The Monograph Dissertation[1] versus the Papers Approach

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Abstract

Although most universities have had the power to award a doctorate on the basis of published papers, many researchers have not taken this route to a degree. As more universities are now offering this alternative it is important to understand how this approach works and why this route is sound. It is envisaged that there will be an increasing number of researchers obtaining their doctorate by the Papers Approach.

Keywords: parsimony**,** monograph dissertation, Papers Approach, portfolio of work, contribution to the body of theoretical knowledge, research risk, publishable standard, Leading Narrative, End Narrative

Introduction

Before providing any comments on the topic of the monograph dissertation versus the Papers Approach to academic research it is important to note that each university has its own set of house rules and its own attitude toward this development in the way doctoral research is conducted and the results reported. This paper addresses some variations to these issues, but it cannot claim to be an exhaustive account. Furthermore, after a thorough literature search it was established that there is not yet any body of academic writing that directly addresses these issues. It is hoped that this paper will establish a debate among the members of the academic community about the providence of the two different approaches in today's academic environment.

Doctorate Degrees

Universities have a number of different routes that may be taken for the gaining of a doctorate. The approach to doctoral research, which is discussed

[1] Although some universities try to distinguish between them the word dissertation used here is a synonym for thesis.

in this article, is described as gaining a doctorate by completing a material research project under supervision[2]. The result of this research project needs to demonstrate clearly that the research degree candidate has added something of value to the body of theoretical knowledge; also has some ability to improve practice, and that the work has been conducted to a high standard of scholarship.

There are different ways in which these two objectives may be realized and the most significant are the monograph dissertation and the Papers Approach. Most universities offer both of these routes, although the monograph dissertation route is by far the best known and is thus regarded by some academics to be the approach that offers less risk to the research degree candidate.

The Monograph Dissertation

The Monograph Dissertation is characterized by the fact that the research is reported in one book, by one author[3] and the completed work is of substantial length. The work is examined as a single entity[4] after its final completion. The structure of the monograph dissertation is six or seven chapters and that has been described in detail in Remenyi and Bannister (2012). Also see Louw and Fouché (2002). A Monograph Dissertation may be seen as one large research project. The greater part of dissertations completed in universities today are produced in this way. Many academics are not even aware of the Papers Approach to doctoral studies, although

[2] Some universities are now allowing work that was not conducted by the research degree candidate under supervision to be included in their doctoral dissertations. The term "Professional PhD" has been coined to denote such a degree, by some universities.

[3] In certain parts of the world universities allow research degrees to be undertaken by multiple individuals who produce only one dissertation. Some academics believe that this is against the spirit of doctoral research.

[4] The examining entity is the university who appoints examiners for the purpose of evaluating the monograph.

most universities have such a degree 'on their books' i.e. their regulations permitted them to offer a doctorate on this basis.

The Papers Approach

The Papers Approach to doctoral research takes a different route because it requires the research degree candidate to undertake a number of different pieces of research that will be 'published' individually as well as being included in the final submission for the degree. Universities normally require three pieces of research work to be completed in this way, although there are some institutions that demand four or even five pieces of research. The different pieces of research need to address a common research problem and they have to display a high degree of coherence. The papers also need to be regarded as making a significant contribution to the field of study. The papers included may be seen as a portfolio of work. Most universities require from the research degree candidate, in addition to this portfolio, two narratives that accompany the presentation of the research papers. These two narratives that are presented with the portfolio are usually bound together into one book. The first narrative introduces the research problem and discusses some aspects of the literature and comments of the methodological issues involved. It is also in this narrative the ethics issues are discussed. A second narrative presents a summary and conclusion as well as limitations and suggestions for further research. Between these two narratives the papers are presented as the description of the research.

Should the Papers have been Published?

The papers need to be 'published' or near 'published'. Originally this route to the doctorate required the papers to be published in peer-reviewed journals[5]. However, over the years it became apparent that waiting for the appearance of the papers in print took too much time. Peer reviewed journals can take a number of years to process papers before they finally appear

[5] The university will have a list of acceptable journals and the papers submitted for the Papers Approach to the dissertation will normally need to have been accepted for publication by one of these journals.

between the covers of a journal. As a result of these delays universities began to allow papers to be included in the portfolio of the research degree candidate's work which were only accepted by a journal for publication or even in some cases the papers may have only been submitted.

In general the submission of a paper to a peer reviewed academic journal is the minimum, although papers that have been internally reviewed or submitted and accepted by a working paper series are sometimes also accepted. Internally reviewed papers need to be assessed by competent internal reviewers (senior members of the School, perhaps) and as such confirmed to be of a 'publishable' standard.

Some universities require these papers to be written by the research degree candidate alone, i.e. as a single authored paper[6], while others allow co-authored papers to be included in the portfolio. When a co-authored paper is used the universities normally requires a certificate from the co-author/s to the effect that the majority of the work conducted for the papers was undertaken by the research degree candidate.

The papers in the portfolio should normally comply with the style requirements of the journal to which they will eventually be sent. They also need to comply with the maximum length of paper that the journal will accept. This is often 8,000 words.

It is not unusual to find the supervisors name as a co-author on these papers. Where co-authored papers are allowed it is sometimes required by the university that at least one solely published is included in the portfolio.

The Research Topic and the Individual Research

Having set out these two different routes to a doctorate it is important to point out it may be more appropriate to address some research topics through the Monograph Dissertation rather than the Papers Approach. It is also worthy of mention that some researchers will find the Monograph Dissertation more congenial to their mind set than the Papers Approach and of course vice versa. Besides the question of the suitability of the research

[6] It would be unusual if there were no single-authored papers in the portfolio of research work.

topic and the researcher's own orientation there is the question of whether there is a suitable supervisor available who feels competent in assisting the researcher with the Paper Approach. There are not many such supervisors available. A rushed decision as to which approach to take, may well lead to a number of problems later in the research process.

Leading and Ending Narratives

The production of the three papers is seldom enough on its own to acquire a degree. The papers have to be accompanied by an introduction, which may be called a Leading Narrative and a conclusion, which is sometimes referred to as an Ending Narrative.

The leading and the ending narratives are material pieces of work and may constitute a considerable amount of the effort required to obtain the degree. Researchers who try to take short cuts with these important aspects of the research may find themselves being told to redo these Narratives. One essential aspect of these pieces of work is the justification as to why the Papers Approach is appropriate to the research topic being presented.

When the Leading and the Ending Narratives and the three to five papers are bound for presentation for examination they may constitute nearly as many pages as a Monograph Dissertation on the same research topic.

The Leading Narrative

The Leading Narrative effectively takes the place of the first three chapters of the traditional monograph dissertation. This narrative explains what the research problem is and why it is important. Like the Introductory Chapter in the monograph dissertation it will also state how the research has been divided among the number of papers required. The title of each of these papers and a two or three sentence description of the paper needs to be supplied. Then the literature has to be reviewed and the methodology used has to be discussed together with the ethical considerations. Examples of letters of consent and applications for an ethics protocol and other such documents can be supplied in the Appendices. There will inevitably be some overlap between what is said in this narrative and what will also need to be discussed in the individual papers as any publishable academic papers needs

to address these issues in their own right. In the interest of parsimony overlap needs to be kept to a minimum, although in these circumstances some degree of overlap will perhaps be inevitable.

The Ending Narrative

The Ending Narrative draws together the research results described in the individual papers, and argues that they may be considered as a cohesive body of research. This involves discussing the conclusions and the application of the results to practice. Limitations and future research challenges are also discussed here.

It is in this section that the research degree candidate needs to argue that the research has made a contribution to the body of theoretical knowledge and that it has application for professional or other performance in practical situations. In addition it is here that the researcher argues for the authority on which the research is based and this includes the validity, reliability and the generalisability issues.

This section of the work is of critical importance as the research has to integrate the Leading Narrative and the published papers into a convincing argument and many researchers find this a daunting challenge.

Why Undertake a Papers Approach to the Dissertation?

The Papers Approach to the dissertation is sometimes incorrectly believed to be intrinsically less demanding than the monograph dissertation. This is seldom if ever the case[7]. The three or five papers have to be assessed and are subject to examiners demanding changes. Then the final dissertation is subject to examination and different examiners may require further changes

[7] There have been some notable exceptions to this where universities have used the Papers Approach to award degrees to Faculty members. In such cases the university has given 'academic credit' for papers written by faculty members while employed by the university.

to be made to the work[8]. The length of the Papers Approach dissertation may be in some cases a little shorter than the Monograph Dissertation, but this need not necessarily be the case.

Probably the main motivation for taking the Papers Approach is that Monograph Dissertations are seldom read by anyone other than the degree examiners. Published papers is the recognised means of communicating the results of research to the academic community and therefore the work undertaken for the degree will have a much higher probability of being seen and cited by other academics. For those research degree candidates who wish to follow an academic career these publications made be a fast track route to find a suitable academic post.

Which Route to the Doctorate Should be Preferred?

Like so many questions that are asked concerning doctoral studies there is no simple answer to whether a researcher should take the Monograph Dissertation or the Papers Approach. Both are acceptable routes and both can lead to the two requirements that need to be present for a doctoral degree to be awarded.

The Papers Approach is not at this time a popular route to a doctorate degree. This means that not many supervisors have experience in supporting a research degree candidate in obtaining a degree this way. Similarly, there is not much experience in the university system in respect to the examination of these degrees. Academics who are unfamiliar with this approach to doctoral studies have raised concerns about some of the research being published in advance of the submission of the final dissertation. They have suggested that the appearance of such papers in journals could be construed as making their inclusion in the dissertation a form of self-plagiarism. It has also been said that if the work has been previously published then it cannot be regarded as original. Fortunately these are minority views.

[8] Of course with the Papers Approach an examiner cannot call for changes to be made to the papers if they are already published or even if they have simply been accepted for publication.

The Papers Approach to doctoral studies should not be undertaken lightly and both the research degree candidate and the supervisor need to be in agreement as to how this work will be conducted and how examiners sympathetic to this route will be found.

With regards the examination of a doctorate produced by the Papers Approach it is important to bear in mind that some academics may not feel competent to examine such a document and thus care needs to be taken with the appointment of examiners.

On the other hand it has been argued that the Papers Approach will become popular with examiners because if the final dissertation contains papers that have already been reviewed then the examiners may be inclined to think that the whole research need not be scrutinized in the same way as it would be if there had been no former review of the work.

Writing of the Papers

The writing of a paper has some similarities to the writing of a dissertation although there are a number of important differences. Although the format of a paper will largely follow that of a dissertation there is the important issue of the maximum number of words. As mentioned above, journals will normally limit submission to a maximum of 8,000 words and this can be problematic when attempting to report a significant piece of research. Nonetheless journals are frequently uncompromising about this issue. It is also important that the researcher learns the principles of parsimonious writing in order to be able to produce comprehensive and competent work of an appropriately defined length.

It is also of central importance that the researcher complies with all the style issues that the journal requires. These will be supplied by the journal and the researcher needs to bear them in mind from the outset of the writing process.

Conclusion

The Papers Approach to doctoral degrees is one way in which universities can demonstrate some innovative thinking. It can attract potential research degree candidates who find the prospect of writing one large Monograph

Dissertation daunting. However, new approaches to academic studies and the examination thereof require careful planning both on the part of the university and potential research degree candidates. This paper provides an account of some of the issues that need to be addressed.

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