Post Publication Review

Burmeister, O. K. (2015). Improving Professional IT Doctorate Completion Rates. *Australasian Journal of Information Systems*, 19, 55-70. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.3127/ajis.v19i0.1073

Review

Completion and attrition rates for doctoral degrees are a topic of pressing importance among universities (e.g. top management, faculty members, graduate students) and funding agencies (e.g. public funding from government agencies, private funding from profit- and non-profit-oriented enterprises) worldwide (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2010). A recent qualitative study by Burmeister (2015) made a commendable attempt to address this problem by examining the enabling conditions that facilitate and the obstacles that impede the successful completion of doctoral degrees, particularly among students who enroll in professional doctorates in the field of information technology. That study finds that the keys to improving the completion rate and reducing the attrition rate of doctoral programs are situated in seven broad areas: retention, student engagement with supervisors, supervision appointment, feedback on progress, student engagement in the course, contribution, and student involvement in institutional communities of practice. Despite some notable insights and useful implications from Burmeister's study, this rejoinder makes several observations that could have improved the quality of the paper.

In the initial parts of the paper, Burmeister makes several distinctions between the types of doctoral programs that exist in educational institutions, including full- and part-time research and professional doctorates. This raises several important, interrelated questions on the relevance of making these distinctions—for example, is there a need to distinguish the different types of doctoral curricula? If yes, what are the motivations/rationales for making such distinctions and what are the implications that could have been overlooked if such distinctions were absent? Thus, clarifying the importance of making distinctions within a broad area of study should help solidify the motivations/rationales for conducting context-specific investigations.

Next, Burmeister reviews the extant literature on doctoral education, particularly in the areas of completion rates and attrition risks in doctoral programs and communities of practice, followed by some contextual background pertaining to the information technology professional doctorate under study. However, the review is generally descriptive, and thus a sense of critical evaluation of the current state of literature in the area is lacking. Instead, the paper would have benefited from some critical reflection on the extant literature entwined with the context of the study itself, such as by elucidating the limitations of existing studies in explaining how to improve completion rates and reduce attrition rates in professional doctorates in the field of information technology and by indicating how the current study contributes to extending the line of inquiry in the area. For example, the paper could have highlighted the point at which the current study adopted a practical rationality route to investigation to explain the rationales behind attritions in doctoral degrees, thus closing the theory–practice gap that is prominent in existing studies that have followed a scientific rationality route to investigation (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011).

Following the literature review, Burmeister explains the methodological aspects of the study—a thematic analysis was conducted using an interpretivist, constructivist approach on a sample of 44 semi-structured interviews consisting of supervisors, students from the information technology research and professional doctoral programs, and university support staff. However, the methodological discussion appears inadequate, as important information pertaining to the rationale for sample selection in terms of the number and type of people interviewed is absent in the paper, which in turn raises concern about data saturation and appropriateness of the sample to the research objectives and questions. Moreover, the trustworthiness (i.e. credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability; similar to

concepts of reliability and validity in quantitative studies) of the thematic analysis and subsequent interpretations are not addressed in the paper. The disclosure of such information is paramount to determine and establish rigor in the execution of and reporting of findings in a qualitative study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Last, Burmeister discusses the results of the study with regard to the improvements in and impediments to completion rates of information technology professional doctorates, but the implications of the findings to information technology and educational theory and practice are relatively weak. For example, it is unclear whether the findings from the current study are in line (or in opposition) with existing studies in the area (e.g. in comparison with studies on completion and attrition rates in other fields or types of doctoral programs; e.g. Litalien & Guay, 2015); it is also unclear which findings can be deemed as "new" from the current investigation. Moreover, much ambiguity persists in several of the study's themes, such as the barriers to progression and further research directions for "retention," aids to progression for "feedback on progress," and policy implications for "student engagement in the course" and "contribution." Addressing these issues would have contributed to a "more complete" paper.

In short, the study excels as a form of "good research" (as it addresses an important and pressing issue in contemporary academic and professional community) but falls short of becoming a "good paper" (due to identified limitations in the paper). It is the hope of this rejoinder that the issues raised and suggestions offered will contribute to improve the quality of papers in top-tier journals, especially those accepted and published in *Australasian Journal of Information Systems*.

Weng Marc Lim
School of Business
Monash University (Malaysia Campus)
lim.weng.marc@monash.edu

Acknowledgment

Many thanks to John Lamp for introducing the post-publication review section in *Australasian Journal of Information Systems*—it is certainly a good avenue for promoting healthy academic discourse. Also, deepest appreciation goes to Oliver K. Burmeister for embarking on a meaningful journey to improve the academic and professional ecosystem, particularly in the area of information technology professional doctorates.

References

Burmeister, O. K. (2015). Improving Professional IT Doctorate Completion Rates. *Australasian Journal of Information Systems*, 19, 55-70. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.3127/ajis.v19i0.1073

Council of Graduate Schools. (2008a). Ph.*D. completion and attrition: Analysis and baseline demographic data from Ph.D. completion project*. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools.

Council of Graduate Schools. (2008b). *Ph.D. completion and attrition: Analysis and baseline program data*. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools.

Council of Graduate Schools. (2009). *Ph.D. completion and attrition: Findings from exit surveys of Ph.D. completers*. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools.

Council of Graduate Schools. (2010). *Ph.D. completion and attrition: Policies and practices to promote student success*. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Litalien, D., & Guay, F. (2015). Dropout intentions in PhD studies: A comprehensive model based on interpersonal relationships and motivational resources. *Contemporary*

Educational Psychology, 41, 218-231. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2015.03.004

Sandberg, J., & Tsoukas, H. (2011). Grasping the logic of practice: Theorizing through practical rationality. *Academy of Management Review*, 36 (2), 338-360. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.5465/amr.2011.59330942

Author Response

The introduction of peer rejoinders and responses is as Dr Lim points out, a good avenue for promoting healthy academic discourse. I also appreciate that he made an effort to critically review my recent article.

In the main, I agree with Dr Lim's comments. Taking them in turn, firstly he points out that my distinctions between the types of doctoral programs (full-time or part-time, and research or professional doctorates) could be subject to debate. Indeed, he did not say 'PhD' and professional doctorates, but 'research' and professional doctorates. However, as I think I demonstrated in the paper, I believe that the professional doctorate is a research degree. Still it simply confirms his point that these distinctions require further investigation. Pedagogically I do think that a part-time professional doctorate undertaken by a mid-career professional, should be distinguished from a full-time PhD, which is often undertaken by a young, single person about to embark on a professional career.

Another point Dr Lim makes is that there is a need to close the theory-practice gap. I totally agree and, like the point above, think this is another avenue that requires further research in regards to IT doctorates.

He then rightly points out the need for methodological rigour. Here and elsewhere he would have liked more detail, and later he questions the review process for the journal. Actually the reviewers similarly wanted more in the methodology and elsewhere, but at over 8,000 words, it was already over the size limits for the journal and therefore in the end a compromise had to be reached between what would be in the paper and which bits were more important to include than others. I hope to publish more from this study and Dr Lim's comments help me to see what I might focus on for future articles.

Finally, Dr Lim points to PhD literature to suggest that my article needs better alignment with PhD studies in other disciplines. However, although I included PhD studies, my focus was professional doctorates in IT. Much has been written about doctorates, especially PhDs and most of it is in area related to education disciplines. Very little exists in IT. Academic discourse such as this will hopefully lead to more research on professional and other doctorate models in IT.

Oliver K. Burmeister
School of Computing and Mathematics
Charles Sturt University
oburmeister@csu.edu.au