and Australian DBA directors and interested parties. There should be international research over the longer term on how unique is the continued contribution of DBA graduates to academic knowledge creation and organisational renewal and whether they deliver on their potential to build bridges between theory and practice.

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