Guest editorial

Impact and engagement: QPR 2018 and doctoral education

The 2018 Quality in Postgraduate Research conference and its theme

In 1994, the first biennial Quality in Postgraduate Research (QPR) Conference was launched with the aim of fostering collaboration between all parties participating in the development of postgraduate research students: the students themselves, academic developers, research administrators and unusually, governmental representatives and high level university and research decision-makers (Quality in Postgraduate Research, 2019). Although the emphasis has always been on the practice of doctoral education, this conference has also contributed significantly to the body of knowledge and research on doctoral education helping to support the development of a “discipline” of doctoral education. As noted by McCulloch (2018, p. 93), based on his reading of the work of Trowler and Krishnan, a discipline includes “accumulated (or reservoirs of) knowledge, individuals engaged with that knowledge, generally agreed ways of thinking and talking about and of investigating phenomena and concepts, and an organizational form.” The QPR has over its 24-year history from 1994 to the most recent 2018 conference, provided a forum for “talented” practitioners and researchers of doctoral education to meet, interact and collaborate across continents for improved practice, research and publication. In addition, papers that were initially presented at the conference have resulted in publications in the journals focusing on doctoral education or researcher development such as Studies in Graduate and Postdoctoral Education as well as the broader Higher Education literature building. These publications led to an increase in the “accumulated knowledge,” the development of more practitioners and researchers, as well as the slow emergence of an “organizational form” and honed the concepts and ways of thinking in the discipline (McCulloch, 2018, pp. 99-100).

Two key concepts that have emerged in the discipline of doctoral education are those of “impact” and “engagement” and the 2018 QPR theme jointly addressed these two concepts. Governments and university authorities have traditionally thought of impact as related to the output of the research, leading to the development of science and knowledge as reflected in journal articles and other internationally respected outputs and affecting industry and economies on a national and international scale. However, the collaborative work of all stakeholders in the discipline of doctoral education at QPR and other conferences and in the scholarly literature has led to a far more nuanced understanding of impact and the importance of impact on individuals of undertaking the doctorate, not just the output resulting from the research. Likewise engagement has traditionally been viewed as the active participation of the research student in research training leading to effective completion of the thesis and research artifacts as well as more recently, participation in training activities leading to greater employability. However, collaboration between all stakeholders has led to a greater focus on how the work affects individuals as well as the environment within which positive identity formation, and current and future research impact can be fostered – dubbed by some an “ecological approach” toward doctoral learning (Bristor and West, 1996; Dougherty et al., 2017).

The QPR special edition papers: doctoral education and the disciplinary stakeholders

The four QPR papers in this mini-special edition encapsulate the key themes of the discipline of doctoral education as well as describing the roles of key stakeholders in the doctoral education “ecology” and the roles and attitudes required by these stakeholders.
First, The purpose and impact of postgraduate knowledge, by Wisker, Robinson and Leibowitz highlights the vital role of the doctoral student themselves. The article reveals findings from a reengagement with participants from five research projects after a number of years. The data from the participants in the first group of studies (Project A) is divided into themes with illustrative quotations provided, while the data from the reengagement (Project B) is provided in the form of case studies. The article shows that although an important focus of the doctorate will always be new knowledge, the impact on an individual’s identity while developing new knowledge and the individual’s experience of the impact of their research on themselves and on knowledge results in changes to the individual’s practice, which in turn has greater local and even international impact. For this impact on identity and practice to occur, a positive doctoral ecology is required.

Researcher supervisors, educators and research administrators within universities all play vital roles in developing the doctoral “ecology” within which personal, local and international impact is developed, but they cannot impose an inflexible pedagogy. The need for flexible researcher development that builds autonomy is another important theme in the doctoral education discipline, which is demonstrated in the second article Embedding transferrable skills into the higher degree by research candidature by Milos. In this “research in practice” article, Milos describes a flexible approach aimed at moving research students from an over-specialized focus on the specific knowledge contribution of their thesis toward an understanding of how this knowledge and the skills learned while developing the knowledge can contribute toward multi-disciplinary teams, nonacademic settings and the broader community. Milos shows how the research educators and administrators supported the doctoral students to map their own developed and developing skills to a competency-based framework using self-reflective activities. Rather than mandating workshop attendance, doctoral students instead work to identify the gaps in their learning and their level of competency in specific skills with the support of the research administrators and researcher educators and potentially their supervisors. The doctoral students are supported to include their learning inside the university, when engaging with participants outside of the university and as part of the broader research community.

The importance of community and industry stakeholders is a third key theme in the doctoral education literature. In the third article of this mini-special edition, Mentoring for employability: a state-level impact study, Jackson, Milos and Kerr describe the important role of industry in the doctoral ecology, not just as a recipient of the knowledge product or of the newly minted doctoral candidate as an employee but also as part of the learning environment. They describe the impact of the Industry Mentoring Network in STEM (IMNIS) scheme. In their evaluation of program goals of career-orientated skills and knowledge six months after the commencement of the program, they show how it encouraged participants to manage their own learning, enhance skills and make a further impact on local and international communities.

The final article in this special edition describes how all the stakeholders in doctoral education need to work together to create an “ecology” that results in impact. The importance of relationship building has been highlighted in the doctoral education literature for some time and this has been extended more recently to a “systems” approach. In the article by Gasson and Bruce entitled Supporting higher degree research collaboration, the authors present a theoretical approach toward collaboration as the key element in building a positive doctoral “ecology” using a botanical metaphor. The roots of the collaboration are trust and respect with the doctoral student trusting and respecting themselves and building trust and respect with all within their research community (e.g. supervisors, research administrators and researcher educators, fellow students and researchers) as well as those
beyond their research community such as community members and industry. The fields within which this collaboration occurs are informal networks, formal networks as well as the sanctioned research community with whom they are producing deliverable research outcomes. Finally, the fruits of the research or the impact is the solving of even more significant problems, achieving more interdisciplinary work and harnessing greater resources to help support the work.

**Conclusion**

This brief editorial has highlighted how the QPR conference brings together themes and stakeholders from the discipline of doctoral education and has briefly introduced the four papers from the 12th biennial QPR conference in this mini-special edition that describes these stakeholders and new developments around the key themes of impact and engagement. In 2020, the 14th QPR conference will address the theme of *Success in doctoral education: perspectives on research training*. It has hoped that this conference will continue to support the discipline of doctoral education and its key participants.

Michelle Yvette Picard  
*College of Arts, Business, Law and Social Sciences, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia, and*  
Alistair McCulloch  
*Learning and Teaching Unit, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia*

**References**


**Further reading**