

An auto/ethnographic study of the influences on a
student's dispositions to drop out of doctoral study: A
Bourdieuian perspective

A dissertation submitted by

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Certification of Thesis

This thesis does not contain material which has been previously submitted for examination in another course or accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution.

To the best of my knowledge this thesis does not contain any material previously published or written by any other person without due reference being made in the text of the thesis.

The research for this project received the approval of the University of Southern Queensland, Office of Research and Higher Degrees Ethics Committee, Approval No.: H13REA163

29th June 2015

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This Doctor of Education thesis has been incubating since early 2008 and is the culmination of a considerable period of personal professional growth and recognition of the complexness of conducting doctoral research. I have a number of people to thank for their assistance and perseverance to bring this study to a temporary close. My research in this topic has only begun.

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Abstract

This research study explores the influence of dispositions as sociological features of doctoral student dropout as experienced by a group of participants from different Australian universities. To elucidate these influences the research poses the two questions of what are the influences on students' decisions to dropout and how is this experienced by the student? Using an analysis of these personal experiences the study suggests a range of outcomes which illuminate the experience of dropout (and dropping out) through a Bourdieusian¹ decision-making lens. These outcomes are the basis of the research conclusions regarding possible approaches to reducing the incidence of doctoral student non-completion. In addition, suggestions for further research into specific aspects of the dropout and dropping out phenomenon are developed.

Dropout research has historically been focussed on various 'risk factors' attributed to students and tertiary institutions. These factors focus on the effects of student income, race or ethnicity, academic achievement, and behaviours and attitudes on student progression and success (Brown & Roderiguez, 2009). The research project sought to contribute to the understanding of student *attrition* expressed via dropout and dropping out. This is undertaken by drawing on an application of Tinto's (1975) theories on student dropout and applied to *disposition* as an influence on attrition. The focus of the research is doctoral level student dispositions, habitus and the cultural and social capital of a group of participants and that of the author/researcher in professional and academic doctoral research programs.

A methodology involving the recollections of the research participants to provide ethnographic (recollections by others) and autoethnographic (self-recollections) data was selected to collect personal experience of doctoral program dropout. An interpretative analytical method framed (Chang, 2008) the concept of dispositions, habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1977b) to 'make sense' of the collected data. With *dispositions* understood as inherited and oriented around personal and collective beliefs as borne-out in the cultural capital of the student, this research supposes that student dropout can be ameliorated by influencing students' beliefs and understandings - their *disposition* - towards further study. This supposition is examined with an exploration of the durability of dispositions with respect to student dropout. The exploration analyses the influence of such factors as the student supervisor relationship, student inadequacy, student life changes and a lack of student cultural capital relative to doctoral research study.

Within the framework of the sociological model of Bourdieu (1984a, p. 101) dropout decisions are not habitual but developed over time. Dispositions are durable with the influence on the habitus arising from the person's capital which may result in a deterministic decision to withdraw from doctoral study contrary to one's disposition. A student's experiences of doctoral supervision, especially inadequate supervision does have an adverse effect on the student's cultural capital, which results in dropout. The endurance of the

¹ The term Bourdieusian is used in this thesis based on a consensus of opinion as suggested by Professor Derek Robbins (Bourdieu Study Group, 2012) of the University of East London.

intrinsic disposition to learn of the student is a factor in the student's recommencement of their doctoral program.

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