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AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES' EXAMINATION CRITERIA FOR DBA DISSERTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the principles that Australian universities tend to use when they develop examination criteria for a DBA dissertation that are different from criteria for a PhD thesis. First, the authors discuss the similarities and differences between the two types of research report—with the major differences being the research domain of the DBA report being management practice, rather than academic literature. Their argument is that the DBA is a professional doctorate for managers and the PhD is a professional doctorate for academics. The following section includes the examination criteria for DBA dissertations and for PhD theses at Australian universities that offer both awards. Finally, the authors present their view of core examination criteria for DBA dissertations. These criteria identify the requirements of the research domain for a DBA dissertation and also cover issues like the amount of literature reviewed and how the thesis is presented. The recommendation is that Australian universities could adapt these DBA examination criteria, standardise their examination processes so that doctoral candidates, supervisors and examiners can have a common frame of reference.

This overview was adapted from presentations at the 2002 Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management Conference, Beechworth, Australia, and similar workshops at doctoral symposiums at QUT in 2002.

INTRODUCTION

DBA programs did not begin in earnest until the 1990s. By 1999, more than 16 UK universities offered a DBA program (Bourner, Ruggeri-Stevens & Bareham 2000) and by 2002, around ten Australian universities did. In some universities, the DBA program has become so popular that it is more successful than their PhD programs in management. Given that the DBA dissertation could be different from a PhD thesis, how should it be examined? There is no literature about this second issue.

This paper aims to answer the question about how DBA dissertations should be examined, based on an investigation of how a DBA program is different from a PhD program. Essentially, we argue that the DBA is a professional doctorate for managers and the PhD is a professional doctorate for academics. Thus the DBA's focus is the management development of the candidate. Our contribution is the first development of appropriate examination criteria for DBA theses.

This paper has three parts. The first part establishes differences between a PhD and a DBA. Then existing examination criteria used to examine PhD theses and DBA dissertations at Australian universities are examined. Finally, new examination criteria for DBA dissertations are developed.

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This paper is delimited to DBA programs that have a major research project that is reported in a dissertation of more than 35 000 words or so; for example, the programs at RMIT, SCU, Swinburne and USQ fit into this category. Thus, DBA programs that are examined through a portfolio of *many* reports are not considered; the program at USA fits into this category. The particular method of examining a DBA dissertation, for example, an oral examination or otherwise, is also beyond the scope of this paper for the criteria developed are for whatever form the examination is. The term 'dissertation' is used for the output of a DBA program and 'thesis' for the output of a PhD program; this is done only for convenience in distinguishing between them. Where both are referred to, the term 'doctoral report' is used.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN A DBA AND A PHD

There are three major differences between a DBA and a PhD in the business/management disciplines: qualifications and knowledge on entry into the program, focus of the program, and the nature of the doctoral report. Firstly, entry into a DBA usually requires an MBA degree or the equivalent, as well as significant management/professional experience (e.g. Association of Business Schools 1997, Bourner, Bowden & Laing 2001, McWilliam et al. 2001). Students with a master's degree in a non-management field are usually required to complete several MBA-level subjects before being able to enter into the DBA program. Applicants whose highest qualification is an Honours degree are not always considered for entry; some universities (SCU, for example) would require completion of some MBA subjects by an Honours student while other universities (Swinburne, for example) do not allow for Honours degree entry at all. In addition to master's level qualifications, entry into a DBA program requires appropriate executive or managerial experience in the public or private sector. In contrast, entry into a PhD program usually requires only a two-semester honours award and no work experience of any kind. These differences suggest that the teaching and learning experiences of a DBA program should be geared to quite mature people with both academic and managerial experience. Indeed, a DBA program could be more 'business-like' in its project-structured approach to producing the outcomes of a DBA thesis and its related learning experiences. For example, because a DBA program does not assume a research honours degree has been completed before the program starts, as a PhD does, it usually requires some research methods coursework. Also, in a DBA program several papers are often written under close supervision in the early stages, thus 'easing' a student into his or her own project's research process.

The second difference between a DBA and a PhD program is the focus of the program. The DBA is a professional doctorate for *managers or management professionals*, that is, it is a doctoral-level program that will help the professional development of practitioners (e.g. Association of Business Schools 1997, Bourner et al. 2001, Lockhart & Stablein 2002). Confirming this judgement, a survey of UK degrees concluded that the DBA program focuses on an executive's development and his or her practice:

...there is reasonable degree of consensus emerging about the nature of the DBA: it is program of *research-based management development* aimed at developing the capacity to make a significant original contribution to *management practice*. (Bourner, Ruggeri-Stevens & Bareham 2000, p. 494; emphases added)

In contrast, the PhD in many universities is a degree that focuses on a contribution to academic literature and prepares usually younger students for a career in academic research—

it could be called a professional doctorate for *academics*. This sort of PhD degree has been criticised by business and industry as inappropriate for a non-academic career because it is too theoretical and solitary, among other things (e.g. Bourner et al. 2000; Evans 2002; Perry & Zuber-Skerritt 1993). Nevertheless, the DBA does not discard all the features of a PhD. It keeps features such as precision of thought and expression, and an awareness of what others have previously written about a topic. But it applies those features to address issues of practical relevance to a manager focusing on the 'professional in context' (Maxwell & Shanahan 1997, p.134).

The third difference between a DBA and a PhD flows from the first two differences, and is the doctoral report itself. Because a DBA student already has a MBA that has covered a broad range of knowledge when he or she enters the program and because of his or her main focus on a management problem rather than the literature, the DBA dissertation is usually shorter than a PhD thesis. Individual universities have different guidelines for the length of a doctoral report. For example, a SCU DBA dissertation is approximately 50 000 words in length, but that is often exceeded, and a Swinburne DBA has a minimum length of 45,000 words. In contrast, a PhD thesis is normally about 50 000 to 60 000 words (Phillips & Pugh, 1994, p. 53), while its maximum is about 100 000 words. Because a DBA dissertation can be longer than its usual maximum word length and a PhD thesis can be considerably shorter than its maximum, the difference in length is not an important one.

A more important difference than word length is that the DBA dissertation could place emphasis on the *managerial implications* of what the DBA research project has found, and not put so much emphasis on the theory (Association of Business Schools 1997, Bourner et al. 2001, Maxwell & Shanahan 1997). For some, the DBA program's focus on managerial outcomes and implications places a DBA dissertation somewhat close to a manager's or consultant's report. Hence, a brief look at the difference between a DBA and such reports is warranted. Essentially, a manager's and some consultant's reports focus on *one* firm's problem. In contrast, while the DBA research problem might be the same as a problem addressed in a manager's or consultant's report, a DBA dissertation would be more rigorous, more in-depth, and aim for *broader* understanding of the type of problem. A DBA would be expected to place the research problem in the extant (academic) literature while a manager's or consultant's report would not (or, if it does, would not do so to the same detailed extent). Also, a DBA dissertation would be expected to draw conclusions and provide implications for a wider audience than just one firm. In short, a DBA thesis explicitly:

- considers what practitioners and others have already learnt and written about the practice;
- explains how ideas in the report are related, as a basis for predictions made in the report;
- explains how processes were carried out to execute the research and prepare the report, so that other practitioners can learn about them and/or check them out; and
- develops implications for other managers in other firms in other industries.

In all, a DBA program offers managers a tough but hopefully exciting journey of professional development that, considering their experience and career goals, is more appropriate for a manager's career path than a PhD program would be.

CONCERNS ABOUT THE EXAMINATION PROCESS

Most DBA programs have a coursework component and such coursework is usually assessed as the student passes through the various subjects. Some DBAs have an additional, substantial thesis component. Thus, the final and main assessment item in these DBA programs is the DBA dissertation. This dissertation is assessed by examination, like a PhD thesis. Since this examination is a crucial part of a DBA program, it is appropriate to focus on it in this paper. There are two concerns with the DBA dissertation examination: there is confusion about the nature and criteria of doctoral examinations in general; and PhD and DBA theses are often examined in the same way although they have different goals.

Confusion about the criteria of doctoral report examinations

Examiners are the 'gatekeepers' who decide whether a postgraduate research student will be awarded their degree and so be allowed into a community of scholars. But there is virtually no training for examiners, their reports have limited distribution to peers, and there is little, if any, feedback to them about their performance (Perry, McPhail & Brown 2001). The limited research about the doctoral examination process suggests that the examination process produces confusing results (for example, Johnston 1997; Nightingale 1984; Nelson 1991; Phillips 1992). In particular, the criteria to be used by examiners are not standardised. In addition, there is no clear, agreed definition of that which constitutes a 'contribution'—a major criterion for some research theses.

Criteria used by examiners

First, consider the criteria that examiners use. This evidence in this discussion includes how PhD theses are examined because the criteria used for DBA and PhD reports are the same, as shown below. Three earlier studies provided a picture of confusion about the criteria used by doctoral examiners. Firstly, Nelson (1991) analysed 219 examiners' reports of Australian National University PhD theses and the Notes to Examiners sent out by all Australian universities, and surveyed 83 Australian examiners in the history discipline. He concluded that examination processes were not standardised, indeed, they were almost unknown and unknowable—'Just how examiners come to their individual decisions about what an examiner's report is, and what standard is required of a PhD thesis, is a *mystery*' (Nelson, 1991, p. 25, emphasis added).

Secondly, Nightingale (1992, p. 169) surveyed staff at the University of New South Wales and found a similarly bewildering picture about PhD examination criteria within that university:

'...there is not even agreement within one institution about what conferring the degree certifies, and that even where there is a serious attempt to give adequate direction to examiners, the criteria remain generalised and difficult to interpret.'

Thirdly, Johnston (1997, p. 346) considered 51 PhD examiners' reports at one university and found similar confusion, with 'inconsistencies and variations in examiners' reports'.

This picture of confusion came from research into examiners of a non-business discipline or from examiners across many disciplines. The picture is the same in research focusing on thesis examinations in a single discipline, the business discipline of marketing in Australia

and New Zealand. (Perry et al. 2001). Answers to an open-ended question about criteria in that interview research elicited a similarly wide range of answers about many issues.

While this paper focuses on the examination of doctoral reports, the issue of confusion about criteria for assessing a research report is also encountered in the related area of reviews for journal articles. Fiske and Fogg (1990, p. 21, emphasis added) investigated all the reviewers' reports for hundreds of articles in some selected, refereed journals and found the coefficient of correlation between reviewers' judgements was a mere 0.2 so that the judgements hardly agree at all: :

'In the typical case, two reviews of the same paper had *no critical point in common*...they write about different topics, each making points that were appropriate and accurate. As a consequence, their recommendations about editorial decisions showed *hardly any agreement*.'

The definition of a 'contribution'

A major examination issue for many doctoral reports is their 'contribution', including DBA dissertations, as shown below. But what exactly is a doctoral report's 'contribution to knowledge'? Phillips (1992, p. 128) explored the meaning of a 'contribution' in in-depth interviews with 50 students and 50 staff at British universities and found confusion: 'students and staff use the same word to describe a range of different concepts'.

Similar confusion was found in research among examiners in Australia and New Zealand (based closely on Perry et al. 2001). That research asked examiners in the marketing discipline to answer an open-ended question about how they defined a contribution. Answers were as fuzzy and diverse as those found by Phillips, including definitions such as 'leading to publication', 'adds to what we know', 'provides insight', 'integrates different things we know', 'conceptualises something new'.

The open-ended question was followed by a more precise, closed-ended question asking examiners to *rank* the following diverse descriptions of a contribution (adapted from Phillips 1992):

- saying something nobody has said before;
- carrying out empirical work that hasn't been done before;
- making a synthesis that hasn't been made before;
- using already known material but with a new interpretation;
- trying out something in this country that has previously only been done in other countries;
- taking a particular technique and applying it in a new area;
- bringing new evidence to bear on an old issue;
- other (please specify)

The examiners' rankings of these descriptions were *very* different. The only pattern of agreement was that the first two items were often ranked as most important. However, an explanation for this agreement about the first two items could be the *imprecision* of the descriptions of those two items, compared to the descriptions of the other items. Thus, the examiners appear to agree only when the level of precision is too low to offer much guidance to DBA and PhD students and their supervisors.

Confusion about examination criteria for PhD vs. DBA doctoral reports

In addition to confusion about the main criteria for a doctoral award and about 'a contribution', there is a further problem for DBA dissertations going forward for examination: it is not always clear to what extent a DBA dissertation is different from a PhD thesis. We contacted the office administering doctoral report examinations at a range of Australian universities that offer both a PhD and a DBA in the business/management disciplines (one or two universities may have been missed, but most were in our list and so it is representative). These universities have had to address the issue of any differences in PhD theses as compared to DBA dissertations, for they have had to decide on appropriate examination report forms and accompanying notes to examiners for both a PhD and a DBA.

Several of the universities we contacted have only recently developed and started their DBA programs; Monash and Deakin fall into this category. Hence they have not (yet) reached the point in their programs where students are approaching examination and as such they have not (yet) had to deal with the issue of examiners' reports. For the purpose of this paper we were interested in universities which have offered a DBA program for some time and which have had DBA theses moved through the examination process. Curtin, Macquarie, RMIT, SCU, Swinburne and USQ fall into this category, for they are universities with DBA graduates.

An investigation of the examination report forms and the accompanying notes to examiners highlighted two issues: whether or not the examination criteria (and hence the report forms) used for DBA and PhD examinations were the same; and, relatedly, how well-established are the criteria used to examine DBA dissertations.

Separate or the same examination forms for PhD and DBA

In many of the universities, the DBA dissertation and the PhD thesis is examined in the *same* way using the same examination criteria and the same notes for examiners. Indeed, four out of six Australian universities with DBA graduates use the same forms for DBA as for PhD examinations. The form used by Curtin specifically states that their professional doctorates are 'subject to the same criteria as those applied to the PhD thesis'. However, some Australian universities (USQ and Swinburne, for example) have developed DBA examination forms that are different from those used for PhDs.

The main difficulty with the use of the same examination criteria and the same examination form for PhDs and DBAs is that it contradicts the fact that a DBA program is marketed as a 'product' that is different from a PhD program. If the output is examined in the same way and is considered equivalent in terms of content and focus, why offer two separate programs and two separate awards?

Actual examination criteria used

The actual criteria used for examining the DBA dissertations (whether through a separate form or using the same form as that used for a PhD thesis) vary among universities. Table 1 shows the various examination criteria that are used and the incidence of their use. The data presented in Table 1 is derived from the examination report forms and guidelines from six Australian universities that offer both a DBA and a PhD, and that have been through the examination process with their DBAs.

All of the six universities agree that a doctoral report should look as such and should be presented in the appropriate manner (in terms of writing style and academic convention). The issues of ‘making a contribution’ and displaying evidence of having successfully completed one’s research apprenticeship are also accepted criteria for dissertations by several universities. However, beyond this, universities present a mixed message to examiners. For instance, some DBA examination report forms require examiners to evaluate components of the dissertation (for example, the adequacy of the literature review) while other universities do not require this.

Criteria	No. of universities (n=6)
Report presentation	6
Research apprenticeship: capacity to conceive, plan and conduct research; capably of working independently	5
Contribution: carried out original/significant research in the field; major advancement; contribution to knowledge in the field	5
Literature: relevant to thesis, showing understanding of the field of research	4
Analysis of information/data	3
Research question: justification and delimitation	2
Methodology: appropriate choice	2
Publishable output: suitable for publication	2
Conclusions: soundly based, showing implications	1

Table 1: Criteria used for examining DBA dissertations

Incidentally, the criteria are either placed on the actual examiners’ form or are mentioned in an accompanying document providing guidance to examiners. When criteria are placed on the form itself, usually the criteria are mentioned again (and expanded upon) in an accompanying document. Unfortunately, in some cases the criteria mentioned in the accompanying notes are not consistent with the examination criteria placed on the form. And all this confusion occurs *before* the individual examiners enter the picture with their own mysterious opinions.

In brief, the examination criteria given to DBA examiners vary from one university to another. Does this mean that DBA dissertations from different universities are different? Would it be possible for a DBA dissertation to pass at one university and to fail at another?

POSSIBLE EXAMINATION CRITERIA FOR A DBA DISSERTATION

The foregoing sections have established a lack of agreement about the criteria with which to evaluate a DBA dissertation. Such lack of accepted norms about DBA dissertations leads to considerable confusion for examiners asked to examine a DBA dissertation. In this section we move towards developing an argument for DBA dissertation examination criteria that are separate and different from those used for PhD thesis examinations.

Need for DBA examination criteria to be different from PhD criteria

Consider some general principles that could underpin the development of criteria to examine a DBA dissertation. Firstly, DBAs are marketed as doctoral research awards relevant to managers and professionals and so the DBA dissertation should be focussed on management practice, as noted above. That is, management practices should be explicit in the overall research problem introduced early in the first chapter. Because managers have to work in a real, particular world and not an abstracted one, the research problem could be delimited to the context of a particular industry and/or country, for example, provided no previous research had investigated this problem and the context was somewhat different from previously researched contexts. These contexts of country and/or industry may apply in a PhD, too, because not all PhDs try to be so abstract that the context is irrelevant, but the context probably could be an important aspect of the goal of a DBA. In addition, the 'implications for management' section of the final chapter could highlight issues for management practice and so should be a major part of the DBA dissertation. In contrast, a PhD thesis focuses much more on implications for theory and for further research. Apart from their different foci, some DBA dissertations are shorter than PhD theses, as also noted and justified above. That is, the literature and methodology chapters in a DBA dissertation may be less extensive than the equivalent chapters in a PhD thesis.

In brief, there is likely to be a difference in the final output of the research: the DBA dissertation is shorter and has a different focus from a PhD thesis. Hence, the DBA should be examined on a different basis from a PhD. The difference should be highlighted in the examination criteria and in the accompanying notes to examiners. We can now turn to developing some core criteria for a DBA dissertation.

Suggestions for appropriate DBA examination criteria

There are two main aspects to a doctoral report: the content of the dissertation and the overall presentation or 'look and feel' of the dissertation. These two aspects are evident in existing examination report forms, but are not usually clearly separated as different aspects of the doctoral report. The *content* of a DBA dissertation can be evaluated by reviewing each of its main components such as the literature review. The content part of a DBA dissertation usually has these components (which may or may not be separate chapters) (Perry 1998): research domain, literature review, methodology of data collection and analysis, the conclusions and implications. The *overall look and feel* of a DBA dissertation can be evaluated by reviewing presentation.

Research domain

The research domain of a DBA thesis should be delimited to management practice, for the reasons given above.

Literature review

DBA research (like PhD research) should be based in the extant literature and hence the dissertation should adequately report the relevant literature about the management practice and place the current research reported in the dissertation appropriately within that knowledge. The review of the literature could cover the usual parent theories (Perry 1998) or background theories (Phillips & Pugh 1994) and the focus theory about the specific research problem. Since a DBA dissertation is sometimes shorter than a PhD thesis and because the

candidate has already covered more literature in their MBA studies than an Honours student has in their's, the length of the literature review may be shorter than that expected in a PhD thesis.

Methodology of data collection and analysis

Most DBA research contains an empirical component where data is collected and analysed. The DBA dissertation (like a PhD thesis in the management/business disciplines) should address the usual issues of justification of method, steps in the data collection process, method-related limitations, research quality such as validity and reliability, and ethics. Of course, capacity to conceive, plan and conduct research will be evident if these points are covered. Since a DBA dissertation is usually shorter than a PhD thesis and because a DBA is aimed at professionals and managers, rather than academics who work as scientists, justification of scientific research paradigms may not be as extensive as that expected from a PhD researcher. Given that the common criticism of a PhD in the social sciences is that it does not involve enough teamwork for a career in industry, the independence of the research should not be important, although the work done by co-researchers will have to be noted.

Conclusions and implications

The research findings should be discussed within the framework of the extant literature to produce the conclusions/contributions of the research. In this way, the conclusion provides a clear link between the research problem investigated, the extant literature and the research findings reported in the dissertation. Then implications that arise from those conclusions should be reported. A DBA is a doctoral degree for professionals and managers and hence implications for managers should have a prominent position in the final chapter of a DBA dissertation. The implications for theory, policy and further research should be covered, but probably need not be emphasised in the same way.

Presentation

Although the content of thesis should be adequate in the ways described above, this is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a doctoral report. In addition to the content, another criterion needs to be fulfilled. It is the presentation or 'look and feel' of the dissertation that enables an examiner to evaluate whether the research report is of doctoral quality. In DBA dissertations the usual criteria for presentation could apply except that the style and referencing conventions of industry and consulting reports should be followed (for example, *Style Manual* 2002), rather than those of academic journals in which managers virtually never publish.

The contribution of a DBA dissertation

It is appropriate to re-visit the issue of a 'contribution' in this section on proposed examination criteria for DBA dissertations. Given the confusion among PhD examiners about what a contribution to the literature is, it would be presumptuous to place much emphasis on this in a DBA dissertation. Indeed, many academics consider that a contribution is not an important part of even a PhD thesis, compared to its research training. Fully 29 percent of respondents at a UNSW survey said the research training was the only aim of a doctorate, and this figure rose to 45 percent at the prestigious Australian Graduate School of Management at UNSW (Nightingale 1992).

One could question whether a DBA needs to have a contribution to a body of academic

knowledge as an examination criteria. In fact, many would argue that the tendency of professional doctorate programs to become too academic in nature 'has to be resisted' (Maxwell & Shanahan 1997 p. 134). After all, a DBA has as its main goal the management development of the student, rather than the development of a body of knowledge. Instead, the outcome of a professional doctorate should be 'significant in the marketplace' (Evans 2002). Hence, a focus on management implications is an important examinable component of the DBA dissertation—as proposed above in the examination of content of the conclusion chapter in the dissertation.

We propose that, for the purpose of examining a DBA dissertation, a broad definition of a contribution be used similar to the first two, generally accepted, criteria from Phillips (1994) and Perry et al. (2001): saying something nobody has said before and/or carrying out empirical work that has not been done before. These criteria can be met by ensuring the DBA research does not replicate another research project. To become more precise about the type of contribution about a DBA thesis is specious when there is so much confusion about a PhD's contribution, when the DBA graduate will rarely want to publish in academic journals that value contributions to academic literature very highly, and when the DBA award is aimed at making a contribution to practice in the student's field.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the DBA has different goals from a PhD, for the DBA is a professional doctorate for managers rather than for academics. Thus a DBA dissertation should be judged differently from a PhD. However, most Australian universities do not have different criteria for the research reports of the two degrees. Indeed, the picture of how DBA dissertations and PhD theses are examined is alarmingly confused. This paper developed some core criteria with which a DBA thesis could be examined, based on the purposes of a DBA dissertation being different from a PhD thesis. These core criteria cover the research domain, literature review, methodology of data collection and analysis, conclusions and implications, and presentation.

If Australian universities adopted these core criteria, DBA supervisors and candidates would be more aware of where they were heading in a DBA research project, and the examination process would be fairer to them both.

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