

Student Voice

PhD by Published Work and “Doctorateness”: My Experience at a UK University

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Abstract

In this short article, I share my experience of completing a PhD by Published Work, an alternative PhD route, at a UK university, especially in relation to its usefulness in preparing me for a position in academia. I end the piece with some questions for potential candidates to consider.

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1. What is PhD by Published Work?

For almost two decades, UK universities have been offering an alternative PhD route, PhD by Published Work (PW), to active researchers who have secured a successful track record of publications but for some reason have not had the opportunity to complete a PhD in their career (Draper 2019). PhD by PW refers to an alternative route to PhD where “a series of peer reviewed academic papers or artefacts are produced around a coherent theme over many years, collated and submitted with a synthesis (or equivalent) and usually defended by oral examination” (Smith 2017, p. 19). This route of PhD is becoming more popular especially in universities in the UK and Australia as a means to retain mid-career staff by encouraging them to attain a doctorate. In doctoral education literature, PhD by PW is often considered as one of the

two formats of PhD by publications – *prospective* and *retrospective*. A *prospective* format of PhD by publications is similar to a traditional PhD in which candidates undertake three to four years of full-time study and produce a substantial body of original research. The only difference between a prospective PhD by publications and its traditional counterpart is that candidates enrolled in the former produce a collection of publications (usually articles in refereed journals) in replacement of a thesis. On the other hand, a *retrospective* PhD by publications is what I refer to as PhD by PW here. Because of its retrospective nature, the duration of enrolment of this programme is usually short, ranging from half a year to two years.

Despite its growing popularity, PhD by PW is still less well-known than the traditional PhD route where candidates produce a thesis and defend it successfully in a viva voce examination because the PW route is mystified by its lack of “requirement for a formal registration period, approved supervision and training programme” (Powell 2004, p. 4). Indeed, upon reviewing the websites of some UK universities which offer PhD by PW, their guidelines differ in considerable ways including eligibility, duration of study, the number of publications required, the quality of publications, the issue of multiple authorship, the length and nature of the synthesis (which is sometimes called a commentary), duration and nature of the viva voce examination. For my case, at the Faculty of Education and Society, University of Sunderland where I am finishing my study, I was enrolled in May 2019 and submitted my thesis (a 25,000-word commentary together with six published work in international refereed journals) in November 2019. My viva voce examination was in March 2020.

In the subsequent sections, I will share my experience as a PhD by PW candidate at a UK university and evaluate the usefulness of my PhD journey

in developing my “doctorateness”, which is defined by Yazdani and Shokooh (2018) as follows:

A personal quality, that following a developmental and transformative apprenticeship process, results in the formation of *an independent scholar* with a certain identity and level of competence and creation of an original contribution, which extend knowledge through scholarship and receipt of the highest academic degree and culminates stewardship of the discipline. (pp. 42) (italics are mine)

2. My experience

I have been an English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) teacher at a secondary school in Hong Kong for six years before entering the post-compulsory education and higher education sector, first as a language lecturer at a community college and then two universities in Hong Kong with a Master’s degree in Applied Linguistics. Starting in July 2020, I will take up a full-time, tenured lectureship in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) at Queen’s University Belfast. Since 2017, I have published 21 first-authored peer-reviewed articles in higher education, educational assessment, and language assessment journals. This research programme, which includes empirical papers and theoretical contributions, is grounded in practical classroom realities, stemming from 10 years of experience as an EFL teacher in Hong Kong.

Having the aspiration to become an academic, I searched for overseas PhD programmes using Google; that was when I first came across PhD by PW offered by UK universities. I read the programme descriptions of many UK universities, including prestigious ones, and decided to apply for three where I was able to identify potential supervisors. When considering which university

to apply to, I considered, most importantly, the availability of supervisors who have a similar research programme; another consideration was the prestige of the university. Disappointedly, two of them rejected me because no supervisors were available to mentor me. Finally, I secured a place at the Faculty of Education and Society at the University of Sunderland and became their first PhD by PW student (at least this was what the administrator told me). My supervisor is an experienced educator in English Language Education and heads the MA in TESOL programme at the university. Having worked in an Asian context for a number of years, he was interested in my work on assessment feedback focusing on English learners in Hong Kong and agreed to be my Director of Studies. Prior to the admission interview, my supervisor worked with me through emails to write up a decent proposal. We identified a coherent theme of my research and finally settled on six of my publications, including research papers, conceptual papers, and practice papers, all on assessment feedback in the English writing classrooms in Hong Kong. Next, we had to work out the conceptual framework, overarching research paradigm, research method(ologies), and research questions. We decided to build my work around the construct of student feedback literacy put forward by Sutton (2012) and Carless and Boud (2018) and situate my work under the Exploratory Practice paradigm, a form of practitioner research (Hanks 2017). Research methodologies used in my published work include grounded theory, phenomenology; specific research methods employed are content analysis of students' peer feedback, open-ended questionnaire, semi-structured focus group interviews, and narrative review of literature. As a coherent body of work, my six published articles aim to answer two research questions: (1) How is feedback conceptualised by ESL learners? (2) How can feedback activities develop ESL learners' feedback literacy? Drawing on findings from my publications, I introduced an expanded conceptual framework of student feedback literacy (Chong *in press*) and discussed evidence-based assessment activities which promote ESL learners' feedback literacy in naturalistic

classroom settings, including teacher feedback, peer feedback, and use of exemplars.

I submitted my commentary and six publications as my thesis in November 2019 and it was approved by the University’s Postgraduate Research Degrees Sub-committee. My viva voce examination took place in March 2020 when I defended my work in front of an independent chair and two examiners (one external and one internal).

3. Advantages and disadvantages of doing a PhD by Published Work

Referring to my experience as a PhD by PW student at a UK university, I will attempt to analyse my experience vis-à-vis its usefulness in developing my “doctorateness”, the ability to be and the identity of “an independent scholar” (Yazdani and Shokooh 2018, p. 42).

3.1 Advantages

Affordability: This is a reason which is irrelevant to the notion of “doctorateness” but worth mentioning. To some, money is a barrier preventing them from getting a PhD. Doing a PhD by PW, because of its relatively short duration, is much cheaper than doing one in the traditional route. Take myself as an example, as a British citizen, I paid £3,860 for the whole programme, which is only a fraction of what a traditional PhD programme would cost. I understand that some universities in the UK only offer this PhD route to their staff or graduates; in such case, the cost is likely to be even less.

Publishability and handling stress: Publishability is one of the most (if not *the* most) significant indicators or predictors of whether a doctoral student will succeed in academia, especially where the “publish or perish” culture

prevails (Badley 2009). Contrary to a traditional PhD candidate’s experience in which he may consider publishing his thesis in the final year or after graduation, candidates of PhD by PW like myself have years of experience publishing in international refereed journals. In other words, while I may not have undergone a structured doctoral training for three or four years, I have acquired advanced research skills the hard way, that is, through my personal encounter with the somewhat daunting academic publication process. This early and real encounter gives me some advantages. First, I become experienced in handling mental stress stemming from submission outcomes. To put simply, I am more able to emotionally and psychologically handle rejections. In my experience, I have encountered all kinds of rejection scenarios, including desk rejections, rejections after major revision, rejections after conflicting reviews. Besides, I become more capable of enduring the agony of waiting for an editorial decision, which usually takes months or sometimes years. Second, I learned from my “supervisors”. While I may not have the luxury to have a supervisor to walk me through the publication do’s and don’ts and co-author with me, my reviewers who have devoted their valuable time to read and give feedback on my submissions become my “supervisors”. Given my background of not having had a supervisor in its traditional sense, I have always been grateful to all the comments I receive; regardless of how harsh (and wrong) the comments may sometimes be, I have learned a great deal from editors’ and reviewers’ comments in the past years. Another kind of “supervisors” I have is senior academics with whom I co-author. Since I am already working in academia, I have the opportunity to publish with my colleagues who are more experienced in research and publication. Through working with them on research projects, I observe and learn how they think, how they conceptualise a problem, how they design research, how they write in a scholarly manner, and how they respond to reviewers’ comments. My experience of working with different experienced scholars enriches not only the way I see research but also my academic

career. Because I am a junior colleague to them, they are more willing to share with me their successes and failures, traps, cultures, and taboos in academia.

Sustainability in research: The most valuable component of a PhD by PW is the opportunity for me to write up a commentary to demonstrate a “golden thread” of my publications and reflect on how my published work has contributed to my field of research (Smith 2015, p. 95). To me, the process of preparing for my commentary is reminiscent of conducting a meta-analysis or research synthesis on my own work. It gives me the chance to consider the importance of my work and reexamine various research components in my publications, including how I conceptualised my study, how I conducted my study, how I reported findings, and how I discussed my findings in light of existing literature. Additionally, the process facilitated my reflection on the future direction of my research programme. For instance, I have recently become very interested in “feedback literacy”, a relatively new notion in assessment literature in higher education; I am especially influenced by the work by Carless and Boud (2018) in which the authors conceptualise this notion. I decided to employ “feedback literacy” as the conceptual framework to synthesise findings and materials in my publication dossier for my PhD by PW, all of which are related to different forms of assessment feedback, including peer feedback, electronic feedback, dialogic feedback, written corrective feedback. Finishing the commentary offers me fresh insights into my published work through a new analytical lens and it helps me reconsider how I can incorporate the notion of “feedback literacy” into my future work.

3.2 Disadvantages

Becoming a hermit: Having said the above, I admit that there were hurdles which I had to overcome when completing my PhD by PW. The first hurdle I had to face is solitude. Unlike a traditional PhD, PhD by PW candidates usually

complete the programme within a year. Given the short duration of my PhD by PW and central task of weaving together my existing work, I have not managed to network, receive mentoring, and establish new collaborations as I would hope to during a traditional PhD. My thinking and writing process was done largely on my own because the commentary concerns my own published work, although I have received valuable comments from my Director of Studies on the drafts of my commentary. Another limitation of doing a PhD by PW is that you have to persevere in face of uncertainty. As mentioned earlier, despite its growing popularity in the UK, PhD by PW is still not considered one of the main forms of doctorates, unlike the traditional PhD or a professional doctorate. For this reason, I was unable to find concrete guidelines for writing up my commentary. For my case, my university's guidelines for the commentary are rather vague. The guidelines only specify the word length (10,000 – 20,000 words) and the language (English); regarding the structure, apart from a required abstract of approximately 300 words, “the structure of the commentary and its relationship to the published work shall be determined by the candidate in discussion with the Director of Studies” (University of Sunderland 2018, p. 9). While I recognised the merits of having a flexible approach for the commentary to cater for the needs of different disciplines, as a student, I felt quite helpless at first. One time, I was trying to search for theses by PhD by PW graduates in the faculty, I could not find one. Upon further inquiry, I was told that I am the first student in the programme and I was directed to a thesis by a PhD by PW in the social sciences discipline. The lack of exemplars and resources to support my writing process is one of the major challenges I faced. Fortunately for me, it was overcome by my self-determination to complete the programme and my supportive and experienced Director of Studies who offered me a lot of useful advice throughout my writing process.

Enduring skepticism: It is undeniable that some in academia are skeptical about the value of doing a PhD by PW; some may consider the degree to be less formal and less recognised than a traditional PhD because of its short duration and its lack of structured research training and supervision. Some may even consider it a shortcut for those who are unable to get into a traditional PhD programme. While it is true that a PhD by PW may not be common in universities in some regions (e.g., in Hong Kong where I come from, PhD by PW is not offered in universities), it is increasingly recognised by universities, at least in the UK, which is demonstrated by the increasing number of PhD by PW awarded by UK universities from 52 in 1996 to 116¹ in 2004 (Powell 2004). Some criticize that a PhD by PW is of less value than a traditional PhD on the basis that there is an absence of structured research training and mode of supervision; however, I can hardly agree because according to the QAA’s descriptors for Level 8 (Doctoral degree), it is described in clarity that the award of a PhD (regardless of routes) is based on the assessment of the quality and originality of the submitted thesis and the candidate’s performance in the viva voce examination. In other words, the recognisability of a PhD award should not be based on the route but “the academic quality of the successful candidate and the associated research outcomes” (Wilson 2002, p. 72). Therefore, one of the suggestions I give to people who are considering doing a PhD by PW is to include work published in top journals in your field as part of your thesis.

4. Considerations for potential applicants

In this short essay, I aim to share my experience of doing a PhD by PW in a UK university and outline my reflections on the usefulness and limitations of doing one. Personally speaking and referring to Yazdani and Shokooh’s (2018) notion of “doctorateness”, I find doing a PhD by PW a very rewarding experience because my published work is formally recognised and the commentary component of the thesis provides me with a valuable conduit to

reflect on my research and ponder over future research directions. As a disclaimer, I have to make clear that I only speak from my own experience and it is not my intention to say that PhD by PW should replace traditional PhD or other forms of doctorates. In fact, I am considering doing a traditional PhD! I believe that different forms of PhD have their merits and it should be up to students to decide which route is the most suitable for them. To help readers who are considering doing a PhD by PW, below are some questions which can guide you to make an informed decision:

- Do you have a well-established research programme on a coherent theme?
- Do you publish in well-established journals in your own discipline (i.e., in social sciences, for example, do you publish in SSCI-indexed journals)?
- Can you demonstrate “independence” in your publications (i.e., is most of your work sole-authored/are you the first author of the majority of your work)?
- Can you find a supervisor who shares a similar research interest and approach to research?
- Are you self-motivated (can you work alone and effectively with minimal support)?
- Are you reflective (can you reflect critically on and synthesise your published work in relation to the latest development of your field)?

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Disclosure statement

All materials included in the article represent the author's own work and anything cited or paraphrased within the text is included in the reference list. The work has not been previously published nor is it being considered for publication elsewhere. There are no potential conflicts of interest.

¹This seems to be the latest figure currently available. I plan to conduct a systematic review of PhD by PW in the UK to review the current landscape.