



Higher Degrees or Higher Ambitions? A New Approach to PhDs in Arts and Humanities in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

The arts and humanities PhD in the United Kingdom has not been reconsidered for many years. It is time to look hard at what value is offered by this important qualification, and how we can show the public and social value of the energy and imagination which arts and humanities graduates demonstrate in their work through changes in supervision, examination, and definitions of purpose.

For a qualification which is so steeped in the appearance of prestige, the doctorate is remarkably underexamined. It has changed relatively little in terms of output, form, and process but the context is markedly different. The modern PhD in the United Kingdom is usually dated to the years immediately after the First World War. It is a relative latecomer to our educational portfolio, and the complex articulation of a three-cycle process (undergraduate, master, doctorate) through the Bologna Process came at the end of the twentieth century.

What we have long argued, especially when justifying efforts to recruit, is that the PhD is a route to many careers other than an academic job. It is undoubtedly true that successful PhD candidates do indeed go on to do a variety of things. The question which is much trickier is the extent to which the PhD was a necessary step or an elective one with marginal added value. One will need to have a relevant PhD to enter a role in research and development in many private laboratories. One may not need a PhD to enter the civil service, school teaching, publishing, business, a think tank and so forth.

This raises some interesting questions, in particular for arts and humanities PhDs:

- Can we be sure that the PhD is adding the skills necessary outside the academic route and that it is fit for the wider purpose which we attribute to it?
- How do we value the skills which are created through studying arts and humanities at a higher degree level if these cannot be arrived at via the classic government recourse to market failure?
- How much public money should be spent and on what kinds of arts and humanities PhDs?

These are difficult questions, and all the more so when the value of arts and humanities is deeply at question from time to time in public discourse. None of us care to pull at a thread which might unravel more of the fabric. But there is a risk that in looking past this, we miss an opportunity for the debate that we actually now need to have about the PhD in arts and humanities.

Are Arts and Humanities PhDs Fit for Purpose?

We cannot just assume that the arts and humanities PhD is fit for purpose. The variety of forms has grown through the increasing admission of practice-based research, but it is at the same time not appropriate that art practice should be constrained to a PhD format. Moreover, some arts and humanities PhDs are much closer to professional doctoral qualifications but that is perhaps less explicit than in, say, business. It is difficult to pin down what we really expect a PhD to offer, and we need to tie that to the broader skill set which a reimagined PhD could offer.

The classic PhD may give shape to many theses, but there are far more models out there, and models which proceed directly to an intervention in public space. The PhD as a route to social innovation and creative intervention does not replace the solid contribution to existing scholarship, but neither is it necessarily separate from it. It may put a high demand on candidates, is a way of showing the kinds of skills the degree fosters and an argument for the kind of funding which may be available.

Public Funding of Arts and Humanities PhDs

Different countries have different ways of funding the PhD of course. But only public funding can open opportunities to all, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) spends proportionately more of its money on PhDs than any other research council in the United Kingdom, although it still supports only around 10 percent of all the arts and humanities PhDs in the system.

In 2020–2021, in the United Kingdom there were about 18,000 arts and humanities doctoral candidates. The gap between supply and demand is inverse to the situation in parts of science, where jobs requiring a PhD exceed the supply. Yet, it might be beneficial if we challenged every publicly funded PhD to be able to show a path to impact just as we assume impact is embedded in research and many other application routes. A broader and more positive definition of the potential skill set of an arts and humanities PhD makes it clear that there should be multiple funding routes.

Two perhaps provocative answers: First, how many arts and humanities PhDs would actually find it so difficult to fit their scholarship into more innovative models, if the encouragement were there? And if they do find it so difficult, should we look at what skills they are acquiring? What funding might be available if the conceptualization of what the PhD was for became the space and time to cocreate rigorous and effective innovations in the public sphere? And what difference could it make to the profile, and employability of the arts and humanities PhD were it framed in those terms?

Second, if we were to arrive at a consensus that our PhD should be open to more innovative and transsectoral work, but if the current model does not fit, should we not look at the model? What might a properly funded and genuinely integrated five- or six-year program, incorporating master degree, look like? Overseas models could be helpful here.

Going further, the supervision and examination of the PhD remain relatively unchanged. Moves to consistent dual supervision in the United Kingdom are welcome but managing this across different kinds of institutions has always been difficult. Should we incentivize it better? Would a different form of examination provide a different route to success? Should we own the ambition of proper PhD supervisory panels which are connected to the process of examination? The PhD is now the only remaining academic qualification regularly awarded on the basis of an interview with two people in a closed room. Why should our final examination not be public as in other European countries, cementing the notion of the PhD outcome as public knowledge?

Revitalizing the Notion of Postgraduate Arts and Humanities

We should fund and support higher degrees in arts and humanities. But we cannot rely on intrinsic value or the public purse to justify our expenditure or hide it under a broader tent. We have to be able to show that the shape and model of an arts and humanities PhD can be as valid and constructive as one in engineering or life science.

We can make the argument better, especially if we work harder at showing the breadth of the industries relevant to our world of thinking and imagining. What are our pharma and life science equivalents? Can we do more to explore and explain portfolio PhDs, discontinuous experiences which can produce the equivalent of a PhD by publication but played out over projects? Or PhDs in policy and social innovation work, especially cocreated with communities? How do we embed the PhD properly in the developing nexus between place, regeneration, and opportunity? What are the models for team PhDs? What are the innovations in funding we should explore? How do we move from paying a fee to creating value? Is the arts and humanities PhD actually a helpful step on the path to genuinely civic universities? How can we reimagine what the laboratories are in which the arts and humanities PhD can be undertaken—not just for the funded few, but for a much wider and more diverse population?

The AHRC will continue to support collaborative PhDs, to promote a wide distribution of discipline-agnostic funding for studentships across the United Kingdom, and to offer targeted competitive funding for centers of excellence. Yet, there is still more to be done. Thousands of unread PhDs is not the answer. A genuinely ambitious project of revitalizing the notion of postgraduate arts and humanities might be transformational, in the United Kingdom but also elsewhere. ▲

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