

**Re-imagining business school doctoral programmes:
enhancing impact, aligning with industry, and developing
the next generation**

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Re-imagining business school doctoral programmes: enhancing impact, aligning with industry, and developing the next generation

Cinderella and synergies

Business and management studies is the most popular university subject globally. Many business schools have been preoccupied with attracting and supporting large numbers of undergraduate students. There is a tendency, however, for doctoral school programmes to be neglected like Cinderella (as Mark Saunders noted at EFMD's 2019 doctoral programmes conference). Little attention has been paid to the impact of business school doctoral programmes. This is curious as the academic faculty pipeline and future of business and management degree education and research largely depend on the production of high-quality doctoral graduates. Clearly, business schools are major players that influence our lives through graduating workers, managers, and leaders in many different types of organisations. Yet there is scope to understand better the potential for closer alignment between organisations and management doctoral experiences, graduate outcomes, and leading-edge practices in business and management studies.

Fit for what purpose?

Our forthcoming book *Business and management doctorates world-wide: developing the next generation* published by Emerald is based on valuable insights from EFMD's annual doctoral programmes conferences and the *EQUAL Guidelines for Doctoral Programmes in Business and Management*. We draw on our combined experiences of leading business and management programmes and researcher development initiatives that encompass postgraduate researcher and research supervisor development and our work for and within business schools. We explore key characteristics of business and management doctorates and the implications of these for future practice and the development of the next generation of doctoral researchers. We also highlight the power dynamics involved in business school doctoral provision, supervision arrangements, and research environments. Finally, we discuss career development prospects as well as opportunities to harness potential value from alumni relationships and doctoral impact.

The dynamics of business and management doctoral programmes

Globally, business school doctoral degree portfolios encompass professional doctorates (e.g., DBA, executive PhDs), industry-based collaborations, as well as publication-based awards. This is in addition to the traditional monograph PhD. Low barriers to entry for delivery (except for the costs of hiring suitably qualified supervisors) have contributed to the proliferation of the award internationally in business schools. There are high levels of competition and substitutability between doctoral education providers in the sector. Although there is a heavy European and North American influence on business school education (linked to Western conceptualisations of 'world class education', associated training, quality assurance metrics and the influence of accreditation bodies such as EQUIS, AACSB and AMBA), growth patterns of business and management doctorates are more complicated than West to East (and North to South) diffusion. This is not least because of a reliance on international flows of students and faculty in some countries such as Australia and in business schools in particular. It is important to acknowledge that Asian institutions present some of

the most significant challenges to the existing ‘business school global order’ currently dominated by North American and European institutions such as Columbia, INSEAD, London Business School, MIT Sloan, and Stanford). In what has been called the ‘Asian century’ the significance of the appeal of North American research environments as places for East Asian graduate students to pursue research careers has often been overlooked. It has been estimated that almost 90% of business school faculty in South Korea hold U.S. social science PhDs. Academics who return from studying in countries with established reputations for delivering high quality doctoral education such as the USA often, by default, gain prestige.

This landscape contributes to perpetuating an elite, research-intensive model of doctoral education with conservative business school norms and values which are reproduced in the academy. There is a dichotomy between reported shortages of business school faculty and academic employment opportunities for business school doctoral graduates. Despite this, many business and management doctoral programmes are inherently infused with the idea of academic prestige. It is interesting to ask which business schools have generated a model of doctoral graduate skills and competences desired by businesses? There is scope for further exploration and sharing of practice to understand what doctoral training meets the changing expectations and needs of business school doctorate stakeholders and other key interested parties to ensure that business school doctorates are contributing to the UN’s sustainable development goals and networks such as [Responsible Research for Business and Management](#).

A need to globalise education and research programmes to be competitive is founded on commonly shared expectations that a small number of leading universities will dominate global higher education. The potential to achieve foreign policy goals (not least in terms of country image) is recognised through what Crowley-Vigneau et al. (2022: 12) call “embracing the international norm on world-class universities” and international expansion of business schools is associated with attempts to compete for influence across global markets and exploit the soft power benefits of internationalised higher education systems. Indeed, we are witnessing the adoption of Western models of doctoral management in non-Western contexts and the influence of elite Anglophone business schools is notable, specifically. We contend that a heavy focus on the reproduction of the academy frustrates acknowledgement of where knowledge sits in knowledge economies. It fails to exploit the potential role of the doctorate within management education portfolios to offer a wider impact on society for economic development and innovation in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world as we grapple with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals and note the January 2023 [AACSB White Paper guidance](#).

Indeterminate routes?

New routes to doctorates have, in some institutions, generated tensions and pitting of the (historically accepted monograph) PhD against the DBA, executive PhD and publication-based PhD. Not all business schools offer a DBA or practice-focused doctorate for example despite a continued focus on the MBA as a prestigious and legitimised award. There are differences in perceived status between types of doctorate and the business and management

(monograph) PhD has its legacy as the ‘prized cow’ or pedigree. This is despite the DBA pre-dating the PhD at Harvard University when in 1953 Harvard Business School was not authorised to award a PhD (Bogle, 2019).

There is scope to extend exploration of practice-based and work-based learning approaches beyond business and management PhD and DBA scholarship in academic outputs. This is important to demonstrate impact in organisations and society more widely. It also matters to enhance the legitimacy of business schools and business school doctorates in multiple domains including policy, public organisations, private firms, entrepreneurship and different types of organisations and sectors beyond academia and depends on the ‘openness’ of business schools and business.

A focus on executive education reflects a trend towards business school redefinitions of organisational identity in an entrepreneurial sense and may be seen as part of repositioning the business school to meet industry needs more explicitly, to become closer to economic practice, and to leverage corporate investment, knowledge, and innovation. For prospective candidates, in 2018 Columbia Southern University outlined four benefits of DBA study: ‘bolstered credibility’; ‘expanded career opportunities’; ‘greater opportunities for promotion’; and ‘better potential for higher salaries’. Similarly, outside the USA, the value of the doctorate to candidates who already enjoy executive employment is often promoted in terms of career advancement. However, little is known about the impact of DBA completion on management practice. Well-established and experienced end of career individuals may embark on a DBA to exit a full-time career path and to follow a portfolio career path (including consultancy, advisory, voluntary work), to step off a career treadmill rather than rise within the ranks. There is, however, scope for more systematic data collection on attrition rates given that domestic and overseas DBA attrition rates per year in Australia have been estimated at 17% and 13% (Kortt et al., 2016) and comparator data over time and between countries is lacking.

The price of knowledge

The positioning of some business and management doctoral awards such as the DBA as ‘executive education’ for ‘senior level’ managers may result in premium pricing. At Cambridge Judge Business School, the 2021 entry fee for the Business Doctorate (BusD) was £80,000 for the first year and £50,000 p.a. for the following three years, i.e., £230,000 (£268,548) in total. Curiously, in 2021 the Cambridge University web site listed only three current doctoral researchers on the BusD – three male candidates supervised by three male professors. Clearly, this niche is highly exclusive where there is a strong brand! Nevertheless, within the doctorate as a business school ‘Cinderella’ scenario, heads of universities may be aware of premium-priced DBAs as a ready source of income.

High fee levels can place pressure on programme managers of business school doctorates and particularly raises questions about the offer and its value and how completions can be achieved when candidates may be time-strapped executives being supervised by someone who may be perceived as less qualified and experienced.

Fee levels inevitably restrict talent pool access. Who can afford a £230,000 DBA or the £20,000 a year PhD fees for international students charged by some Australian, USA and Asian business schools? What does this signal for the achievement of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging in line with accreditation body criteria such as AACSB? There is much to reflect on in terms of business school doctoral recruitment and selection processes representing the picking of winners or backing of favourites. Postgraduate research student recruitment in business schools is often seen as an academic capacity-building activity which risks reproducing inequalities in the academy and society more broadly.

Although business schools may be well positioned to enable changes to address gender and racial discrimination in corporations, boasts about international diversity should not be used as a 'proxy for racial diversity' (Ethier, 2022). The importance of mentoring students from diverse backgrounds before they apply for doctoral programmes has been highlighted as an option to improve transparency and overcome homophily in graduate admissions, especially for candidates who might not have considered doctoral study as an option. There is scope for business schools to collaborate to create new talent pools and research networks. Clearly, there are also issues about race and the ethnic composition of faculty members and how faculty search and appointment committees make hiring decisions to enhance diversity.

We cannot overlook exogenous forces which influence who applies to which programmes and why. Who benefits from the privilege of employer funding or government sponsorship? Who has access to the cultural capital associated with navigating a competitive academic applications process? Who benefits from opportunities to apply for fully funded scholarships (without having to pay for home to international fee differentials)? Despite an appetite for internationalising business school doctorate programmes and an opportunity to celebrate 'brain gain', fees and funding structures do not always support the mobility of self-funded international candidates in particular with generous scholarships and hardship funds.

Integration and identity in business school doctoral communities

Integration into doctoral communities is variable. Preparedness for entry to doctoral studies is often overlooked and under-appreciated in expectations relating to time taken to complete. Repeated calls for critical and reflexive institutional transformation of business and management schools have been made. The influence of entrenched white, masculine, and heteronormative values of business schools appear to contribute, at least partially, to a wider prevalent academic culture where gender issues are perceived as individualised rather than structural. This can present contrasting environments for industry-based DBA or PhD candidates, in particular, and impacts not only on academic socialisation but deeper-seated doctoral candidate identity. Perceptions of being part of a doctoral community and progressing through the same doctoral lifecycle can easily differ between doctoral candidates based in a business school context. Faculty enrolled on doctorates, particularly when they have been required to study for a part-time or PhD DBA as part of upskilling measures to meet accreditation targets may readily understand business school research environments but not identify with programme peers. This can frustrate the community-building aspirations of many doctoral programme leaders in business schools.

Providing opportunities for business school doctoral candidates to engage in discipline-level networks through research workshops and conferences, special interest groups (SIGs), and become independent learners in a particular field often falls on doctoral supervisors as potential role models and mentors influencing the professional researcher identity formation of their candidates. For under-represented groups, a lack of appreciation and understanding of struggles faced may leave candidates unable to “enact identities that are valued by their mentors” (Hall and Burns, 2009: 49) which results in marginalisation. This can be seen to be problematic in business schools where a lack of diversity of faculty and/or heteronormative, gendered, and racialised research environments often dominate.

The ‘way things are done’ is susceptible to the bounded discretion of supervisors and examiners and the accommodation of new approaches, creativity and innovative methods. We cannot overlook the existence of conservative culture in business schools and resistance to progressive agendas that are viewed as “antithetical to free-market enterprise” (Jordan Peterson cited in Rhodes, 2022: 1). Furthermore, there remains significant scope to mitigate gender inequalities in business education and to involve more women in business schools in research with impact. This also applies at doctoral level study in business schools.

Career pathways of business school doctoral candidates

More understanding of professional candidates in business schools is needed in terms of graduate outcomes. A candidate who takes two or three years off from working in financial services in the City of London to complete a PhD in finance and then returns to a highly paid job in the City would clearly be in a very different situation from a self-funded young candidate from a developing country who is relying on financial support from multiple family members and working several jobs. Moreover, financial prospects post-graduation might also affect morale. We also are aware that doctoral supervisors from whom candidates might solicit career advice do not tend to be business school faculty members with the greatest levels of non-academic employment experience.

We have found some candidates who are completing the DBA to enhance their status, as a hobby, or to give them and their family some time to gain a visa to live and study abroad. These candidates may have limited, if any, expectations about the business school facilitating a career move for them in the same way that a full-time PhD student who wishes to be a full-time academic might expect their supervisor to help them gain their first academic job. For instance, government funded civil servants on DBAs may feel that internal promotion will be guaranteed when they complete their DBA. Long-serving CEOs pre-retirement who feel stale in the saddle may see the DBA as a sabbatical. The DBA may enable time for them to wind down before leaving their organisations or handing over a family firm to a successor without the expectation of career advancement.

In contrast, it might be assumed that others with aspirations for promotion are able to figure out their own next steps with the help of an executive search firm consultant or private coach. Why include careers advice at all then in a business school for DBA candidates, especially if they continue to work?

We suggest this approach ignores the considerable talent amongst DBA candidates in an age of lifelong learning and the increasingly scholarly research impact agenda. Rather than letting their DBA graduates fend for themselves, we argue that careers services should be available to counsel DBA candidates throughout and beyond their studies, if not prior to programme application. Additionally, lack of support for DBA candidates can result in many lost in the system who never graduate.

PhD candidate in-programme exposure to business school faculty members with experience of practice may be limited by doctoral award policies and regulations. This can impact on career role-modelling. Yet, some business and management PhD graduates do seek to work in industry (across a variety of sectors). It is surprising that there is a lack of systematic data to track business school PhD graduate destinations outside academia. This would provide potential quick wins in securing business-school and university-wide benefits linked to this highly qualified alumni group in industry.

Next generation business school faculty and beyond

In re-imagining more dynamic and fit-for-purpose business and management doctoral programmes, we have emphasised the importance of facilitating integration, identity formation and impact with meaningful careers. In seeking to nurture doctoral researchers for the next generation of business school faculty members, we call for more innovative and inclusive approaches to recognise the successes of business school doctorates worldwide and absorptive capacity for doctoral graduates in business, academia and beyond. We look forward to discussing this further with the [EFMD doctoral community](#).

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We have noted some key characteristics of the business school context as fundamental in the shaping of the nature of provision, expectations, experiences, and outcomes. Practices and behaviours are inevitably reflective of the history and evolution of the business school and business and management education. We have also identified challenges that cut across the management of doctoral education per se and the PGR lifecycle in terms of positioning, status, recruitment, throughput, and impact. Responses to these challenges are to some extent dynamic linked to oscillating influences but they may also be read more generally as static and improvident, reflecting attachments to entrenched norms and traditions in doctoral education. We reflect on many unanswered questions, not least in terms of the future shape of