

Doctoral Coursework is Needed in Australasia

Frank Alpert & Michael A. Kamins

Abstract

The formal structure of most Australasian marketing doctoral programs is still thesis-only. This Commentary presents the perspective that this structure is not ideal for today's academic environment. We argue for the importance of coursework in a doctoral student's education. The argument should be relevant to all thesis-only social science and business doctoral programs, but our focus is on the case of marketing in Australasia. Students having coursework may develop stronger research skills than thesis-only students, thus thesis-only students would generally be at a disadvantage in terms of achieving publication in higher-ranking international journals. Coursework clearly helps to broaden and deepen a student's knowledge of research methods, but it also helps with the subtle and tacit skills of judging research quality.

Keywords: Marketing education, Doctoral coursework

1. Introduction

Completing a PhD without having had the benefit of doctoral coursework is similar to competing in a swim meet while being thrown into the deep end without knowing how to swim. If that's not enough, you find yourself thrown in with other swimmers from abroad, who have already had several years of swimming training. While through sheer force of intellect and strong self-discipline you may ultimately learn on your own how to conduct research and get published, many others will have had the benefit of up to several years of doctoral coursework to help them. This typically includes many courses where published articles are discussed and critiqued, with their problems surfaced for all to see. There is now *global* competition to publish, and those who are "well trained" will generally have an advantage toward having their work see the light of day in the better journals.

Australasia is the only English-speaking region we are aware of that generally does not require doctoral coursework in Marketing. A survey in 2003 of the websites of all 37 Australian public universities plus the Australian Graduate School of Management and the private Bond University, plus the 8 New Zealand universities, totalling 47 websites surveyed, revealed

only 6 with *mandatory* doctoral coursework. Thus, 87% did not have mandatory coursework. (A few cases were unclear from the website, but if coursework was required it should have been clearly indicated.) Adverse consequences from this situation may have been limited in the past, when there was an ample job market for Marketing academics and more of a teaching focus. Increasingly, however, according to Polonsky et al. (1998), the importance of publishing for Australasian Marketing academia is growing, leading these authors to conclude that now "there is much more of a U.S.-type publish or perish mentality." Combine these two factors—importance of publication and global competition to publish—and the need for the best possible research training is strong.

Are Australasian doctoral students well prepared by their training for this new environment? Unfortunately, as Uncles (1998, p. 89) points out, it is quite common to find doctoral theses in Australian universities where:

"The student attempts to show mastery of a body of knowledge by describing it at length in an exhaustive literature review. Far from being a presentation of the student's own synthesis of the literature, it tends to read more like a general textbook."

This describes a fairly basic error. Quite simply, we would call this type of research effort a “laundry list dissertation” where a mass of literature is favoured over integrating and analysing literature to lay a foundation for hypotheses. That is, without a deeply-internalised basis in how to write a research paper, the default dissertation option for many is an agonizingly long description of the literature. These students tragically believe that the more citations in the literature review, *prima facie* the more favourably the thesis will be received. For what it’s worth, we have seen Visiting Scholars here from North America express shock at what they view as the lack of rigorous training, saying that doctoral students here are smart but poorly trained.

A lack of doctoral coursework in critical areas such as marketing theory, consumer behaviour and research methodology can result in a lack of guided experience critiquing marketing articles. This leads to weaknesses in theoretical development and methodological follow-through (components critical for success in any business research project). Taking research methods as an example, it is a challenge for students on their own without coursework to achieve: 1) *depth* in a sophisticated method, such as structural equation modelling, sufficient to allow skilful use, and 2) awareness of the *breadth* of research methods available today, from conjoint analysis through time-series modelling, in order to identify the *best* method to suit the research problem. This gives rise to a tool-kit approach to conducting empirical research where students only attempt the methodological approach they or their supervisor know best, without branching out into using what may be the more appropriate methodology. While a lack of rigorous research methods training is the most glaring deficiency in thesis-only systems, there are more subtle problems too, on which we shall focus.

2. The Traditional Australasian System of Doctoral Education

In the traditional Australasian system, a research student can show his/her research prowess by first writing an Honours thesis in partial fulfilment for the Honours degree. Once this is successfully completed, he/she at some point moves on to the doctoral level by working with a PhD research supervisor on a topic of mutual interest, typically over the next three years (at a full-time pace). At completion, the thesis is sent out to two or three external examiners who grade the thesis on a range of something like outright acceptance, minor revision, major revision, and failure. According to Moses (1985), there

are three requirements for an Australasian Ph.D. thesis: a) that a distinct contribution to a body of knowledge is demonstrated, b) that competence in the research process is exhibited, and c) that mastery over a body of knowledge is shown. While this system has been successful in producing doctoral graduates most of whom go into the world of academia, one might ask is it also equally successful in training them for the art of getting published in good journals today, a challenge that will face them throughout their research career? The original Oxford/Cambridge thesis-only system may have been meant for small numbers of the very elite prior to the modern information explosion. While some individuals today through their own ability or through the astute guidance of their PhD supervisor can of course achieve a high level of skill, we are now at a time of *mass research higher degree enrolment* (at least compared to a half-century ago) in Australasia, so a more broadly effective system is desirable – something that has been increasingly evident in recent years (Uncles, 2000).

What of the argument that research students have completed a year of a Bachelors Honours program that includes coursework? Honours programs vary considerably around Australasia, but in our view an Honours degree is not a substitute for doctoral coursework for three reasons. Many, if not most, Honours programs for marketing students have few or no scholarly courses. Unlike Honours programs outside of business fields, which are entirely scholarly, business Honours programs may include managerial courses as well. Even for scholarly courses, the level of the courses are generally not doctoral level. Some students have a gap of years between their Honours degree and the start of their PhD. Furthermore, some individuals may seek to commence PhD study through the “back door” (i.e., without an Honours degree). Again, these are general statements about Honours programs, as there will be some scholarly aspects in some Honours programs that may be quite good.

We have already hinted above that mastery and competency over a research area cannot and should not be measured in kilos. While a current guideline is that a doctoral dissertation should be 75,000 words (Preece, 1994), there is not and cannot be a guideline for what exactly these words should say, and that is the major problem facing a new doctoral student. Indeed, the key to a successful thesis and ensuing academic career lies in point a) above, that is, the ability to make a distinct contribution to a body of knowledge. We would

recommend stressing that aspect by phrasing the PhD requirement as a “significant contribution,” as opposed to merely a “distinct contribution” (which seems Honours thesis level to us). Just over half of Australasian universities have moved on to an official standard of “significant” or “substantial” contribution (25 in the survey of 47 websites), but still five state “distinct” and another seven simply state “original” (the rest being unclear or unspecified in the website).

But the catch is, how does one go about developing the necessary skills to make a significant contribution? Clearly, there are books and articles to be read which explain in great detail the various elements of the research process from thesis formulation to the general process of getting published, to the specific characteristics of “good” research. For example Perry (1998) and Uncles (1998) discuss and present some common and alternative perspectives regarding how a thesis should be structured. Baker (2000, 2001a, 2001b) offers the Marketing field a series of articles with advice on selecting a research methodology, writing a literature review and “writing up and getting published”. The popular book *How to Get a PhD* (Phillips and Pugh, 2000) necessarily only scratches the surface of how to do good research. The mere presence of these publications suggests that there is a growing need for young researchers to understand the process of research. However, one should ask, *if you have to read these articles to understand how to do research*, have you already begun to sink in the deep end of the pool? Indeed, even if you read these articles would you be assured of success? Isn't good research too sophisticated an art for someone to simply read 5-10 such articles on their own and then go for it?

Furthermore, we would argue that a key article among this set is missing, and that is the article that tells you how to come up with a research idea, which makes a significant contribution to an area of marketing. If one could write an article containing a magic formula, which assuredly generates such research ideas, it would already have been done (and have been frequently cited!). Yet many researchers do come up with creative, interesting and substantive research ideas, month after month and year after year. How do they do it?

3. Benefits of Doctoral Coursework

Uncles (1998, p. 88) hit the nail on the head when he said that many doctoral students “will wish that some guidance had been offered earlier.” We argue that this

guidance comes in the form of required coursework. The USA and Canada have of course an established tradition of about four doctoral courses per semester for four semesters (two years), culminating in a major field exam. Even the British form of doctoral education (on which the Australasian system is based upon) has moved from the traditional major advisor/no coursework system, to one that includes a curriculum incorporating formal research training (Huisman, De Weert and Bartelse, 2002). We are not advocating a full 16 course North American system, but are arguing that introducing some coursework is beneficial.

What are the benefits of doctoral coursework? In the “doctoral seminar” framework, where several journal articles are read and critiqued by the students with the discussion guided by an academic staff member expert in the field, doctoral students gain practice in evaluating scholarly research. They learn not only the issues with empirical methods in actual practice, but also the more difficult art of evaluating the contribution of hypotheses. This skill only comes with practice! It takes reading a great many journal articles to *internalise* a sense of what research is strong and what is weak. The doctoral courses provide this experience academically and socially. Indeed, by hearing what other students and the academic also say, they get a broader sense of what comprises “good” research. Research skill thereby becomes *tacit knowledge*, or more specifically, “sagacious tacit knowledge,” which Castillo (2002) argues is the “engine of scientific discovery.” This tacit knowledge cannot be learned by simply reading on one's own an article such as “How to Do Research” (or even several such articles). There are difficult judgement calls in social science research. For example, “when are my hypotheses good enough?,” “when is my contribution significant enough?,” “when is my research method strong enough and appropriate enough?,” and “when are my research questions done?” You can't read how to make these judgement calls—they are tacit knowledge, a skill, honed/internalised from (guided) critique of a great many research articles. Typically, in a North American marketing PhD program there are four doctoral courses per semester for four semesters (two years). Of these 16 courses, say six are textbook courses, some of which are methods courses, and eight are readings seminars. Furthermore, suppose that the readings seminars cover four journal articles per week each for ten weeks of a twelve-week semester. If you work out the math, this totals 320 articles critiqued!

Furthermore, at many top universities around the world the doctoral seminars typically involve as part of assessment the development of a “research proposal” that includes a literature review, development of hypotheses and description of proposed methodology. In this, the only element missing from a full paper is the actual collection of empirical data. Those who practice writing research proposals should be able to come up with a stronger one for their actual dissertation. Indeed, Polonsky et al. (1998) argue for “learning by doing” in the context of working with your research supervisor or academic mentor – however, more practice in writing research proposals can be accomplished, and in a more systematic way, through doctoral coursework preceding and in preparation for the dissertation.

Three UK academics writing about their doctoral experiences (Lindgreen, Vallaster and Vanhamme, 2001) suggest two relevant “Do’s” for a doctoral research program: “Take courses in a field if you are lacking some theoretical background; and participate in doctoral colloquiums, seminars and conferences.” Furthermore, in terms of addressing the problem of the *isolation* of thesis-only doctoral students, Lindgreen credits doctoral seminars as an instrumental component of his success in the doctoral program in that he was able to effectively network with other doctoral students, which continued on after graduation and led to joint research. The Australian PREQ (Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire) results show that, of several factors affecting the context for RHD study (eg, supervision, infrastructure support, skill development, intellectual and social climate), it is the intellectual and social climate that is the least satisfactory nationwide (Ainley, 2001). The PREQ is administered to all graduates of RHD programs in Australian universities. Furthermore, Margaret Powles’s (1989) study indicated that at the University of Melbourne, intellectual and social isolation was the most significant university-related factor related to withdrawal or failure to complete. Doctoral seminars can relieve these problems by creating a collegial community among research students. Often there is extensive interaction and even passionate debate among the students, which hones their skills of discussing marketing phenomena.

From another perspective, coursework with different faculty members enables students to gain an understanding of the research interests of academic staff and helps the student to decide whether he/she can work effectively with particular professors, both from a

personality and research perspective. Again, as noted by Les Johnson in Polonsky et al. (1998), critical elements of research success are linked to how well the mentor and student “get along” on dimensions of personality, research interests and work habits. In some universities around the world, it is only until after the doctoral coursework is completed that the student’s thesis advisor is determined. This allows the student to more fully develop his/her research interests, and to find a supervisor that is most congruent to these interests and also to her/his personal style. For the student to be assigned a PhD supervisor based simply upon topic area is problematic. For students to choose based on whom they liked as a lecturer in their undergraduate courses, or even to simply stay with who they worked with in their Honours program, may be suboptimal in that students may not be exposed to research expertise and styles of *all* the academic staff. Furthermore, students wouldn’t know which staff members meet needs such as for particular methodological expertise.

There is also debate over breadth versus specialisation. Thesis-only leads to highly specialised knowledge. Coursework leads to broader knowledge. We believe today’s academic has to teach a variety of courses and interact with colleagues with a variety of interests, so some breadth is desirable. Breadth also facilitates choice of thesis topic. The thesis-only system requires identification of topic, at least in broad terms, upon entry—perhaps with exposure to other areas in marketing, a different topic might have been preferred. Furthermore, the coursework helps with specification of the research topic, as students are more familiar with and can more easily identify literature gaps as well as knowing the appropriate scope for a research study. The breadth from coursework helps make students into *scholars of marketing*, which is something different from simply being an expert in the usually narrow area of the PhD thesis.

Coursework is not a novel approach to learning in Australasia, as it is present at both the undergraduate and masters level. So why not at the doctoral level? There are a number of counter-arguments against doctoral coursework. One is that that doctoral courses are uneconomical because enrolments would be too small as annual doctoral intakes in each discipline are often small. The easy answer is to *aggregate* students from cognate fields or across years within a field, such as have a business research methods doctoral course that all new business PhD students would attend.

Second, it may be argued that coursework delays fieldwork. Yet, North American PhD theses are completed in two years, after two years of coursework, so coursework may actually speed up thesis completion. Some students may claim they already have sufficient training and therefore coursework would slow them down by being unnecessary. In such cases, the onus would be on the student to prove their prior training was equivalent in order to have the coursework waived. Public policy debates are relevant here too. Funding arrangements already in place in Australia exert pressure on universities to expedite completions, and there is consideration being given to, in terms of future funding, providing financial incentives to universities for early completions, which might raise concern about requiring too many courses. These issues are discussed in the report of the Evaluation of Knowledge and Innovation Reforms Consultation Group. Nevertheless, the government only requires 66% of a PhD program to be the research component, which leaves ample scope for some coursework.

Third, coursework may be perceived as dogmatic—doctoral students being told how to do research, when scholarship is all about original thinking. The academics who lead doctoral courses do a good job when they consciously try to encourage original thinking and original approaches.

Fourth, some argue there is a shortage of academics in our part of the world to lead marketing doctoral courses. This would hopefully be a short-term problem, but could be made up for by regional synergies, such as research-successful professors leading seminars open to all in their capital cities, and “bush doctor” researchers invited to visit isolated campuses, both possibly including eminent visiting scholars from all over the world.

Finally, are there steps short of coursework that are sufficient “compromises” between the old and new systems? The university could provide optional research methods workshops on selected research methods, its learning centres could provide optional research skills workshops, and there may be optional PhD colloquia on national or regional bases. Attendance might be “expected” at the Department’s research speaker series, and mandatory Business School PhD colloquia. However, the problem with optional resources is that some students may not realise they need these options. Departmental research speaker series would not typically have sufficient guided student discussion. We argue why

stop at halfway measures—why not begin to introduce mandatory coursework. Useful enrichment activities (e.g., attendance at research speaker series, the occasional specialised workshops) can continue alongside the coursework and enhance the program.

4. Recommendation: An Efficient Start with Two Courses

We are suggesting that universities without doctoral coursework should gradually introduce coursework into their doctoral programs, as a few in Australasia are already doing. One course is better than none, but we propose, as a starter, two in particular that efficiently begin to provide the best of the coursework system. One course could be what is sometimes described as a “*survey course*” doctoral seminar. This has little to do with survey research, but rather is a course taught by different marketing staff members on a weekly basis. Each staff member assigns pre-readings in the area of their research expertise that are to be discussed on a given week, and hence the course becomes both a survey of the marketing literature and an overview of academic staff expertise and styles. The survey course helps develop the tacit knowledge of judging the quality of research ideas and empirical tests in marketing. Furthermore, students then choose one of these topics of interest in which to write a research proposal, containing a literature review, methodology and development of hypotheses – everything except the data! Therefore, the dissertation topic does not have to stand on the Honours Thesis, but may evolve as the student experiences the broader variety of the doctoral program. Furthermore, the survey course is very efficient in leveraging staff research expertise into doctoral teaching, and probably most staff would be delighted to lead a week’s seminar even if the Department’s marketing doctoral enrolment is small.

A course in *research methods* would obviously be a strong candidate to coincide with the survey course during research students’ first semester. Not only would this course cover complex statistical methods, but also probably qualitative research, questionnaire design, and experimental design. Many students are weak in research methods when they enter a doctoral program, and find out rather quickly that these are a critical requirement for successful completion of their dissertation. Furthermore, finding the right method and true mastery over it are critical if the student is to write articles to be published in top marketing journals. Perhaps 50 years ago research

methods could be mastered by self-study, but today's research methods are more varied and more sophisticated. Most students would probably prefer some help with, say, structural equation modelling (a combination of psychometrics and econometrics that is quite complex), rather than having to learn it on their own. Some leading journal articles warn of misapplication of complex methods such as this (e.g., Baumgartner and Homburg, 1996) — the misapplication problem could be exacerbated by weak training in the method.

The methods course and survey course nicely complement each other, as the methods course could be the same course for all business students, thereby achieving economies of scale, and be textbook-based. The survey course, in contrast, would be a journal article based course, specific to the student's discipline.

There are other possible sets of doctoral coursework, including larger sets with four or more required courses. For example, some would argue that a course in philosophy of science, or marketing theory, would also serve the doctoral student well as it could directly tackle the difficult issues of epistemology and theory construction in social science. There is also a strong argument that adequately covering research methods requires at least two courses, not just one. These would be the expansions we would make if we had to choose a four course sequence. However, it is not the purpose of this Commentary to argue which set of doctoral courses is best, but rather to argue for moving from *none to some*.

There are many forms of doctoral coursework already introduced at what were once thesis-only universities, some now in Australasia. There is only space here to mention one, from one of the originals, Cambridge University. At the Judge Institute of Management at Cambridge University: "The compulsory Research Methodology Course is held in the first year and comprises four sections: The Philosophy and Methodology of the Social Sciences; Quantitative and Qualitative Methodology (sic); Research Design; and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences" (http://www.jims.cam.ac.uk/programmes/phd/phd_f.htm 1, March 2004). (To this, we would add a discipline-specific course, such as the survey course.)

In sum, we argue that Australasian marketing doctoral students could benefit strongly from taking coursework in terms of writing better dissertations, becoming more skilled researchers and more competitive in the global

publications contest, and ultimately in being broader and better colleagues and teachers.

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Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement is given to Griffith University School of Marketing doctoral student Anita Love for research assistance, and for helpful comments from Dr. Linda Conrad of the Griffith Institute of Higher Education.

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